

CHAPTER THREE

Figure 18: **Zen garden**
(Dengarden 2016)



3.1. Introduction

The debate concerning the decolonisation of public spaces in South Africa is essentially a debate about the narrative content of the spaces. “This battle is ultimately about power. Power over who gets to tell the story of South Africa” (Faure 2015). Public spaces are thus associated with meaning, hence people are not debating about the actual design aesthetics of the spaces, but the representational aspects of the spaces. For this reason, the issue of narratives, the representation of the narratives and the meanings that are associated with the narratives will be discussed in this chapter.

Landscape architects are continually debating whether designed landscapes should have meaning. In taking a position, three essays on Susan Herrington’s (2007) *Gardens can mean*, Elzbieta Kazmierczak’s (2003) *Design as meaning making: From making things to the design of thinking* and Jane Gillette’s (2005) *Can gardens mean?* will be studied. This dissertation places itself in the debate because the departing point of this research is about the manifestation of a narrative in a designed landscape. The

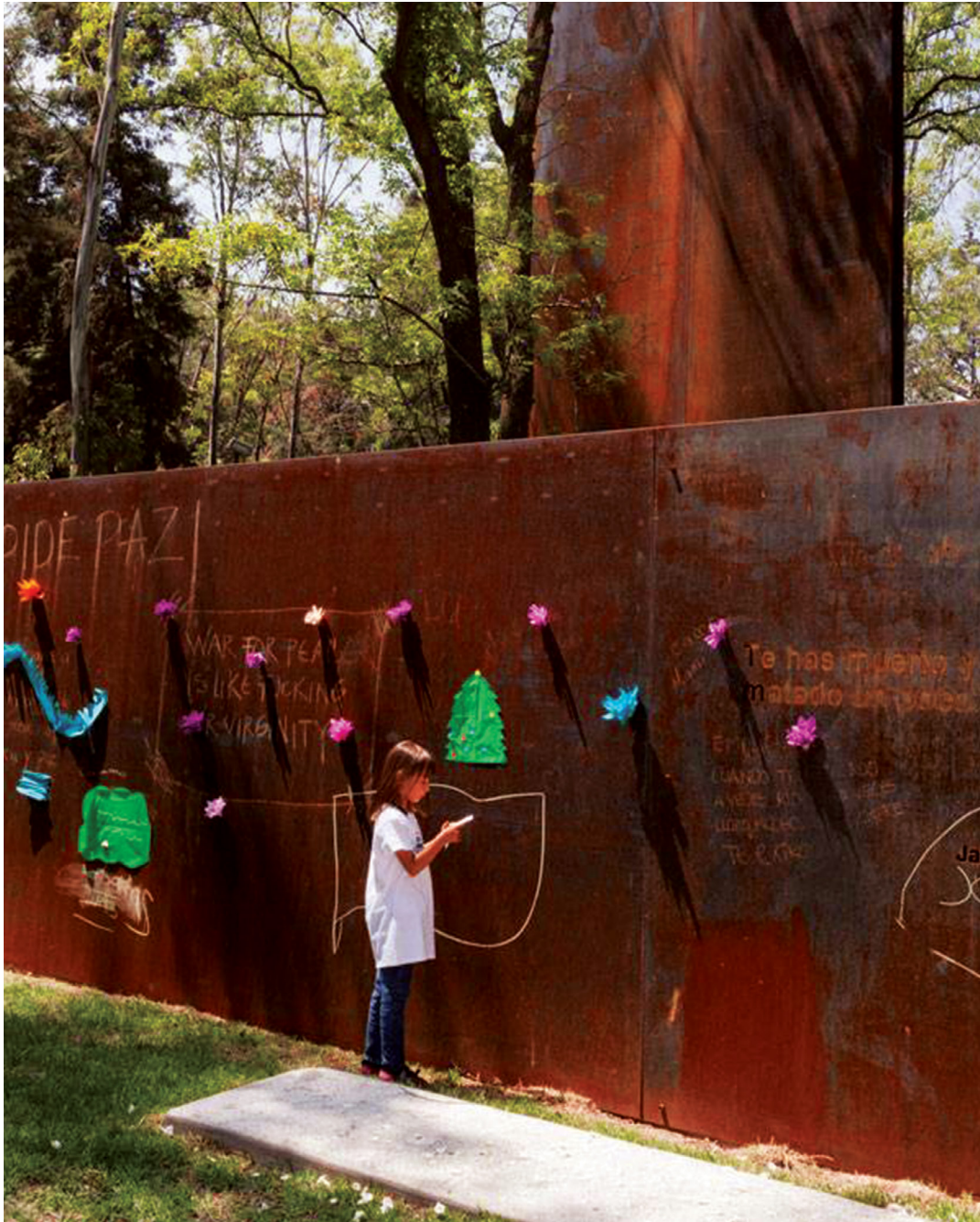


Figure 19: Memorial to the victims of violence in Mexico (Coman 2015)

position taken by the author is that landscape architects should design settings for the narrative to be performed, instead of translating the narrative into form. This position is taken as a way to refrain from a symbolic approach to communicating narratives because “public symbols and images have the power to catalyse mass mobilisation and action” (Gamedze 2015) especially when certain groups feel that they are being excluded from the narrative that the symbols and images are representing. Therefore, the process of re-imagining public spaces in South Africa should rather focus on designing spaces that allow every individual in the city to create and recreate their own meaning than enforcing meaning to the public (Gamedze 2015).

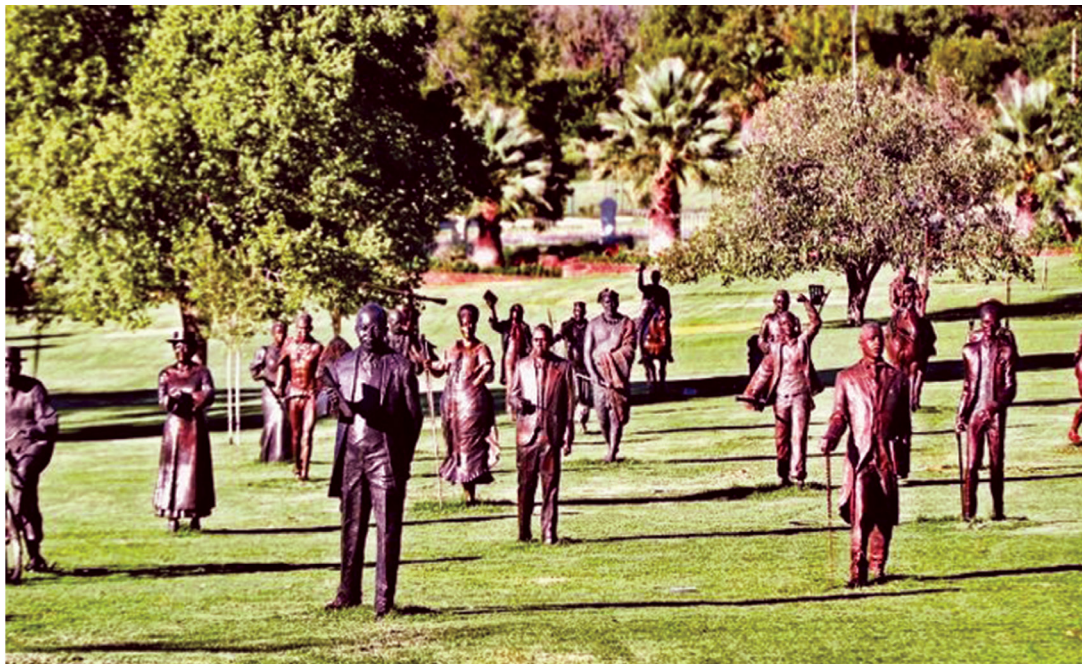
3.2. Jane Gillette: *Can gardens mean?*

In *Can gardens mean?*, Jane Gillette questions if designed landscapes have the ability to portray meaning. Although she argues that landscapes are incapable of expressing complex ideas unlike poets

and writers, she questions if landscapes could mean, to whom would the meaning be directed and would that individual be able to interpret the designer's intent? This discussion also applies to the design of public spaces in Pretoria. If the decolonisation of public spaces is to be successful, whose narrative would the spaces communicate and whose narrative would it leave out considering that we live in a diverse society. This is one of the reasons why this dissertation abstains from a symbolic and representational approach to designing public spaces. Gillette discusses the issues concerning the use of symbolism in landscapes by referring to the Zen garden. She asserts that meaning in the Zen garden is established through "written and spoken tradition" (Gillette 2005:88). She further questions how many visitors at the Zen garden would have been able to tell the meaning of the garden by looking at it alone and in the process ignoring the temple setting and Zen Buddhism (Gillette 2005:88).

There are two main issues that arise from the discussion on taking a symbolic approach to communicating narratives. The first issue is that the use of symbols in public spaces has the potential to create divisions among people of different cultural backgrounds. For example, Thuli Gamedze laments the use of bronze material by Dali Tambo in sculpturing people of African descent because bronze is viewed as a colonial material that was used to sculpture colonialists such as Cecil John Rhodes (Gamedze 2015). "The issue of symbols is thus not simply one of aesthetics, but how these symbols are understood, interpreted and engaged within the present" (Webb 2016). The second issue is that the symbolism used in public spaces might not be completely understood by the public, as Gillette stated, the medium used by landscape architects is difficult to derive meaning from unlike the medium of text used by poets and writers that is easy to interpret, thereby creating meaning for the reader. She compares the landscape medium of expression to vocabulary by stating that "since words of landscape are physical, only so many can be fitted quite literally, on to the site while linguistic words by contrast, take up no space and can go indefinitely modifying and qualifying, even poeticizing" (Gillette 2005:89). The use of text to convey meaning is applied in the design of the memorial to the victims of violence in Mexico by Gaeta Springhall Architects. The design consists of corten steel walls that the visitors to the memorial are encouraged to write and draw on regarding any conflicts affecting Mexico City. This approach results in the public understanding what the intention of the designed landscape is. It is through the process of interacting and participating in the designed space that people find meaning and not through landscape elements.

Figure 20: **Bronze sculptures by Dali Tambo** (Partridge 2014)



3.3. Susan Herrington: *Gardens can mean*

In *Gardens can mean*, Herrington responds to Jane Gillette's argument that the use of *pathetic*

Normative position: understanding the narrative

fallacy (personifying human qualities to nature) in describing landscapes exposes the limitations that landscapes have as an expressive language. She asserts that the use of *pathetic fallacy* does not mean “gardens cannot mean” (Herrington 2007:5), but that the very fact that landscape architects have to resort to devices used by writers to fill the gap in narrative representation demonstrates the difficulties of communicating easily understood messages through the landscape.

In some cases, Herrington believes that designers need to be expressive without solving site-related problems. This opinion comes after Marc Treib “cautions that in their quest to give meaning to landscapes, designers are overlooking the importance of pleasure and human comfort” (Herrington 2007:304). Herrington gives an example of Isamu Noguchi’s design of *California scenario* which was criticised by Treib as being too sunny. In Noguchi’s defence, Herrington argues that the design was made to evoke the California climate which is sunny. Moreover, he discusses Noguchi’s design as an expression of the *California scenario* rather than a problem solving exercise (Herrington 2007:304). However, the expressive language in the design will not add value to the landscape if it does not adhere to the idea of *plurality* in space making. The author is of this opinion because landscape architects design environments that get inhabited by people. It is for this reason that designers should not be designing uncomfortable spaces. In using the example of Isamu Noguchi’s design of *California scenario*, the author questions Herrington’s argument by asking the following questions:

- i. Wouldn’t Noguchi’s design be more successful if he had merged the idea of expressive language with a human centred approach?
- ii. Would an ordinary individual in California understand that the designer’s intention was to express California’s climate or would the individual see the designed plaza as an uncomfortably hot environment?

The idea of a narrative in designing landscapes is significant because “... narratives can account for context in ways that simply making a place comfortable does not” (Herrington 2007:306 – 307). Having said that, the concern of this dissertation is the content of the narrative and the manner in which the narrative manifests in a design.



Figure 21: **Isamu Noguchi’s California scenario** (Poindexter 2013)

3.4. Elzbieta T. Kazmierczak: *Design as meaning making: from making things to the design of thinking*

Kazmierczak's stance on narratives and meaning in designs is that designers can communicate narratives to the public by making use of "cognitive semiotics" as a means to "bridge the gap between the content of the design and the communication" (Kazmierczak 2003:3). She further argues that the idea of "cognitive semiotics" can generate meaning through the use of symbols (Kazmierczak 2003:3). In this discussion, Kazmierczak is in support of Herrington's argument that designers can communicate messages to the public by shaping design elements that can easily be interpreted by the public. This idea of *cognitive semiotics* (using signs and symbols to represent ideas) has been the point of debate in South African public spaces, especially after the Rhodes Must Fall movement which saw the vandalism of statues at the University of Cape Town and other public spaces such as Church Square in Pretoria (Faure 2015). Kazmierczak emphasises the idea of *cognitive semiotics* as an approach that "defines design through the receiver's (cognitive and intellectual) act of reasoning" (Kazmierczak 2003:5). She expands her idea by stating that it is this intellectual reasoning by the public that creates "meaning or content of design" (Kazmierczak 2003:5). The *content of design* (material, form, spatial arrangement) affects how the public uses the space. For example, how they move and where they sit. It is through the experience of space that meaning is created in a landscape. It is this dissertation's argument that landscapes on their own do not have meaning but it is the spatial experience of the individual in the landscape that creates meaning. Gamedze argues a similar point when she asks "What would a space of memorialisation look like if it was a space that allowed the public to create and recreate its own formulations of memory? Indeed, what would an actual public space look like in South Africa" (Gamedze 2015).

3.5. Conclusion

As a result of limitations that landscape elements have in communicating narratives and by accepting the notion that landscapes alone cannot mean, this dissertation investigated scenography as a means to understand non-symbolic space making techniques. Scenographers "think of space in action, how we can make it and break it, and how it can be constructed with form and colour to enhance the human being and the text" (Howard 2009:1). The role of scenographers, as stated by Pamela Howard, is to enhance the narrative through the design of performance space. Pamela Howard's idea that scenographers "should think of space in action" is important for this investigation (Howard 2009:1) because it gives an alternative approach of thinking about narrative designs.

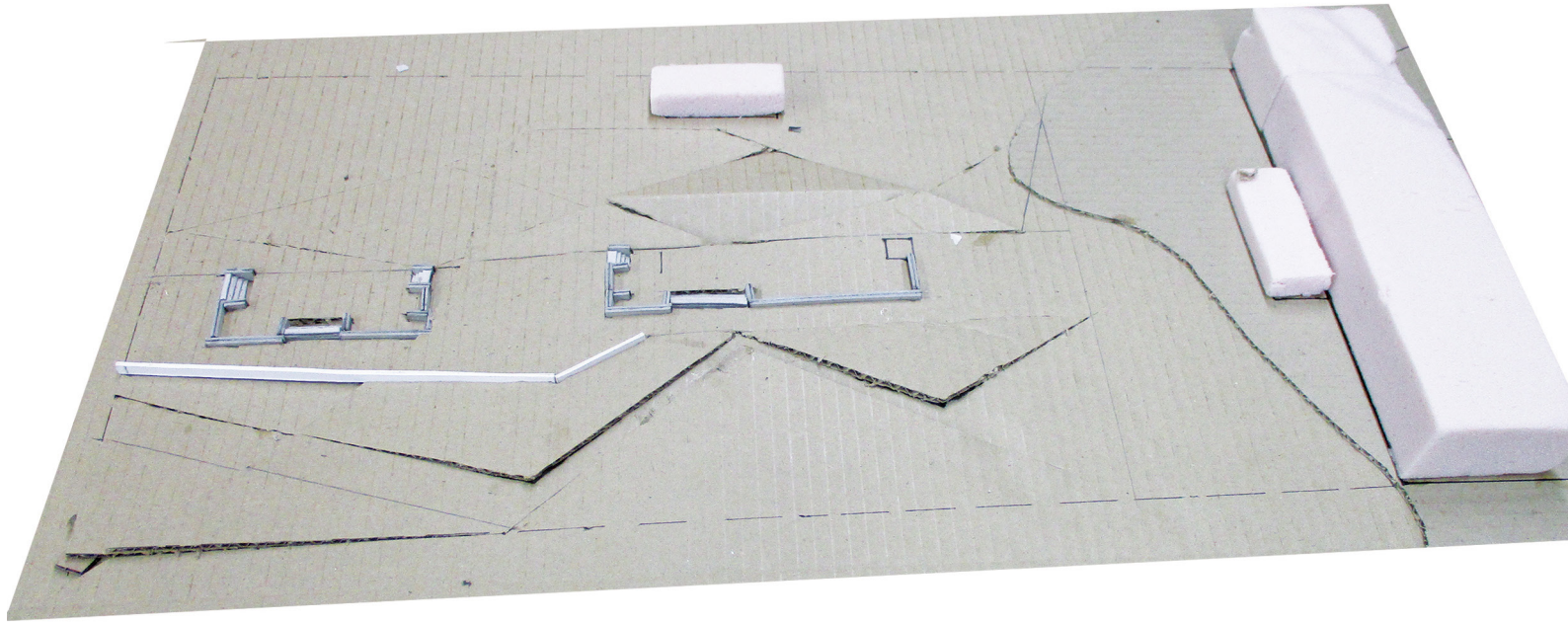


Figure 22: Design process (Sculpting the landscape) (Autl© University of Pretoria

