

An Analysis of the Influence of Minimalism on Landscape Design

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Abstract: This article summarizes and analyzes the origin, development, and evolution of the minimalist movement, as well as its impact on various aspects of landscape design. Taking the works of Peter Walker as an example, it analyzes the characteristics of minimalist landscape design and provides an overview of the development process of minimalism in landscape design. The purpose is to clarify the evolutionary process of the minimalist movement since the 1970s, analyze the new developments in minimalist landscape design since the 21st century, predict possible future directions in landscape design, and hope to gain valuable experience for future design inspiration.

1. The Birth and Development of Minimalism

1.1 Historical Origins of Minimalist Gardens

Strictly speaking, the rise of minimalism can be traced back to the United States in the 1960s. However, it is worth broadening our perspective and looking back to ancient Eastern and Western civilizations to find the roots of minimalism. It is well known that the birth of any ideology and the rise of a movement are not immediate but are deeply rooted in the long-term evolution of culture and civilization. The pursuit of beauty by humans has always been an enduring and universal aspect. In fact, traces of minimalism can be found in classical Eastern and Western gardens.

1.1.1 Historical Origins in Eastern Classical Gardens

Influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, ancient Chinese gardens focused on creating artistic conceptions, particularly through the use of water and rocks to create empty spaces. The white walls and blue tiles in Huizhou-style architecture are typical examples of creating blank spaces, capturing the essence of natural landscapes, and integrating Chinese cultural customs. In addition, Buddhism has had a significant influence on Eastern culture. Zen Buddhism, which originated from Buddhism, reflects an aura of emptiness, purity, flow, tranquility, and simplicity. "Emptiness" is the core of Buddhist philosophy. In the 12th century, Zen Buddhism was introduced to Japan, and the monks used simple materials and minimalist techniques to create abstract "dry landscape" gardens, becoming another historical source of minimalism in the East[1].

1.1.2 Influence of Western Classical Thought

While Eastern culture shaped the essence of minimalist gardens, Western classical thought influenced the external characteristics of minimalist gardens. The West believes that beauty lies in the fusion of nature and reason. They constructed rule-based gardens with rigorous mathematical relationships and minimalist geometric structures. These gardens had clear hierarchies and well-organized elements aligned along a central axis. The arrangement of plants through shaping and pruning created rhythmic variations within a geometric space. The minimalist form was used to express idealistic political aspirations.

1.2 Development Process of the Minimalist Movement

1.2.1 From Minimalist Art to Minimalist Gardens

Minimalism first appeared in the public eye in 1929 in New York. David Burlyuk used the term "Minimalist Art" to describe a painting by Han Greyham[2]. It was around the 1960s in New York, the birthplace of abstract geometric painting and sculpture, that works characterized by right angles, rectangles, or cubes and created with minimalist techniques emerged prominently. Key figures in this movement included Anthony Caro, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Carl Andre. Within a relatively short period, there was a significant shift in mainstream art from figurative to abstract. To adapt to new functional needs and lifestyles, aesthetics and ideologies had to evolve with societal development. Minimalism unified functional and rational design principles and sculpted objects in a concise and profound manner, showcasing the spirit of contemporary design. Simultaneously, the minimalist movement quickly permeated various fields, including sculpture, architecture, interiors, and landscape design.

1.2.2 Comparison of Characteristics between Minimalist Art and Landscape

Now, let's analyze the characteristics of minimalist art and minimalist landscape from several perspectives, as shown in Table 1 [3].

Table 1: Characteristics of Minimalist Art and Minimalist Landscape

Minimalist Art	Minimalist Gardens	Examples
(1) Reduction and Abandon Simplicity of form does not necessarily mean simplicity of experience. Single unique forms do not simplify connections but establish order.	Minimalist landscape design is deeply influenced by this point. Its essential characteristic lies in the extreme simplification of forms, often using very simple geometric shapes to shape the landscape.	Peter Walker: Design of the Tanner Fountain (Circular composition composed of megaliths)
(2) Nonrepresentational and Nonreferential Escape from external connections, not representing or referring to anything other than itself. Emphasizes that what the viewer sees is the true existence of the work.	The works are not entirely nonreferential or nonrepresentational, but they always focus on one point: the emphasis on objective expression and the pursuit of contentless and themeless representation.	Peter Walker: Design of the Japanese Advanced Technology Center Garden (Emphasis on the order of entrance with a grid-like arrangement of hills)
(3) Composition Principle Adheres to nonrelational composition, emphasizing the whole and eliminating all distracting details.	The technique often uses a series of individual elements, manifesting a fashionable atmosphere. It also emphasizes the unity and integrity of the work, achieving the serialization of landscape elements.	Martha Schwartz: Design of the Rio Shopping Center (Series placement of gilded frogs)
(4) Materials Preference for non-natural or industrial materials such as stainless steel, plated aluminum, and glass. These materials do not convey intrinsic meaning, but rather evoke abstract coldness, leaving no room for audience associations and directing attention to the work itself.	In material selection, commonly used modern industrial materials such as steel or other industrial waste products are chosen. The use of industrial production or customized materials highlights the characteristics of modern industrial civilization, aiming to break away completely from traditional garden art.	Peter Walker: Design of the Plaza Tower Courtyard (Use of stainless steel materials)
(5) Plane Defines Space Flattening and hardening the ground is another method used by minimalist art to attract attention to the ground itself, detached from the surrounding environment.	This is also one of the characteristics of landscape design influenced by minimalist art. However, this point sometimes leads to a lack of spatial perception.	Peter Walker: Marbolo Street Roof Garden (Arrangement of mirrors defines an ordered landscape space)

From the comparative analysis in Table 1, it can be seen that the advancements in technology

and changing ideologies brought about by the post-industrial era have had a profound impact on the development of modern minimalist landscapes. In fact, in addition to minimalist art, art forms closely related to minimalist art, such as land art and conceptual art, have also provided creative nourishment for contemporary landscape designers. These design techniques have been influenced to varying degrees by minimalism, but the most iconic works with minimalist features are arguably those of American landscape designer Peter Walker.

2. Representative Figure of Minimalist Landscape - Peter Walker

2.1 Brief Biography of Peter Walker

Peter Walker (1932-) was born in Pasadena, California, USA. He graduated from the University of California, Berkeley in 1955 with a Bachelor's degree in Landscape Design. From 1955 to 1956, he pursued graduate studies at the University of Illinois. In 1957, he obtained a Master's degree in Landscape Design from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. In the same year, he co-founded Sasaki Walker & Associates (SWA), a landscape design firm, with Professor Hideo Sasaki (1919-2000) at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. The company gradually expanded and became one of the most renowned landscape design firms in the United States. In the 1960s and 1970s, as the principal of SWA, Walker successfully led many significant projects, such as the Weyerhaeuser Headquarters in Tacoma, Washington, and Foothill College in California. It can be seen that his early works primarily manifested two tendencies: the expansion of architectural forms and integration with the surrounding environment[4].

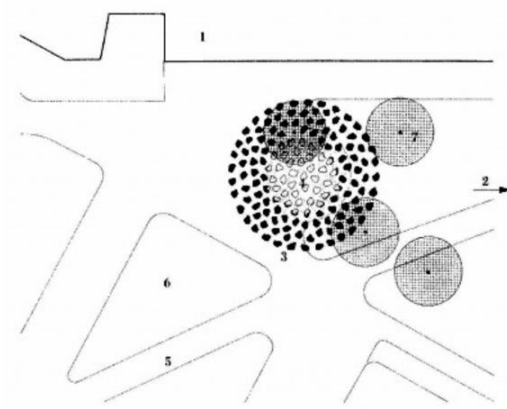
In reality, Walker's true interest lies in the realm of art. In the early 1960s, he began to show a strong interest in minimalist art and collected works by minimalist artists such as LeWitt and Judd. Over time, he increasingly contemplated the possibility of combining this art form with landscape.

However, the style and working environment of SWA did not align with his pursuit. In 1976, he decided to part ways with SWA and join the Harvard University Graduate School of Design to explore the combination of minimalism and landscape. During an internship in France in 1977, he discovered that classicalism in Le Nôtre, contemporary minimalism, and early modernism were interconnected in many aspects. From 1983 to 1989, he collaborated with his wife Schwartz on the creation of minimalist landscapes. During this period, his most famous works include the Tanner Fountain, Burnett Park, and the Hotel Kempinski Garden.

2.2 Introduction to Peter Walker's Classic Works

2.2.1 Tanner Fountain

The Tanner Fountain is undoubtedly Peter Walker's most iconic work with distinct minimalist features. Completed in 1984 on the campus of Harvard University, Walker arranged 159 stones in a circular formation with a diameter of 18 meters (See Figure 1). In the center, there is a misty fountain that hovers among the stones, creating a sense of prehistoric mystery. This work was actually influenced by a stone formation sculpture created by artist Andre in Hartford in 1977. Amidst the complex surroundings, the simple and pure form of the fountain serves as a focal point, exhibiting rich variations with changing weather, seasons, and lighting conditions. It functions as a space for university students to relax, gather, and for pedestrians to appreciate and explore (See Figure 2). Walker states that this artistic expression is suitable for expressing the thirst for knowledge of university students and Harvard University's pursuit of wisdom. In fact, this work may not convey anything in particular; it merely expresses itself, depending on each individual's interpretation.



Source: Wang Xiangrong, Lin Qing, "Theory and Practice of Western Landscape Design"

Figure 1: Plan of Tanner Fountain



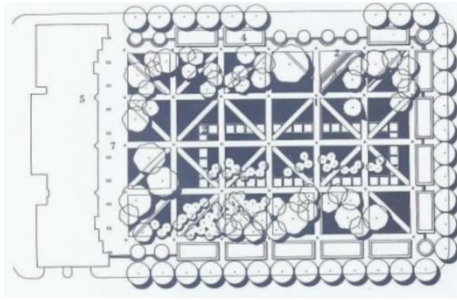
Source: Wang Xiangrong, Lin Qing, "Theory and Practice of Western Landscape Design"

Figure 2: Tanner Fountain

2.2.2 Burnett Park

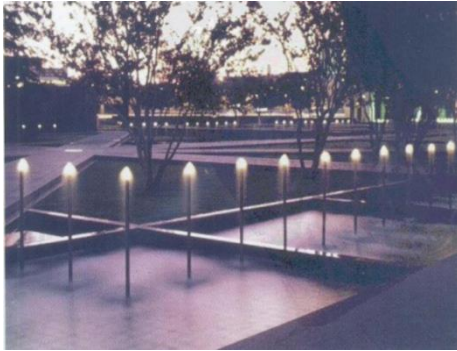
Burnett Park in Fort Worth, Texas, is another work by Peter Walker. The park features a grid and multiple layers overlapping on a single plane. It is divided into three major horizontal layers (See Figure 3): the bottom layer consists of a flat lawn, the second layer is composed of grid-like and diagonal intersecting paths slightly elevated above the lawn, projecting changing shadows over time. The third layer is a circular water channel composed of a series of square pools with a row of fountain columns, serving as the visual centerpiece of the park. Scattered shrubs and trees on the lawn bring spatial variations within the rigorous composition (See Figure 4).

One could say that "there is nothing" in Burnett Park, only straight lines and rectangles forming the lawn, water channels, and pavement. As a public plaza in the city, it perfectly achieves the functions of traffic flow, pedestrian gathering, and leisure. Simultaneously, it exhibits a minimalist and modern urban style.



Source: Wang Xiangrong, Lin Qing, "Theory and Practice of Western Landscape Design"

Figure 3: Plan of Burnett Park

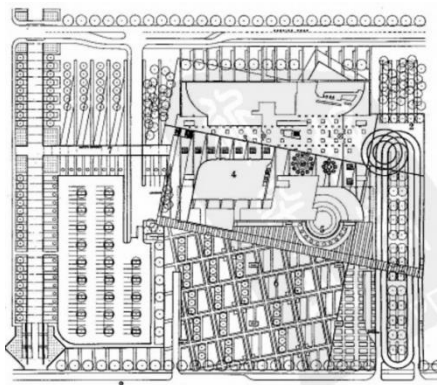


Source: Wang Xiangrong, Lin Qing, "Theory and Practice of Western Landscape Design"

Figure 4: Night view of Burnett Park

2.2.3 Hotel Kempinski Garden

The Hotel Kempinski Garden at Munich Airport in Germany, completed in 1994, is one of Peter Walker's renowned works in Europe, garnering widespread attention. The design reflects Walker's fusion of European formal gardens and modern art. He divided the garden area into multiple square landscape units that intersect with the 10-degree inclined plane of the hotel building (See Figure 5). Each unit is adorned with a series of vegetation, forming a cohesive whole. This connects the hotel lobby, garden, and transportation areas, creating a green and pleasant space for swift passage. The well-balanced landscape enhances a sense of order and modernity within the minimalistic design (See Figure 6).



Source: Wang Xiangrong, Lin Qing, "Theory and Practice of Western Landscape Design"

Figure 5: Plan of Hotel Kempinski Garden



Source: Wang Xiangrong, Lin Qing, "Theory and Practice of Western Landscape Design"

Figure 6: Hotel Kempinski Garden

3. The Birth and Development of Post-Minimalism

3.1 From Minimalism to Post-Minimalism

In the 21st century, with the development of information technology and globalization, the volume of information and data has exploded. People are surrounded by a constant influx of visual forms. Urban dwellers find themselves immersed in overwhelming commercial designs and material temptations. Coupled with the pressures of fast-paced lifestyles and the shortcomings of reality, people long for a more simplified ideal world. This has created fertile ground for the vibrant development of minimalism in the new era.

Meanwhile, even after more than two decades of minimalist dominance, the pure lines, geometric forms, and distilled essential scales, proportions, and spirit no longer provide the same freshness and stimulation to people. They seek a more precisely tailored simplicity, spaces that are more comfortable and sensuous, and designs that are more customized and personalized. This gave rise to post-minimalism[5].

3.2 Characteristics of Post-Minimalist Landscape Design

Unlike "postmodernism," which rebels against "modernism," "post-minimalism" is an extension and development of "minimalism." Italian designer Lino Codato attempted to illustrate "post-minimalism" by incorporating seven styles into the design of the "Seven Houses" for Bologna Furniture. He tried to blend appropriate curves into straight lines and introduce vibrant colors into absolute black and white, creating a new concept that is both simple and sensual. Similarly, post-minimalism has also sparked significant discussions and changes in the field of landscape design, including the following aspects:

3.2.1 Warm and Comfortable Complex Curved Forms

Thanks to the technological advancements in computer-aided design, designers can construct more abstract ideas in a virtual three-dimensional space, freeing themselves from the constraints of paper and presenting more intuitive representations. Particularly, complex curved structures and irregular forms can better fit the landscape concept. From large-scale architectural structures and facades to landscape elements like pergolas, and even tree planters and light fixtures, they can embody advanced and graceful post-minimalist features.

3.2.2 Lightweight and Clean Ultimate Design

The continuous progress in construction technology provides a solid foundation for post-minimalist landscapes. Surface treatments of plastic molds create high-gloss, matte, and various patterned effects, while metal materials undergo surface processes like drawing, electroplating, and polishing to produce various colors and textures. These techniques contribute to a perfect sense of lightness and cleanliness, allowing designers to spare no expense in achieving aesthetic excellence in appearance and maximizing the expression of beauty within the minimal elements that fulfill functional requirements. This is an important characteristic of post-minimalist landscapes.

3.2.3 Novel Integration with Natural Vegetation

Landscape designers have recognized that landscapes ultimately serve human beings, and the visual impact on subjective perception is of paramount importance. This is particularly evident in dealing with vegetation. Nature represented by plants inherently contradicts the created minimalist spaces, yet both are equally indispensable. Post-minimalism proposes two solutions: placing abstract artificial objects directly in natural spaces to create a stark contrast between simplicity and complexity, accentuating the minimalism of the main subject; or regulating the range of vegetation in artificial environments, utilizing clean lawns, individual trees, or vegetation combinations to give vegetation a sense of cleanliness. This is particularly evident in post-minimalist landscapes.

4. Conclusion

The post-World War II economic and industrial boom gave rise to minimalism, and the arrival of the information age brought about the emergence of post-minimalism. With the continuous deepening of modernization and informatization, minimalism will permeate every aspect of our lives. Simplification of complex designs has become the mainstream, and this trend extends to the field of landscape, as seen in the abstract simplification of traditional Chinese architectural tiles in New Chinese-style designs or the representation of simplicity in Nordic or New European styles. In the 21st century, especially after 2010, many newly built urban gardens, commercial buildings, and residential communities in China bear a significant influence of minimalism. Combined with the continuous progress in computer-aided design and construction technology, minimalism is destined to become the future mainstream.

Human beings are inherently contradictory. They constantly pursue ideal simplicity in the real world while striving to simulate reality as accurately as possible in the virtual world. Ultimately, it reflects people's desire to freely shape spaces. "Minimalism" is precisely the starting point and endpoint of all creations. Countless science fiction works depict a future world that is minimalist because it represents the highest form of design evolution. The best design is when there is no design, and a blank slate contains the most abundant information. This embodies the philosophical connotation of "emptiness" and "non-existence" in Buddhism and Taoism.

However, contemporary minimalist landscapes also face significant challenges. These include the insufficient construction capabilities resulting in significant discrepancies between the intended and actual effects, the outdated aesthetic sense of the general public leading to the filling and destruction of minimalist spaces, and the distorted development caused by excessive hype and vague concepts. For example, pursuing minimalism for minimalism's sake can lead to functional deficiencies and inconvenient obstacles, rendering them useless. Alternatively, blindly expanding the concept of minimalism to encompass everything deviates completely from the essence of minimalism and becomes a concept-driven manipulation, creating new consumer demands that are

contrary to the essence of minimalism.

We must recognize that minimalist design is not mere simplicity detached from life. Good design should seamlessly blend into life, providing comfort and convenience. Contributing better designs to society and facilitating people's lives is the responsibility of every designer and the lifelong pursuit of the author.

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