

Activating Landscape

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Landscape, in the fields of anthropology and human geography, has been taking an increasingly phenomenological turn. Issues of meaning and representation have been giving way to those of interaction and engagement, with a focus on understanding the manner in which people's experiences are directly shaped by landscape, just as the individual and collective activities of people directly shape a landscape's qualities.

For both the landscape designer and the field of landscape architecture this phenomenological shift presents exciting possibilities as landscapes become increasingly understood, *and designed*, as an array of behaviours.

Rather than the production of meaning-full form (such as the Garden of Australian Dreams in Canberra), landscape's abundance directly depends on the richness of the activities undertaken. In this regard, the shifting role of the landscape designer is to determine what activities to prompt and what artefacts, environments, services and systems might best support those activities.

If that is the opportunity, then, for the discipline, it is also an imaginative challenge. To get a sense of these latent difficulties just review any series of competition entries – for instance the Highline or Urban Voids competitions. Once we have stripped away the dog-walking, balloon-carrying, phone-talking, child-skipping, café-stopping, roller-skating, hand-holding and generally flaneur-style behaviours of promenading there is often very little else happening.

This tendency to consider landscape as a stage from which to observe and be observed is in stark contrast to the very real ecological, environmental and *still very landscape-based* issues of this century. Here, think of climate change, rising flood plains, environmental degradation, habitat loss, impacts of mineral extraction, energy production and industrialised manufacturing, food production and food waste, urban sprawl, greater interconnectedness and so on. Into such a milieu a key question for landscape architecture is whether the discipline can design innovative activities and behaviours that will bring into play the instrumental dimensions of landscape so that these issues are substantively addressed. And what roles can landscape's phenomenological dimensions play in initiating and supporting positive, imaginative and plausible futures?

On a small scale consider the growth of farmer's markets. In my case, any societal and landscape change is less in the spatial arrangement of the market itself or in the conviviality of a Saturday morning catch-up. Rather it occurs in my routine purchase of sweet potatoes from a grower 5 kilometres from my home: a transaction that changes my local landscape from being a rapid vista seen during

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a daily commute to one in which I am not just beholding a landscape, or just more aware of what goes on, but instead touching, tasting and digesting it. Compare this with the manner of landscape interactions produced by the centrally purchased produce made available by a nation-wide supermarket.

Understanding these types of visceral and experiential dimensions of landscape has been an ongoing project for anthropologists and human geographers. These researchers have worked through an intimate investigation of personal behaviours to identify how behaviour opens up a broader range of landscape qualities.

Hayden Lorimer (2005, p 84) in a sustained examination of landscape-based practices notes:

... the focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions. Attention to these kinds of expression, it is contended, offers an escape from the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery, interpretation, judgement and ultimate representation. In short, so much ordinary action gives no advance notice of what it will become. Yet, it still makes critical differences to our experiences of space and place.

In such a frame, instead of analysing specific sites, the focus is to consider practices as the primary drivers for the landscapes that emerge. As Lorimer states, it is 'to make sense of the ecologies of place created by actions and processes, rather than the place portrayed by the end product' (2005, p 85).

Such work (and also that of Tim Ingold, Nigel Thrift, David Crouch, Claire Waterton, John Wylie and, to some extent, Doreen Massey) challenges a close consideration of all the instrumental activities we undertake, and in particular the conversational way that landscapes shape behaviour and behaviour shapes landscape. Such interactions are far more nuanced, grounded and potent than those that occupy the conceptual imagery in many landscape design productions. And yet, while the insights of these anthropologists and human geographers are strong, it is as if – just as the experiential potential of landscape is beginning to open up – their discipline constrains their taking the next step.

For instance, Wylie concludes a key study with a call for a 'geopoetics' – a term loosely defined as a landscopic creativity – that 'would be about working explicitly with expressive vocabularies and grammars in order to creatively and critically knit biographies, events, visions, and topographies into landscape' (2006, p 533). Yet while this work identifies an opportunity for a creative and phenomenologically rich engagement of landscape, it struggles to suggest just what behaviours to foster, and through what means these could be prompted – *designed* no less.

It is in this gap that a key challenge can be found for the discipline of landscape architecture: as we grapple with answering just what is the greatly broadened scope of activities that individuals, groups and society should be undertaking in landscape. And with it, what are the ways we should move, inhabit and sustain ourselves within landscapes, such that the activities we undertake bring us *within* the wider ecological weavings of the environments in which we dwell?

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