Due to the high rural-to-urban migration in China, cities are beginning to develop alternative urban-development policies that will not be devastating to the local environment and social culture as harmful existing policies have been. One of these policies is the channelization of rivers by concrete embankments. This process has proven to be ecologically destructive. A project that was designed to not only provide an alternative storm water and flood management solution but also create a space that is welcoming to both locals and tourists while creating a new local aesthetic (Johnstone and Kong) is the “Floating Gardens” along the Yongning River Park south of Shanghai, in Taizhou City, China.
This project was requested in 2002 by the Government of Huangyan District in Taizhou City (Turenscape). Construction took place between March 2002 and January 2004. The Government commissioned the Beijing-based firm, Turenscape, to design this park. This project was led by Dr. Kongjian Yu who received his Doctorate in Design from the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University. Yu founded the firm Turenscape which is made up of Architects, Landscape Architects, Urban Planners and Environmental Designers. This project is aligned with Turenscape’s international recognition for innovative and environmentally sound designs (Turenscape).

Yu’s designs exemplify his belief that “land is a living system” and of “big foot” landscapes”. These refer to urban development based on ecological infrastructure (Yu). Yu employs his belief that this new aesthetic is needed to appreciate ecological urbanism (Yu). According to Yu, “ecological urbanism” is a necessary strategy for survival, entailing the recognition of the land as a living system and identifying an ecological infrastructure that will guide urban development (United Nations).

Turenscape grouped the land into patterns of large areas connected by corridors that allow both the natural and human systems to function (United Nation). This exchange between the two systems is what allows each to thrive. Modern cities were designed against natural forces and an example of this is the way modern cities have created a standard practice of managing water with concrete embankments, like that along the Yongning River (Yu).
This image of the previously existing concrete is a depressing site. It does not draw anyone in nor does it stimulate thoughts of the contemplative nature. Yu had the concrete embankments removed and replaced with a system of native grasses that work to stabilize the river banks. Wetlands were created that provide flood mitigation, allow the biodiversity to be conserved, create a space for outdoor recreation, environmental education and local cultural and historical demonstrations (Dumbarton Oaks).
In order to meet the environmental and social goals of this project, which were to create a space that allows natural flooding to occur while also providing a space for human activity, the designers created a human matrix that works together with a natural matrix composed of wetlands and native vegetation, including native grasses.

The human matrix is composed of a network of paths, trees, and eight “story boxes”.

These story boxes are large vibrant structures that allude to the local history of the land and culture of the people. These are striking in their structural form and playful form. These structures are painted in vibrant shades.
An interesting fact is that the gardens do not actually float. Instead the name is meant to symbolize the coexistence of the two matrices and allude to the focus of water throughout the park. Additionally, many of the water features of the site reflect the story boxes and other elements and create a floating illusion of these features (Johnstone and Kong).
There is a matrix of trees throughout the park. These may be grouped into squares or line walkways and paths.

They add a softness to the formal straight pathways. However, the planting patterns are formal and geometric themselves. The trees may be planted in a line along pathways, creating in themselves, another straight line parallel to the pathway. The tree trunks frame the pathway and the crisscross trunks compliment the crisscrossing pattern of the pathways across the water. These geometric forms and lines add to the modern aesthetic of the park using natural materials.
When the trees are linear along the pathways, they act as accents to the path and space but when grouped together, they are a key visual focus point.

Tall grasses are planted throughout the park and along the river's edge. These grasses create a smooth transition between the urban areas, that are built up with low-income housing, and the park.
There are both formal features, like geometric lines and direct pathways, as well as meandering trails and lush growth. There is an interesting juxtaposition between the planting and these large, vibrant story boxes that are placed throughout the park.
These seem to act to connect the visitor to the natural setting. People are able to cross through them into another part of the park, but each point brings contemplation and connection to the cultural history of the region. The story boxes contain allusions to rice, citrus, mountain, water, stone, fish, martial arts, and Taoism.
Each storybox is accessed by a diagonal straight path. The visitor is continually passing over the water, through these boxes, and onto land again. Water is a constant in this park and people are continually engaging with it.

It is interesting that when humans tried to control the water with hard concrete structures, people lost touch with the land and the entire space. It became a neglected riverbank that did not welcoming to people. However, now that Turenscape designed a space that called for the removal of the concrete from the river’s banks, allowing for natural processes to occur, people have a presence in the space. With previous engineering solutions, like concrete channelization, this space was unused by people and the land was ecologically devastated. This project was able to merge a new aesthetic with a successful flood-control solution to create a vibrant space that people enjoy.

Bibliography:


