

Go With Me: 50 Steps to Landscape Thinking: Book Review

SHANNON DAVIS

Go With Me: 50 Steps to Landscape Thinking, Thomas Oles, with Marieke Timmermans and Jacques Abelman, Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura Press; 2014; ISBN 9789461400383

G*o With Me: 50 Steps to Landscape Thinking* is a handbook and an essential guide for both students of landscape architecture and professionals alike. It provides inspiration, initiates questions and encourages readers to look at landscapes anew – guiding their discovery of them in an inclusive and profound way.

This is a handbook to be taken on site, to sit next to you at the drawing desk or beside the computer, to be read before, during and after project completion. Dropped into a satchel, slipped into a pocket, held in hand, the book offers direction and inspiration at each stage of the design process. Its physical form, a small, ‘hardy’, beautifully textured book, lends itself perfectly to this purpose, while its intellectual content fulfils the role of an essential guide – a vademecum or an authentic ‘go with me’.

Created by Thomas Oles, with contributions from Marieke Timmermans and Jacques Abelman of the Amsterdam School of the Arts, the book was developed based on the lectureship programme ‘The Living Landscape’ within the Masters programme of the Landscape Architecture Department 2010–12. The programme was set up to ‘help students unravel the complex meaning of landscape and find out how the “living” part of landscapes is linked to the spatial quality of landscapes’ (Timmermans, 2014, p 18).

By introducing discussion on the evolving meaning, ever-changing and deep qualities of ‘landscape’, the handbook proposes to allow us to look at ‘landscapes’ afresh. Described as not being a static image, a picture painted by nature or designed by man, ‘landscape’ here is considered a ‘temporary result of social, economic and political movements, as a snapshot in the continuous interaction between patterns of human occupation and natural processes’ (Oxenaar, 2014, p 15). Inspired by this definition, the text guides readers to ‘seeing’ and understanding the landscape in this way.

The book is organised into five categories relevant to the design process – sensing, reasoning, showing, changing, testing – and each section contains 10 essential ‘propositions’ or principles for engagement. Each principle is introduced by an epigraph intended to highlight and challenge the consideration of ‘other’ voices in the landscape discussion. Two or more key texts are also referred to under each principle, to expand its meaning. ‘Some are essential works in the

Shannon Davis is Lecturer, School of Landscape Architecture, Lincoln University, PO Box 85084, Lincoln University, Christchurch 7647, Canterbury, Aotearoa New Zealand. Telephone: +64-3-423-0472 Email: shannon.davis@lincoln.ac.nz

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profession ... while others bridge ... unfamiliar territory in our design educations' (Abelman, 2014, p 27). Introducing, as a result, over a hundred possibilities for additional exploration and research, these key texts provide a useful 'next step' of enquiry. Each principle comprises a short discussion, often including questions for individual contemplation, and includes a type of 'so what' proposition, which explicitly directs and challenges an act of thinking or design, either practical or theoretical. From the section 'Showing', step 26 suggests:

26 Come to Your Senses

Familiarity erases immediacy. First, when you did not know the place, when the stuff of the world had yet to arrange itself into hierarchies, everything was as important as everything else. You noticed big things – the long slope of land toward sea, the red-orange ribbon of a river – but also the hand-painted sign on an old boundary, the sound a snake made sliding up stone, the hard taste of olive branch smoke. You did not have ideas, only movement and sense. Later, as you came to know the place, to rank and organize its contents, this tangle of impressions receded to the margins of your mind, where it languished, half-remembered. Yet you were never again as present as during those first precious moments.

So: when you have your ideas, return to the site before ideas, before reasoning, even before thought. Recover the landscape as pure sense and motion, show the self open to the riot of the world.

In providing such 'tools', these 50 steps to landscape thinking deliver a well-considered, enlightened and clear outline for contemplating 'landscape' and all the dimensions it encompasses.

In his current role as Assistant Professor of Landscape Architecture at Cornell University, Thomas Oles teaches and researches in the areas of cultural history and the theoretical foundations of landscape architecture. This book of 'tools' will be equally encouraging for those ingrained in landscape architecture practice to once again engage with design theory, sensitise, dis-connect and perceive the landscape in new ways, as it will be for design students learning and developing an understanding of landscape and design process.

So thumb this book, bend it, fold it, drop it into icy water on half-frozen lakes, carry it in your backpack as you wade through canals and across deserts. But use it. Use it to focus the attention, to hone the senses, to broaden the mind. Use it again and again to think landscape, and landscape architecture, anew (Oles, 2014, p 24).

REFERENCE

Oxenaar, A (2014) Foreword. In *Go With Me: 50 Steps to Landscape Thinking*, Thomas Oles, with Marieke Timmermans and Jacques Abelman, Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura Press.