

# A Time for Designing

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Internationally, the tendency towards using designing and design in landscape architecture research is growing. Yet many still perceive designing as unscientific and as a form of practice rather than a method of inquiry. As a result, it is strongly critiqued and challenged by researchers who seek to determine the validity of research methods across the discipline of landscape architecture.

We perceive this dilemma comes from an urge to identify and position design within a sciences paradigm that orients design-directed inquiry into a specific place among a wider pantheon of approaches; at times even relating it to the most deterministic of scientific communities. Our concern is that such a focus constrains rather than liberates the actual activities of designing, along with its potential, as a means to do research.

Consequently, many so-called methodological improvements in design research seek to harness its practice through analysis and subsequent insertion into design principles. Or worse, the often late phase of designing in a typical design research proposal co-opts design as a gathering-up device of loose ends from a conglomerate of other types of research (euphemistically referred to as mixed methods) into some form of exemplary appendix.

Why then edit a themed issue on the role of designing in landscape architecture research? Because design as a method of inquiry is, in our view, being underused, misused and misled, and becoming part of a miscellaneous department of lost and found. And because we sense it is long overdue for design and designing to be generously welcomed into landscape architecture's programmes of research.

Landscape architecture, with its current low status in terms of H-indices, its slight impact in wider programmes of research and its relatively small number of scholars, is arguably seeking to do too much. Instead of trying to achieve the impossible – to simultaneously and rapidly build an accredited peer review system (and with it methodological rigour and scientific acceptance in an increasingly demanding regulatory realm) *and* at the same time offer a capable and feasible set of alternatives for the great challenges the sciences tell us lie ahead – researchers in landscape architecture should make a call as to where they might serve best. We consider this place to be *designing* and all the connotations and innovations that surround its activity.

In this issue of *Landscape Review*, the discipline's first issue dedicated to the theme of designing and landscape architecture research, we seek to support the building momentum evident in the different research cultures that exist within landscape architecture's international community and many of those already

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EDITORIAL

focused on designing. The authors who responded to our call for this themed issue have been selected to represent a diversity of approaches.

The four main papers reveal emerging methods and subjects in designing landscapes and landscape architecture research. Because of their emergent character, they contain an immanent research orientation. The designers involved express naturalness in researching their intentions, and their own means and mutual relationships between society and landscape phenomena. The subjects addressed range from enhancing embodied interactions on site, understanding animal interactions with landscapes, real-time and 1:1 design intervention and, lastly, the complex realm of biosemiotics, including navigation by means of smell. These subjects all break traditional boundaries of research interests. They explore, much like surveyors once charted new terrains, what designerly aspects are included while engaging landscapes from a bodily, animal, real-time and multisensory type of interaction.

Carola Wingren from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences explores how the human body can become a sensory tool for designing rapidly accelerating landscape change as sea levels keep rising and coastal areas lag behind in their adaptation to such changes. To her and her students, the body is not only an instrument to gather alternative data; it is a unique platform giving time and space for mourning and acceptance.

Roxi Thoren from the University of Oregon (USA) describes how she inverted the structure of studying the unfamiliar world of animals. Instead of exploring how we should engage with animals, she has set up yearly field experiments that allow students to perform alongside animals. Valuable lessons and artistic means gathered from this multi-year approach are shared in her paper.

Brett Milligan from UC Davis, College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences (USA) describes design interactions in vacant spaces. These began with small gestures, awaited responses, regarded alterations by other users, plant life and animal interaction in the same space as he more consciously upscaled his real-time involvement. This series of interventions points to a process of learning by doing. Each time, the design intervention talks back beyond what had been conceived, revealing existing landscape assemblages and creating new assemblages within the same milieu.

Judith van der Elst (independent researcher, the Netherlands), Heather Richards-Rissetto (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, USA) and Lily Díaz (Aalto University, Finland) all share a background in anthropology with an interest in nomadic landscape relations. They also share a fascination with sensing technologies, advanced geographic information systems and ubiquitous computing. They introduce a design challenge that focuses on multisensory aspects of the environment to help increase a situational awareness that indicates ways to investigate the relationship between health and ecology and the interconnectedness between rural and urban areas.

The report section of this issue features seven studies that extend the scope and generative potential of design research. This comes from the way the authors are able to elicit critical insight from creative and imaginative practices. Design methods, such as drawing, graphic creation and mapping, are used in unique ways to expand the capacity of landscape architecture to consider

and respond in designerly ways to problems, including landscape degradation caused by industry, and landscape practices such as walking. This often involves the intentional synthesising of seemingly opposing or unrelated concepts, forms and practices. These projects, therefore, are able to bring together environmental analysis and aesthetic analysis of national parks and mining sites, for instance.

The first five reports present work from Master of Landscape Architecture design research theses. From Wageningen University, The Netherlands is research by Frederik Gotemans and Carlo Leonardi and from Lincoln University, New Zealand, is research by Jess Rae, Tenille Pickett and Kate Blackburne. This work takes the form of a series of exhibits that indicate the direction of their work and provides a gateway into each scholar's in-depth design research, which is accessible online.

The sixth report is an abridged chapter from Mick Abbott's doctoral thesis that outlines a case for design-directed research and considers the metaphor of trajectory ways as a means of structuring design research.

The final report presents a design research studio undertaken in collaboration with researchers from Lincoln University and Wageningen University. It examines the potential of landscape cities as a conceptual trope for dealing with rapid population growth, and discusses the main methods used, as well as design 'challenges' versus the research 'objective'. These reports – whose genesis is firmly located with landscape design research – demonstrate a sustained effort to expand the various approaches within landscape architecture, creating and using imaginative methods to produce innovative research outcomes. They investigate potential departure points and expectations for research, as a commitment is made to explore novel processes that can generate original findings.

This issue of *Landscape Review* focuses on the active components of the design imperative that underpins the discipline. In it, active and specific investigations are reported that are embedded within interwoven practices of *designing* and *researching*. This issue rejects a desire to use matrices of Boolean word searches in academic databases to claim a panoptic view of design-directed research's scope in the discipline. Rather, and because we consider the design-directed research area to be rapidly expanding, it is located firmly *within* and *of* the territory.

Hence, this issue does not establish a singular frame for 'design-directed research', 'research through design', 'research through designing', 'landscape design research' or any other related phrase. While each term may have validity as a way-finding device, we reject that any of them marks out any known, defined and specific place. Rather, the papers in this issue operate as an open invitation to participate in the many (and as yet only partly discernible) ways that welcome a diversity of investigations, design methods, terms and forms of finding.