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APPROACHING THE “AS FOUND”

Ellen Braae



Transecting requires a set of approaches and tools, including literature, maps, materials for making simple spatial models, lots of drawing paper, a camera, as well as boxes and bags for collecting material on-site.

The twentieth century was obsessed with novelty. It was obsessed with the idea of newness, with all that which had never been seen; it regarded novelty as a direct reflection of humanity’s continuous development. This attention to novelty goes hand in hand with the idea of progress, which has led the self-understanding and development of the Western world for centuries. However, the ideas of novelty and progress have started to change. We are increasingly aware of the limited resources on Earth, not only in terms of materials but also in terms of space. The challenge is to find sufficient ways in which humans and non-humans can coexist within this limited spatial framework that constitutes our common lifeworld. Changing from urbanizing greenfields to reconfiguring already urbanized areas puts the landscape architectural profession center stage. The ability to read and edit the “as found” has, to a certain degree, always been a primary point of departure for landscape architecture.¹ Yet this more fundamental shift in the premises related to the limited resources are so materially and culturally profound that they deeply affect the theories and methods of landscape architecture—and, of course, also the outcome. Understanding design as a transformation of what already exists rather than a bringing into the world of something entirely new, created *ex nihilo*, marks an epistemological change. First and foremost, it requires a reconfiguration of our understanding and the theories and tools needed for capturing and articulating site-bound aspects.² Only then can these elements be used as points of departure for new designs—in the sense of reconfiguring and reworking the “as found.”

Since the Renaissance, the Romantic notion of the genius, and the twentieth century’s focus on novelty and loss, designers have been obsessed with creating objects *ex nihilo*, feeling the power of bringing something new into the world. This creative act resonates with Architecture with a capital “A,” which seeks to construct entirely new buildings or other “objects” while architectural practices such

¹ The notion of the “as found” comes from *As Found: Discovery of the Ordinary*, a publication that focuses on British architecture and art from the 1950s, edited by Claude Lichtenstein and Thomas Schrenberger (Zurich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2001). “As Found” was also the title of a conference I coordinated for a series that has been running

at the University of Copenhagen for ten years. It was also the title of the first volume of the new journal *Nordic Journal of Architecture*, which I edited with Svava Riesto, published in 2012.

² Ellen Braae, *Beauty Redeemed: Recycling Post-Industrial Landscapes* (Risskov: Ikaros Press/Basel: Birkhäuser, 2015).

as restoration and landscape architecture have, to some degree, been considered minor arts. Presumably, this kind of architecture with a lowercase “a” has been considered less creative because the starting point is quite often an existing building or previously altered site rather than an idea—in the sense of a mind’s work acting as aesthetic straitjacket—thus neither fully giving rise to newness nor allowing for the individual—genius—expression necessary to produce an outcome with a clear author or an identifiable style based on the creation of a well appreciated work of art. The work of that small portion of architects in the twentieth century practicing this intervention-based type of architecture—reinterpreting, reusing, and reworking the materials at hand—was not properly acknowledged at their time.

An intervention-based design practice has only recently gained its deserved recognition and been acknowledged as a deliberate, creative act. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Renaissance art expert Jacob Burckhardt (also considered the father of cultural history) described the post-Antique spolia practice of reusing building elements (i.e. the use of materials from pagan churches in the construction of new Christian churches after Christianization took place) not only as a response to a lack of materials but furthermore as “an embarrassing lack of imagination”!³ Today we know that this was certainly not the case. On the contrary, the creative reuse proved an elaborate strategy encompassing other aesthetic and ethical values of that time, which also relied on various epistemes of creativity. French curator and art theorist Nicolas Bourriaud has identified an intense awareness and practice of reworking existing materials within the contemporary art scene, be it Chanel color schemes, old films or other artworks, or actual leftover materials. By describing these current art practices as “post-production,” Bourriaud taps into the overall discourse of transformation within the design and planning disciplines concerned with the urban landscape.⁴ Today, more approaches relying on the creativity embedded in reading, interpreting, and reworking existing materials, including sites, are needed and indeed finally gaining ground.

³ Maria Hansen Fabricius, *The Eloquence of Appropriation: Prolegomena to an Understanding of Spolia in Early Christian Rome* (Analecta Romana Instituti Danici/L’erma de Bretschneider, 2003), 277.

⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World* (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002).

From Welfare Cities to Competitive Urban Landscapes

Urban landscapes denote the hybridity of built up and open areas where everything comes together, so to speak. What we used to conceive of as opposing entities—the city and the landscape—have become mutually constituting elements in a more direct and entangled way where neither acts as background to the other. Instead, we can talk about various degrees of density and open space in the urban landscape despite the fact that everything has been urbanized, in the sense that it is the result of conscious decision-making—that is, planned and embedded in the global neoliberal economy.⁵ In Europe, the urbanization process, when measured purely in terms of square meters built, has already reached a peak. Consequently, the question today is more one of what to do with that which already exists than how to further expand the urbanized areas, a proposition which characterized the second phase of modernization.

While the role of landscape architects and planners in the decades following World War II was to lay out new functions with unique spatial expressions that could provide an equal distribution of welfare goods, the role of the landscape architect today is to enhance the already urbanized areas in fulfillment of society’s current needs and dreams. The post-war urbanization process resulted in low-density, functionally segregated and horizontal cities, which were hierarchically organized around old city centers as satellite towns or urban districts and linked together by infrastructure. Today’s development of the welfare city is driven by another logic that could be characterized as the third phase of modernization. It involves the reorganization of urbanized areas by neoliberal capitalism, that is, by competition generated between institutions, regions, and nations. We can now observe a rise of the regional and even transnational perspective or of the city without limits, introducing a new and ever larger territorial scale for urban thinking. This marks a shift from looking at cities and their hinterlands to a regional perspective in which cities sprawl over increasingly larger areas, making it more appropriate to speak about urban landscapes than cities. This

⁵ Neil Brenner, ed., *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (Berlin: Jovis, 2013).

viewpoint also acknowledges the interrelatedness of the many distributed centers and public amenities, ranging from water systems to open spaces to power plants and much more. The “collective consumption” that characterized post-war urban development is readily being replaced by a complementarity of functions that includes education, research, culture, sports, and leisure.⁶ This overall development of the urban landscape within the last half-century has many profound consequences, which our planning tools are no longer able to address. Master plans, local plans, green structure plans, infrastructure plans, etc., all deal with quantitative matters, which derive from that period and thus also reflect the attempt to control the vast, centrifugally-oriented urban development.

A Normative Approach?

The premises of the current modernization phase described above, when viewed in conjunction with the perspectives of both sustainability and diverse cultural production, make it of the utmost importance that we learn to pay attention to what is already there, to the “as found” urban landscape. In a landscape architectural context this calls for an investigation of site, of its particularities and multi-scalar relations. This, in turn, demands the reassessment and further development of theories and methods that reflect this fundamental shift. On a more profound level, it is also a call for reflection, as we need to reconsider what constitutes the overall objectives of our practice today. In much of my recent work, I have reflected on the topic of site-specificity and the theories and methods it may accommodate. In particular, I have discussed site-sensitive or site-specific approaches to designing in industrial areas,⁷ especially in the context of large-scale harbor transformation projects⁸ within the epochal reintegration of former industrial areas into the city fabric. The flip side of the “unfamiliar” character of the former industrial areas has unfortunately often led to a *tabula-rasa* treatment of site followed

⁶ Manuel Castell defines “collective consumption” in various ways. He claims that the spatial consumption of collective means of consumption defines what is urban. Manuel Castell, *The Urban Question* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 449.

⁷ Ellen Braae, *Beauty Redeemed: Recycling Post-Industrial*

Landscapes (Risskov: Ikaros Press/Basel: Birkhäuser, 2015).

⁸ Ellen Braae and Lisa Diedrich, “Site Specificity in Contemporary Large Scale Harbour Transformation Projects,” *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, vol. 7, iss. 1 (Spring 2012), 20–33.

by the rapid construction of generic, new urban districts that look the same across all continents. Moreover, the attachment of few emblematic elements to a new master plan is a frequently used yet superficial practice that makes the need for a much more elaborate, site-related theory and practice exceedingly clear.

The defining, universal post-war understanding of the “good life” and the underlying what-is-good-for-the-many-is-good-for-everyone credo is being replaced by a more pragmatic approach. The universal values that still prevail in much of the current planning are being replaced with a what-is-good-is-what-works-here approach, which takes local needs and circumstances into account. In his reflection on what approaches to use when enhancing the urban landscape’s energy consumption and social equity, the French urban theorist François Ascher points to the principle of using a different solution for every different, existing situation.⁹ He thus calls for a multitude of outcomes wherein each “treatment” should correspond to that particular situation, that particular time, and that particular group of actors. This is not to say, however, that there are no common denominators when it comes down to overall values.

If we want to promote a more heterogeneous urban landscape that grows out of more site-sensitive design and planning approaches (as was the case with the former industrial areas and water landscapes), is it possible to identify a common ground and a common set of values? Is it possible to differentiate rather than homogenize and still identify shared values? Yes, it is possible to identify common objectives or values for the transformation of the existing, namely by paying particular attention to the specificity of a site and the “as found” urban landscape. In presenting the following four interrelated imperatives, which I have found to be the common ground, I will bring together site aspects associated with sustainability, ecology, economy, and social aspects, while also acknowledging the need to look beyond these traditional features. Certainly, daring to dwell on the subjective human perspective of the urban landscape brings into play relevant on-site experiences and landscape architectural fieldwork.

⁹ François Ascher, “Multimobility, Multispeed Cities: A Challenge for Architects, Town Planners and Politicians,” *Places*, vol. 19, iss. 01 (2007), 36–42.

Ecological Imperative

Let us start with one of the more well-known features: ecology. It sets the objective of maintaining, restoring, and creating habitats and appropriate conditions for natural processes. How this—reflecting on the coexistence of humans and non-humans—is considered in a design and planning perspective is demonstrated, among others, by the Italian urbanists Bernardo Secchi and Paola Viganò.¹⁰ Their objective is to reinforce links and relationships between various habitats and corridors. Today, stormwater is to be managed on-site at the level of singular plots, yet in an urban context we must address large-scale water management, relationships, and characters. The ecological imperative is well grounded, however, we still need to make it work within greater planning project contexts and beyond the sole question of preservation.

Democratic Imperative

According to the European Landscape Convention ratified by most European countries in 2010, we regard the Earth's landmass, that is, landscapes and open spaces, as common ground. This means all environments should be accessible to pedestrians and other slow, non-motorized modes of transportation in addition to making room for public activities, interpretations, and appropriations as outlined by the German urban scholar Thomas Sieverts.¹¹ The Dutch planners and political scientists Marten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp¹² point out the importance of meeting the Other—those different from yourself—in order to secure a democratic sense of how a diverse population can live together harmoniously. This should also be reflected in the way we transform the existing urban landscape not only into accessible common grounds but also potential meeting places.

¹⁰ Paola Viganò, "The Metropolis of the 21st Century: The Project of a Porous City," *On Territories, Oase 80* (2010), 91–108.

¹¹ Thomas Sieverts, "Von der unmöglichen Ordnung zu einer möglichen Unordnung im

Entwerfen der Stadtlandschaft," *disP*, vol. 43, iss. 169 (2007).

¹² Maarten Hajer and Arnold Reijndorp, *In Search of New Public Domain* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2001).

Significance Imperative

The concept of significance represents the opposite of indifference and neglect. Significance means associating meaning with the urban landscape both on a general, collective level and as individuals and subcultural groups with relations to particular sites. On the general level, it describes a cultural awareness, which, again, Sieverts regards as a minimum requisite for aesthetic awareness—the focus of the fourth imperative. Yet cultural awareness encompasses a recognition and understanding of the urban landscape as having certain qualities and histories in its own right. The significance deriving from this acknowledgement and acceptance taps into the thinking about recognition as a positive reading of our everyday "habitat." This is at the core of the European Landscape Convention¹³ as well as the Faro Convention's goals.¹⁴ Both stress how important it is for people to identify with their physical life-world and for experts working on the enhancement of the urban landscape to understand that this may, in fact, already be the case. In this event, as experts, landscape architects should be attentive to the "as found" rather than superimposing prefixed value schemes.

Beauty Imperative

Beauty permeates everyday experiences and thus goes far beyond art appreciation or sublime experience.¹⁵ As such, it is also not attached to abstract theories of aesthetics. Instead, it is about sensory perceptions and bodily experience or what the German theorist Gernot Böhme considers an aspect of "atmosphere;"¹⁶ it is a phenomenon taking place between the perceiver and the perceived. And since we are all embedded in the urban landscape, an aesthetic engagement

¹³ Council of Europe, The European Landscape Convention, Treaty no. 176 (Florence, 20/10/2000), accessed on Jan. 30, 2017, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/176>.

¹⁴ Council of Europe, The Faro Convention, Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, Treaty no. 199 (Faro,

01/06/2011), accessed on Jan. 30, 2017, <http://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/199>.

¹⁵ Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁶ Gernot Böhme, *Architektur und Atmosphäre* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006).

is inherently critical. Furthermore, if the experience of designed or restored landscapes holds the potential to substantiate an environmental awareness and understanding, then beauty also entails an ethical dimension. More specifically, we can say that through design, beauty and stimulating atmospheres may constitute ways of making our lifeworld more acceptable and desirable. In the long term, we may even exercise this imperative by challenging and thereby also expanding our conceptions of beauty.¹⁷

These imperatives are culturally anchored and thus also subject to change over time. However, they also hold a strategic dimension: They can be spelled out at the singular site and thus both broaden their applicability and endlessly refine their meaning with each new approach to the “as found.” Ascher’s aforementioned credo, about differentiation according to the multitude of existing situations and making things work locally according to local needs, still stands center stage. Negotiating these top-down imperatives with the locally “as found,” its embedded potentials, and emerging needs and dreams, definitely emphasizes the role of site-reading and the profession of landscape architecture.

While site has gained critical importance as a design parameter over the last ten to twenty years, the renewed interest in mapping differs substantially from the genius loci approach outlined by Norberg-Schulz.¹⁸ While Norberg-Schulz was searching for essential and inherent values for the designer to reveal, site is regarded today more as a relational and dynamic construct. In this way, it is both subject to forces of modernization and the activities of those living there, accumulating successive adjustments and alterations. One thing is certain: site is more than a geometric or objective phenomenon defined by space and time. It is equally constructed by bodily experience and the emotions and memories it evokes. It is also a multi-scalar phenomenon, which becomes especially clear when tracing water landscapes, for the dynamics of water are at work whether wet or dry, vertical or horizontal, flowing or stagnant.

¹⁷ Ellen Braae, *Beauty Redeemed: Recycling Post-Industrial Landscapes* (Risskov: Ikaros Press/Basel: Birkhäuser, 2015).

¹⁸ Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Academy Editions (London, 1980).

They demark something to reflect on, to grasp, and to help us understand water, site, and the urban landscape as part of a larger, dynamic, and interrelated system.

Transecting as a Method of Mapping and Narrating

The objective of transforming something into something else is not so much about new constructions as it is about a shift in perception. However, from a landscape architectural viewpoint, spatial interventions are the primary means of obtaining change. Another important transformative influence is time. It relentlessly changes objects, places, and conditions from one state into another, for even these intermediate states are never static. Even encountering sites and their temporal dynamics and atmospheres first hand takes place in and is limited to a specific time.

One look at the landscape architect’s toolbox quickly reveals that to a large extent the design tools are inherited from architecture. Furthermore, the two most prominent tools used for working with representation and projection—the plan and the section—appear much more calibrated to dealing with space than with time. This is worth noting since time lies at the core of any transformation process. Site readings can reveal aspects that are otherwise invisible to the in-studio study of mediated site material in the form of plans, sections, maps, statistics, or aerial photos. They may also act as complements to these more well-developed activities in the process of understanding the complexities of urban landscapes and developing ideas for future spatial interventions. **Thus, searching for alternatives to generic and universal design solutions that could lead to more nuanced transformations requires substantial methodologic development. To can reveal ephemeral site qualities requires media capable of accurately capturing and representing the dynamic and relational character of a place.**

Looking for answers on how to capture and represent site qualities in terms of relational atmospherics, I have set up a project exploring a concept called “traveling transect” as a method for mapping and narrating water landscapes. The technique builds on the ideas of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century traveler and scientist Alexander von Humboldt and was developed in collaboration with landscape architecture scholars and professors Lisa Diedrich and

Gini Lee.¹⁹ The traveling transect method draws on approaches from Humboldt's open works and transareal traveling, as we found his work quite relevant and refreshing for urban landscape readings.

Indeed, Alexander von Humboldt's work breaks with two epistemologies of his time: the reflection at distance and knowledge as a series of stratified entities. He preferred experience-based learning and empirical on-site explorations on his travels across continents and practiced an open-ended and multi-mediated notation technique that encompassed writing, drawing, material collection, annotations, and more. Particularly his *Tableau Physique* inspired us for it combines various types of information, both scientific content and representational forms. Most significantly, the technique reflects his on-site transareal travel observations in the juxtaposition and annotation of heterogeneous information. This is especially interesting since his embedded premise—his second epistemological breakthrough—establishes that we are able to derive knowledge from bringing together information that is already available. This line of thinking goes hand in hand with our interest in the “as found;” furthermore, it expresses some resemblance with today's innovation paradigm. Humboldt has thus prototyped a way of constructing a site's identity, which, on the one hand, mirrors the way we experience it and, on the other, successfully represents various site data in a way that juxtaposes on-site aesthetic awareness with other kinds of knowledge. Lastly, we appreciate his open-ended reflections on relationships, cause and effect, and classifications. Our project thus consists of both mobile, scientific on-site inquiry and off-site reflection, keeping in mind that combining site observation with studio elaboration and representation is highly constructive for reviewing, exploring, and redesigning possible futures.

We conducted the on-site part of our pilot project in 2013 on the Canary Islands. Humboldt visited the islands himself on his way to America, constituting for himself an *Inselwelt*—a term which

¹⁹ Ellen Braae, Lisa Diedrich, and Gini Lee, “The Transect as a Method for Mapping and Narrating Water Landscapes: Humboldt's Open Works and Transareal Travelling,” *NANO* (New American Notes Online), iss. 06 (November 2014),

accessed on Jan. 30, 2017, <http://www.nanocrit.com/issues/6-2014/transect-method-mapping-narrating-water-landscapes-humboldts-open-works-transareal-travelling>.

designates both a micro cosmos and refers to a part of a larger “world of islands”—and for us an ideal on-site laboratory for our transareal and trans-scalar reading of water landscapes. Based on our prior knowledge of the islands, we set up an itinerary. It included sites that we had identified as important, both as water landscapes and cultural landscapes, and areas which we sought to investigate. We linked these disparate places with the power of the line. Introducing a geometrical component, namely a straight line, gave us a larger territory to traverse while also redirecting our attention to areas where we would otherwise not have ventured. We literally drew this central corridor on hand-drawn maps as a straight, red line that would take us through the most constitutive water-related features. Knowing that following the line itself would encourage deviation, we incorporated serendipity as an intentional way of finding what we were not looking for. In this way, the itinerary represented only a rough sketch—for while we were on-site conducting our transareal travel we adjusted the route according to a combination of factors: accessibility, deviations caused by the serendipity that the traveling itself continuously brought about thus also affecting our focus, and in response to our constantly developing discussions, understandings, and interests. By means of collected material, observations, sketches, simple models, photos, and video footage, we grasped and notated form, color, scale, structure, materiality, sound, and use in order to capture the site atmospheres and dynamics within a spatially relational framework.

Transareal travel does not end there—beyond the active traversing and collecting, we engage discussion, in-studio reflection and analysis to build toward a more comprehensive site reading. While traveling, discussions with fellow researchers and conversations with individuals who are more knowledgeable about specific sites are constructive for allowing the understanding of a place to evolve throughout the transect process. These conversations often take the form of speculating about how things have come about and what they may become when continued in the off-site phase, reworking, deepening, and reconfiguring the findings into new open entities, our own “*tableaux physiques*.” Back in the studio, these heterogeneous and diverse findings—observations, sketches, video footage, material

samples, simple model analyses, etc.—are annotated, curated, and collaged to build up “thick maps” using media from our own time. In this way, the findings gradually become “foundings.”²⁰ On various occasions, we displayed, published, and lectured on these site/off-site tableaux²¹ in the hopes of giving urban landscape qualities a voice.

Norms and Atmospheres

Rather than asking if we can create something new by achieving a better understanding of the existing, we should ask ourselves how we can improve the existing. The first step is clearly to develop subtler reading modes. There is basically no alternative way to address the current urban landscape as all future changes will have to take place within the existing built up areas. And unless we can accept the erasure of what is already there, we must exercise a new attentiveness and awareness—an awareness open to creative interventions, an awareness that considers the relational, dynamic, and multi-scalar aspects of site, and an awareness of both the spatial or structural physiognomy and ephemeral qualities of site.

The imperatives that I laid out, emphasizing the roles of ecology, democracy, significance, and beauty, establish an underlying scheme through which landscape architects may achieve such an awareness. While the traveling transect methodology also supports these four imperatives, it clearly must be used to supplement other modes of generating site-related knowledge as we have mainly focused on revealing aspects, which are harder to grasp yet certainly no less important. As we encounter places that have been subject to multiple cycles of cultivation and phases of urbanization, the traveling transect may reveal local appreciations and uses of water landscapes—as was also the intent for our Canary transect—for water landscapes, in particular, are relational, dynamic, and multi-scalar. The straightforward test of accessibility explored during our initial itinerary improves our understanding of horizontal access. Crossing

²⁰ Ellen Braae, Lisa Diedrich, and Gini Lee, “The Travelling Transect: Capturing Island Dynamics, Relationships and Atmospheres in the Water Landscapes of the Canaries,” in *Nordes Online Proceedings* (2013), 191–200.

²¹ Ellen Braae, Lisa Diedrich, and Gini Lee, “The Travelling Transect,” an exhibition at Nordes (Malmö, 2013).

areas with various urban densities, levels of agricultural development and expression also provides us with a better understanding of the character, extent, and structure of open areas available for public use. Most of all, however, the traveling transect methodology substantiates the imperatives of significance and beauty, which as features are difficult to grasp and represent and thus often overlooked. This may be the case particularly when the point of departure is the “as found” rather than something created *ex nihilo*, for it depends on values, methods, and creative practices different from those that come with that kind of novelty, which so profoundly informed twentieth century design practices.