



Drawing by Alison Page, Creative Shape Shifter Exhibition, Melbourne School of Design
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Landscape architects love to talk about representation

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Take a look at the Routledge *Representing Landscapes* series published from 2012 to 2024: *Digital*, *Hybrid*, *Analogue* and *Visualizing Climate Action* (Amoroso, 2015, 2016, 2019, 2025) are just a few of the subtitles. Landscape architects love to talk about representation.

It was through the lens of representation that landscape architects first considered the impact of digital technology, leading to extensive debate over a projected loss of creativity. In contrast, architecture, inspired by the work of Deleuze and Guattari, explored the potentials of parametric tools emerging from the car and aviation industries to speculate on novel ideas of smooth space and continuous variation. But landscape architecture's comfort zone is not speculation. It is representation.

Introduction

Landscape architecture's obsession with representation inspired the writing of *Landscape Architecture and Digital Technologies: Reconceptualising Design and Making*, which I co-authored with Heike Rahmann (Walliss and Rahmann, 2016). Through this book, we aimed to shift understandings of the digital away from a limited focus on representation to instead explore the broader value of the digital in shaping contemporary design practice. Working across academia and practice, *Landscape Architecture and Digital Technologies* examined parametric modelling, scripting, real-time data, simulation, prototyping, fabrication, and Building Information Modelling for their potentials in the design and construction of contemporary landscapes.

Published in 2016, our book formed part of a cluster of works exploring digital design possibilities that emerged contemporaneously. Related publications included *Responsive Landscapes* (Cantrell and Holzman, 2016), *Codify: Parametric and Computational Design in Landscape Architecture* (Cantrell and Mekies, 2018) and *Dynamic Patterns* (M'Closkey and VanDerSys, 2017). That moment could be considered landscape architecture's first digital turn.

A decade on, the question is no longer about understanding how technology changes practice but instead how design practice is now positioned in an increasingly technological age. As Mario Carpo (2017) highlights, while the first digital turn focused on making, this second digital turn concerns how technology has altered our ways of thinking. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence (AI), which, at its most extreme, represents a complete outsourcing of thinking.

An image is not a design

In researching *Landscape Architecture and Digital Technologies*, it became clear to us that digital technologies encourage a very different design logic. This was not simply drawing through digital means. Digital techniques move from the privileging of the visual and compositional to a focus on processes of formation. These processes break the binary between the physical and the digital and are driven by explicit rather than implied knowledge. As such, a digital practice requires a high level of critical thinking and curation on the part of the designer. It is not a linear process.

The introduction of AI offers enormous potential for designers to extend their capabilities. However, an emerging concern is the assumption that design can be

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outsourced to AI. For clients, this leads to expectations of lower design fees and faster outputs. A 2025 discussion with an AI specialist architect from the internationally renowned firm Snøhetta highlighted a troubling trend of clients coming to meetings with images generated by AI, followed by a request for the firm to produce a replica. Here we see how the production of a realistic image is conflated as a design. Snøhetta soon realised the importance of communicating to clients that they are paying for a bespoke design process and not a product. Given landscape architecture is a process-driven practice, this shouldn't be too hard, right?

The problem of known solutions

Landscape Architecture and Digital Technologies was driven by the new possibilities and novel design outcome afforded by digital design. Yet this explicit emphasis on design and making has diminished over the past decade as those in the profession of landscape architecture have increasingly positioned themselves as problem solvers. The unfolding implications of climate change have no doubt inspired this instrumental turn towards ecology, landscape planning and science.

In his article 'The problem with solutions', Rob Holmes (2020) clearly lays out the pitfalls of a problem-solving approach. Adopting Evgeny Morozov's term 'solutionism', Holmes highlights how this approach encourages the adoption of known solutions and often ignores aspects that are not considered problems. In its simplest form, solutionism can be understood through the saying, 'when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail'. It is not a stretch to see how the intersection of AI with a problem-solving approach could easily replicate many work flows of the landscape architect. Repeatable methodologies (think McHargian overlay) easily translate into a fast AI procedure. Landscape visualisations can be developed in minutes. If, as Holmes warns, solutionism encourages the replication of ideas and concepts from other places, what is the role of the designer, given AI excels in the domain of what has already been done?

Universities are currently at the front line of this evolution. As Zhai, Wibowo and Li (2024, p 31) warn in their literature review on the effects of AI on students' cognitive abilities, 'students in research and education might depend too heavily on AI generated content, neglecting the development of their ideas and original thought process'. Even for the most conscientious student, it is hard to go past an AI summary of a book or to resist outsourcing renders and images. Programs can take a simple photo of a building and reproduce it as a full set of plans, sections and elevation. Why spend time reading a book or speculating through an open-ended design process when you can outsource in minutes? Academics are now having to include 'proof of learning' in their classes: assessing assignments is no longer enough; they must have evidence that the student has acquired knowledge. Our experience is practice's future.

Representing landscape architecture

Over 25 years ago, James Corner (1999) wrote the essay 'The agency of mapping: speculation, critique and invention'. In his critique, he implored landscape architects to see mapping as a creative design practice, stating that 'Its agency lies in neither reproduction nor imposition but rather in uncovering realities previously unseen or unimagined, even across seemingly exhausted grounds' (p 213).

In many ways, history is now repeating itself. With the influence of AI unfolding rapidly, landscape architects in practice and academia must once again be reminded of the value of creativity and imagination. As Richard Weller (2023) warns, landscape architecture has dropped the ball on design:

Landscape architects must take responsibility for a general lack of design experimentation in both the academy and the profession. This lack of commitment to design novelty, material exploration, and technological innovation is replaced,

I think, by an emphasis on illustrating an orthodoxy of righteousness bundled under the rubrics of sustainability, resilience and equity. (p 12)

Landscape architecture's biggest representational challenge therefore lies not in how we work with representation but instead in whether landscape architecture can convincingly shift itself back into the domain of design. Otherwise, our own future might become a problem.

About the author



Associate Professor Jillian Walliss is interested in the relationship between theory, culture and contemporary design practice. She works across multiple platforms including digital media, exhibition and festival curation, is a guest editor for books and journals, and writes for a wide range of academic and professional journals. Her research is characterised by strong links to design practice.

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