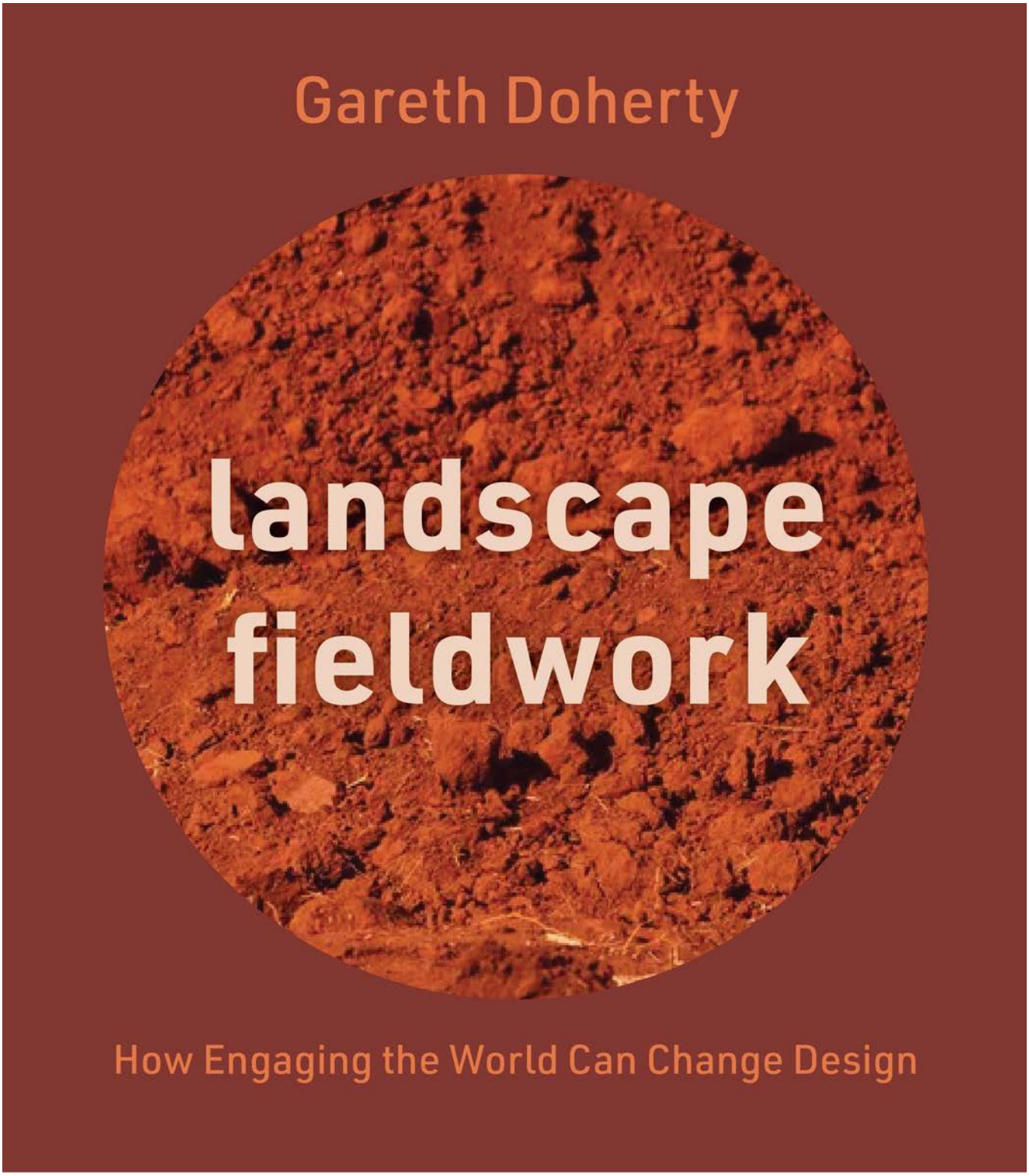

Front cover of *Landscape Fieldwork: How Engaging the World Can Change Design* (with permission from Gareth Doherty, 2024).

LANDSCAPE REVIEW

A feeling for fieldwork

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This book is about methodologies in the field *for* landscape architecture, which of course has always been part of the methodologies in the field *of* landscape architecture. It acknowledges that fieldwork is not new. But the concerns of climate have adjusted the lens, iniquitous power relationships are now more apparent, and the technologies for distancing ourselves from realities have become more available. So, we need to reinvent the way we do fieldwork, because reading about, feeling and tacitly knowing the relationship between a landscape and its people is still core to making creative turns in landscape architecture.

In the Coen Brothers' 2007 film *No Country for Old Men*, a sequence of scenes in a vast, dry grassland leads the narrative. As the pronghorn-hunting Josh Brolin character roams alone in the seemingly endless landscape, a drug-deal-gone-wrong story unfolds with the disturbing immediacy of a wounded pit bull, abandoned cars, trailers full of drugs, dead bodies, a nearly dead body and a cash-filled suitcase. But there is little action. The tempo proceeds at the character's slow and deliberate walking pace in the landscape, guided not by what he does, but by what he sees.

As the camera zooms in and out, filmic drama builds with clues offered by the landscape. Long shots scan the panorama. Close-ups read the ground's fine-grain. The rifle's viewfinder cross-hairs capture a distant tableaux of stillness.

Each scalar iteration of landscape triggers curiosity. The barren mountain horizon explains the dry ground, which confers open grassland for the wild herds, which parallels the lonely congregation of cars, which reinforces the remoteness, which must have invited the subsequent shoot-out, which explains the wounded dog. And then, a tipping point. A hunch turns the hunter/observer into the story's protagonist when he tracks *el ultimo hombre* – the last man standing – to the shade of a lone tree, with a suitcase full of cash.

Gareth Doherty might see parallels between this sequence and the fieldwork methods of a landscape architect. Doherty has just published a memoir of his landscape fieldwork undertaken in part-exotic, part-everyday landscapes that he renders curiously fascinating. They include remote Irish villages, suburban Netherlands, a Bahraini city, Bahaman Cays and Brazilian *terreiros*. In them, he explains a playbook of tactics for understanding the nature of landscape through the reading of scales, the agency of immersion and the application of observation tools. But there is more to this than science. He draws out the feeling of landscape – none more so than in the gripping prologue where, as a young boy with his mother and grandmother, he witnessed weekly cataclysmic land clashes and the occasional petrol bomb in the Troubles of Derry–Londonderry – and carries it through to the spiritual finale when he is sent into a subconscious trance by an orisha's ritual in the *terreiros* of Bahia. And, like the Josh Brolin character, he intentionally blurs observation (fieldwork) with pre-occupation (pre-fieldwork), with catalytic responses (prototype design).

While the Coen Brothers, as film directors, and Doherty, as landscape fieldworker, deal with people as part of the landscape, there is of course a point of departure: Doherty engages with the living.

KEY WORDS

social ecologies; ethnography; fieldwork methodologies; fieldwork design

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Gareth Doherty is notably the co-editor of the important landscape architecture tome, *Ecological Urbanism* (Mostafavi and Doherty, 2016). Its discourse arguably succeeds and differentiates landscape urbanism from ecological urbanism, in that the former proposes the ecology of landscape's natural processes as the driver for urbanism, while the latter, drawing from Felix Guattari's (2000) *The Three Ecologies*, frames an interplay of social, cultural and environmental ecologies as the makings of sustainable cities.

The lineage is salient because Doherty's recent *Landscape Fieldwork* is rich in the people dimensions of its place-studies. In fact, the social and the cultural almost overshadow the discussion of the natural processes of the landscape. This may, of course, be his point: that one learns and knows about a place through the people there, from their daily practices, their language and their customs, and by appreciating local people's engagement with landscape systems. For example, one can only discern an Irish person's attitude to landscape care by finding out who the grandparents supported in the 1922 independence battles. Similarly, the problem of the impoverished 'commonage' in the Bahamas – the non private-island landscape – can only make sense by correlating the inherited dependencies of enslaved descendants with first-hand observations of the too-free-range chickens that overrun the underproductive Cays.

In another important precedent, the work in Bahrain is from Doherty's earlier monograph *Paradoxes of Green: Landscapes of a City-State* (2017). There, he laments the West's importation of an attraction for 'green', which is contrary to the colours of the Bahraini desert and has left locals with an appetite for verdancy that the climate's water regime just cannot support. After living in a green neighbourhood for a year, after endless walking, and after learning the language and particularly its connections between colour and form, he concludes on the essence of the spectrum of the desert's ecologies in understanding and designing for these people and this landscape. The Bahraini story has been adapted to form a chapter in *Landscape Fieldwork*, where the year-long fieldwork is crucial to the book's narrative.

Crucial too are the book's divergent conversations with farmers, residents, shopkeepers, academics, bureaucrats, orishas, prime ministers and presidents. Hence, just as much as it is a playbook for fieldwork tactics, *Landscape Fieldwork* is a memoir. This is not surprising. In fact, one of the underpinning practices of fieldwork for Doherty is ethnographic. Ethnography is both empirical and personal. Because it frames science in a first-person point of view, it necessitates recognition of the biases of the researcher. On the other hand, it also champions the science of first-hand encounters, and thereby eschews our discipline's reliance on reducted and interpreted secondary source mapping in the representation of landscape. Ethnographic fieldwork, Doherty suggests, is anthropology and landscape architecture working together, which explains the intertwined socio-ecological narrative.

The memoir, which proceeds chronologically through Doherty's life, reveals how, in his first project in his home town in Ireland, his design emerged from his own experiences of growing up and knowing the landscape and its people. Then, as a landscape architect, he has to come to terms with the complexity of knowing landscape and people, without the luxury of growing up in its socio-ecological environment. So he experiments in ways to connect people with landscape through design. After the organised chance of social encounters in the Netherlands, he communicates design through gaming. The year in Bahrain showed that flashcards of landscape vignettes enabled communication with locals most effectively. In the Bahamas, he collectivised fieldwork and ran exhibitions for locals with a 1:1 model of a chicken coop and a story about how it could re-domesticate the islands' poultry, make the landscape more productive and empower the locals' independence.

The memoir also diverges into Doherty's conversations with a number of mentors, who may actually be his community of practice because they all share a fascination with fieldwork. They include landscape architects like Geoffrey Jellicoe, Roberto Burle Marx, Anne Whiston Spirn, Ian McHarg and James Corner. They all appreciate the need to dig deep and demystify landscape through fieldwork and, in places like Jellicoe's sacred groves at Shute, they simultaneously want people to feel it, to let it into the subconscious where its mystery can persist.

All of this – the mapping, the conversations, and the prototyping - Doherty postulates is fieldwork. That is, it is work that enables one to know the landscape and its people, and to design with it.

The overlap with design is important: Doherty seeks methodologies not just for describing and representing landscape, but also for prescribing a creative outcome. The outcomes vary in their focus: in Ireland, it is on the process of cut and fill to make a public square; it is on the prototypical chicken coops that are dispersed across the commonages in the Bahamas; and it is on the adaptation of *terreiros* in Bahia so that they can be preserved across the city. The design research work is thereby close-up and human-scaled, but also projects out to the scale of the city, and the country. It is captured, on the one hand, as the memoir that is intensely warm and personal and, on the other, as a playbook of tactics, both of which are what Leon van Schaik (2011) characterises in design research as 'the constant probing of actuality … [to] establish new knowledge about design practice'.

In his critical reflection on deep and complex place studies, Doherty suggests that the intensely local reality of landscape fieldwork is relevant to the urgent global pressures of climate and social equity. In our working-day realms where digitisation of landscape is increasingly available, the domain of fieldwork methods can cultivate creative design projections based on the situated relationship between natural systems and people. Work in the field *of* landscape architecture may be more expansive than it has ever been, but the ethnographic socio-ecological work in the field *for* landscape architecture still offers rich, novel and inspiring outcomes.

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