

A Case Study Method for Landscape Architecture

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Executive Summary

Case studies are widely used in most professions, including medicine, law, engineering, business, planning, and architecture. This practice is also becoming increasingly common in landscape architecture. The primary body of knowledge in landscape architecture is contained in the written and visual documentation—that is, stories—of projects, be it well-known ones such as New York's Central Park, or more modest projects such as a small neighborhood park. Together, these cases provide the primary form of education, innovation, and testing for the profession. They also serve as the collective record of the advancement and development of knowledge in landscape architecture.

This report summarizes a research project commissioned by the Landscape Architecture Foundation (LAF) in 1997 and completed in 1999 for development of a case study method for landscape architecture. The report concludes that the case study method is a highly appropriate and valuable approach in landscape architecture. The body of research and practice in landscape architecture is already based to some degree on a case study method. Many past designed projects, research studies, and educational curricula have utilized a case study approach. The profession lends itself especially well to this type of critical analysis. With increased rigor and funding, the case study method promises to be an increasingly common and effective form of analysis and dissemination for landscape architects.

Case Studies in Landscape Architecture

Case study analysis has a long history in landscape architecture. While not always called case studies, the documentation and dissemination of projects has been done since the days of Olmsted. Many of these are simply the documentation and publication of projects lacking more in-depth and critical review. Professional design awards are a useful source of exemplary case studies. Some contemporary landscape architects have used case studies to develop and test their theories and design ideas. They include some of the most important landscape architects working today, including Rich Haag, Randy Hester, Ann Spirn, Ian McHarg, Carl Steinitz, Rob Thayer, John Lyle, and Peter Walker, to name just a few. There is also a sizable body of literature on landscape architecture projects based all or in part on case studies (see seminal case study project list below). There has been a recent increase in the number of case studies, particularly those published by Process Architecture and Spacemaker Press in the United States.

Some Key Issues in Case Study Analysis

There are several critical issues to address when designing and carrying out a study. Questions to be considered include: Who should perform the case study? What is the role of participants in carrying out the case study (designer, client, and users)? What constitutes success or failure of a project? How will failures be reported? How can objectivity be ensured in carrying out a case study?

Critical Dimensions

Case studies can be utilized to bring out several kinds of information. While some of this information may be unique to the given project and its context, it may also be useful in advancing knowledge in the profession in general. Elements that a full case study should include are:

- **Baseline information/context**—List the location, size, client, designers, consultant(s), density, land use type, etc.
- **Roles of the key participants**—What are the roles of the landscape architect and other professionals? Client? Users? What is the nature of the team? Who leads the team? What is their role in the beginning of the project? How does this change during course of project?
- **Financial**—List the initial budget and the final costs. What are the reasons for any difference?
- **Process**—What is the political process? Decision making process? Design process? Implementation process? Who influences a project's decisions and outcomes? Why? How does the project come together?
- **Definitions of and responses to problems**—What problems is the project trying to solve? Was it solved? If so, how? If not, why not? Were other problems solved?
- **Goals**—What are the key goals (social, ecological, aesthetic)? How were they set? Who defined them? Did the goals change during course of project? If so, how?
- **Program**—How was the program developed? Who developed it? Was it modified during course of project?
- **Design**—What are the key design concepts? The inspiration for form? How did the designer translate goals into form?
- **Site visit(s)**—What does the project look like? How does it work? How does it feel?
- **Use**—How is the place used? Who uses it? Who does not use it?

- Maintenance and management—What are the problems of management and maintenance? What are the maintenance costs? How is the project perceived by space managers?
- Perception and meaning—Describe how the place is perceived and valued.
- Scale—What is the size of the project? Dimensions of key elements? Amount of site coverage and impervious surface?
- Time—How well does the place fare over time? How does project age incrementally?
- Unique constraints—How were they addressed in process?
- Community—How is the community served by this project? What is its social impact? Meaning?
- Environmental sensitivity and impact—How is the environment served by this project? What is its contribution to sustainability?
- Impact on profession—How is the profession served by this project? What does it contribute to the professional knowledge base?
- Infrastructure—What are the underlying challenges of the site? Technological constraints?
- Lessons learned—Describe the site-specific lessons learned in comparison to the more generalizable lessons?
- Theoretical underpinning—Why was the project done? What are the questions it is trying to answer? Problem(s) it is trying to solve?
- Outside critiques—Include critiques by awards jury, experts, users, review committees, design critics, and journalists. Has there been any controversy associated with the project? Has this been resolved? If so, how?

A Suggested Format for Case Studies

From the range of knowledge that can make up a case study, at least three levels of information are possible in a case study analysis. The first, and simplest, is a project abstract (2 to 3 pages). The second is a full project case study. The third is a more in-depth case study with contextual or specialized material included. While each may have a different audience, the greatest need, especially in teaching, is for the more detailed case studies of the second and third level.

Abstract/fact sheet

- photo(s)
- project background
- project significance and impact
- lessons learned
- contacts
- keywords

Full case study

- project name
- location
- date designed/planned
- construction completed
- cost
- size
- landscape architects
- client
- consultants
- managed by
- context
- site analysis
- project background and history
- genesis of project
- design, development, and decision making processes
- role of landscape architects
- program elements
- maintenance and management
- photographs)
- site plants)
- user /use analysis
- peer reviews
- criticism
- significance and uniqueness of project
- limitations
- generalizable features and lessons
- future issues /plans
- bibliography of project citations/references
- Web sites /links
- contacts for further information

In-depth analysis

There are often more in-depth and case specific considerations unique to this type of case study. They may include:

- archival research (project records, newspaper articles, etc.)
- awards or special recognition for project
- copies of articles or reports on project
- interviews with client
- interviews with managers and maintenance people
- interviews with users
- interviews with non-users
- longitudinal studies of the place over time