

# LANDSCAPE AND AGENCY

*Landscape and Agency* explores how landscape, as an idea, a visual medium and a design practice, is organized, appropriated and framed in the transformation of places, from the local to the global. It highlights how the development of the idea of agency in landscape theory and practice can fundamentally change our engagement with future landscapes. Including a wide range of international contributions, each illustrated chapter investigates the many ways in which the relationship between the ideas and practices of landscape, and social and subjective formations and material processes, are invested with agency. They critically examine the role of landscape in processes of contemporary urban development, environmental debate and political agendas and explore how these relations can be analysed and rethought through a dialogue between theory and practice.

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Critical Essays

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# INTRODUCTION

## Critical concerns of landscape

*Ed Wall and Tim Waterman*

In *Landscape and Agency* we explore the capacity for action and change in the interrelations between people and land. We discuss the potential for transforming landscapes and the transformative potential of landscapes to redefine cities and enrich daily lives. We are focused explicitly on landscapes of practice – lived, acted, engaged landscapes. Chapters critically examine landscapes that are formed through a range of interactions across the design, planning, occupation and use of land. We embrace a range of definitions of landscape, from the narrowly scenographic approaches drawn from the field of painting to geographies describing ecological and economic dynamics at territorial scales. The term ‘landscape’ has not only various contemporary meanings, but has been differently employed through time, and in each era what it has described about our human relationship with land reflects broad shifts in thinking and modes of acting and being. Its earliest European meanings, elaborated with great historical rigour by Kenneth Olwig in his *Landscape, Nature, and the Body Politic* (2002), comprise an explicit relationship between land use (often in the context of the negotiation of the commons), custom, morals, and law. Rather than the largely scenographic and painterly art it would later become, a ‘landscape’ was first understood as something produced through social and technical changes to the land, the manipulation of the valley basins, coastal shores, rivers and wetlands to provide sustenance, shelter and defence. The meaning of the suffix *-scape* as describing a system or a set of processes and relationships is here evident, and other authors have resurrected this pre-modern and pre-capitalist sense (Jackson, 1984; Bender, 1993; Corner, 1999; Johnson, 2007) including Denis Cosgrove, who acknowledged the resurgence of this definition in his introduction to the second edition of *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1998). Of course, landscape also plays an important role in providing both an active and passive symbol and a theatrical backdrop for national identity (Daniels, 1993; Matless, 1998; Olwig, 2002). This sense of a collective work need not be tied to nationalism, however, as the work

of landscape precedes the construction of the nation-state. Instead, landscape as a collective work over time is implicit, as exemplified by Henri Lefebvre's resonant words, 'We have learned how to perceive the face of our nation on the earth, in the landscape, slowly shaped by centuries of work, of patient, humble gestures' (2008 [1991], 134).

This collectivity is evident in J.B. Jackson's *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (1984, 8), that the term 'landscape' was taken in the tenth century to refer to the 'collective aspects of the environment', and this sense of collectivity and interaction lends itself to being conceived in terms that use ecosystem as metaphor. In the last century, an ecological structure of thought has been argued to allow us to conceive of our relationship with landscape in ways that both reach into the history of humanity and which create new frames for thinking about the present and the future that are embodied, emplaced and practised (Bateson, 1972; Code, 2006; Rawes, 2013). This layering-up of meanings allows for a simultaneity of ideas of landscape: that characteristic that consistently calls for the metaphor of the palimpsest to be pressed into service, to the point of cliché. These layers might now be composed of pre-literate embeddedness, medieval ties of custom and obligation, modern scenographic iconographies and their concomitant identities, and now a contemporary ecology of mind which brings them all together in modes of being, acting and thinking. A human environment characterized by such relational action, which reflects on the past to project into the future, is powerfully emerging as landscape's new epistemology. Rather than emerging solely from landscape discourses a series of 'turns' in critical theory have changed landscape's frame. These include the linguistic turn, the cultural turn and the relational, corporeal, spatial, constructivist and ecological turns. These widely linked shifts in critical theory have prompted an examination of agency in landscape, which, in keeping with the post-disciplinary construction of the spatial turn, combine the sociological, the geographical and the historical in equal measure (Soja, 1996, 2010).

## Chapters

In *Landscape and Agency* we advocate for the capacity of landscape, as a complex of powerful social, spatial and ecological relations, to empower change, if not also to embody it. While critically reflecting on contemporary theories and practices we aim to highlight the achievements of architecture, landscape architecture and urban design to employ social and ecological knowledge in the rehabilitation of physical sites (see Chapter 3, 'Agency, advocacy, vocabulary: three landscape projects', by Jane Wolff). The continued influences of Landschaftspark Duisburg Nord, Parc de la Villette and Fresh Kills Park on subsequent landscape projects and discourses have endured alongside critical writings on the power of landscape as an ecological and projective medium that can transform cities (see Cosgrove, 1998 [1984]; Corner, 1999; Waldheim, 2006; Reed and Lister, 2014). The chapters of this book have been brought together, in part, due to the persuasiveness of these discourses. However, we are also conscious that many of these design approaches advance economic agendas that tend to situate themselves in the midst of vast, complex, ineffable market systems while assuming a self-organizational

or self-regulating equilibrium. Douglas Spencer's chapter on 'Agency and artifice in the environment of neoliberalism' (Chapter 13) directly describes these concerns, as does his timely *The Architecture of Neoliberalism* (2016). We recognize a silence amongst landscape practices and an impotence of landscape, architecture and landscape architecture theory to propose effective address to other contemporary challenges of our environments and societies. We identify that the repeated flooding of cities and the destructive actions of material displacements during urban developments struggle to be contained. We are concerned with the appropriation of landscape – that landscapes as languages, as technologies, as practices and as representations have been co-opted to advance economic advantage despite or against social and environmental concerns. In this context, landscape architectural practices and aesthetics have been actively employed in advancing gentrification, facilitating the displacement of communities and visually framing (and concealing) urban narratives of predation and dispossession that, while obscured, may still be read in urban landscapes by a practised eye. Under the cloak of the acclaim for the successes of landscape projects which, for example, clean up and remake urban waterfronts to open up public access, these new urban landscapes are embraced by landowners and developers (and accepted by municipal planners) as devices to escalate land values, displace undesirable businesses, upturn land uses and attract more affluent residents. In her critique of the development of the Fresh Kills Park on a vast landfill site on New York's Staten Island, Linda Pollak (2002, 59) describes a 'magic disappearing act' which is performed as a veneer of scenographic landscape is employed to conceal the wasted (albeit treated) land below. Landscape, in these terms, becomes a purifying agent remediating the soil as it can also be found to cleanse the contents and beautify the appearance of cities. Following Pollak, many of the chapters are interested in the agency of working landscapes (see Don Mitchell's afterword, 'Landscape's agency'), such as the vast engineered layers of waste being processed below Fresh Kills Park, and they are critical of the agency which scenographic relations use to obscure the knowledge, skill and labour required to create them.

The chapters question prevailing ideas and approaches to landscape with the aim of revealing alternative cultural and ecological relations. We explore how the development of ecological and relational landscape thought and practice can fundamentally change our engagement with people and environments (see Chapter 6, 'Planetary aesthetics', by Peg Rawes). We discuss the development of contemporary landscapes from their recent history in capitalist modernity as a picturesque visual medium to disciplinary developments from landscape gardening and landscape architecture to landscape urbanism. We are concerned with the many ways in which the relationships between the ideas and practices of landscape and the social and subjective formations and material processes are invested with agency. We critically examine the role of landscape in uneven processes of contemporary urban development, environmental debate and political agendas and we ask how these relationships can be analysed and rethought through the dialogic construction of theory and practice. The chapters are focused on the agency of landscape relations, the influence of our environments and our impact on the land through use, occupation, design and development (see Chapter 9,

'Publicity and propriety: democracy and manners in Britain's public landscape', by Tim Waterman). It is through landscape practices (such as landscape architecture and landscape urbanism) that the agency of landscape can be most vividly read: as Ross Exo Adams writes in Chapter 1, 'Landscapes of post-history', 'If there is agency in landscape practices, it is likely grounded in the ontological status of landscape itself.' How the dynamics of landscapes empower individuals and groups to act is a consistent theme through the chapters. As the potential of landscapes are realized through the means of design, community action or political resistance, the vast scope and often unrealized capacity of landscape actions are revealed (see Chapter 11, 'Post-landscape', by Ed Wall). We focus on the agency of landscape relations rather than the capacity for change of individuals. Communities are implicated within these relations as well as the actions and processes of our environments. In Chapter 4 ('The law is at fault? Landscape rights and "agency" in international law'), Amy Strecker explores laws that relate to 'rights *to* landscape' and attempts to establish the 'rights *of* landscape'. Even in these terms, the rights of individuals can be found to be more effectively argued than the latter protection of physical environments through the law. The anthropomorphic sense of agency as empowerment, however, is not one that we find consistently problematic. It can be an aid to making natural processes and forces tangible and legible (see Chapter 2, 'Reciprocal landscapes: material portraits in New York City and elsewhere', by Jane Hutton) as we locate ourselves within our varying environments. The chapters in this book are situated socially, politically, economically, ecologically and legally in a particular nexus of time. They reflect on contemporary design projects that continue to transform ecological conditions (see Chapter 5, 'How to live in a jungle: the (bio) politics of the park as urban model', by Maria Giudici) as well as reconsidering representational approaches that have made claims to empowerment, both ecological and social (see Chapter 8, 'Rhythm, agency, scoring and the city', by Paul Cureton). As old systems struggle to adjust to more recent political and technological change, landscapes can provide a means to adapt. Equally they can remain a relic of past ideals, perhaps illustrating where the agency of nostalgia, or at least of the defence of the status quo, trumps the agency of adaptation and evolution in places (see Chapter 7, 'The closed landscapes of Sverdlovsk-44 and Krasnoyarsk-26', by Katya Larina). The broad geographic range that the chapters address represents the reciprocity of landscape discourses and the global relations which are inherent in contemporary landscape practices. The spaces of and for communities and the representation of social groups in the reconfiguration of landscapes is a core concern in the book (see Chapter 10, 'The power of the incremental: agronomic investment in Lisbon's Chelas Valley', by Jill Desimini, and Chapter 12, 'Activating equitable landscapes and critical design assemblages in Bangkok', by Camillo Boano and William Hunter), that, as many landscape practices also aim to address, provides clues to how future landscapes might be made and occupied.

## Landscape and agency

When we began planning the 'Landscape and Critical Agency' symposium (2012), with Murray Fraser and Douglas Spencer, in the conversations that would become

the basis for this book we shared a common concern for the need for criticality in landscape practices, design and theory. While troubled that economic agendas and political upheavals were undermining the capacity of landscapes everywhere to support and provide the ground for positive change, we were optimistic that shifting the frames in which we commonly think of and form landscapes could begin to realize more potential in built and lived landscapes. That ecological practices in landscape have advanced is a considerable achievement for which landscape architects can claim a central role. How writers and practitioners engage with the urgency of current landscape relations, to challenge escalating land values, community displacements, continued privatizations and advancing gentrification is a great and complex challenge. *Landscape and Agency* aims to open up these questions, challenge prevailing practices and encouraging action that will engender more just and sustainable future landscape relations. Thus, as we refer to landscape and agency, we describe relationships that are not one of dominion over land, flora and fauna, but rather that we see the work of landscape architecture and of planned development as one of involvement and collective action – and that the work itself is much larger than merely that accomplished within a single project or profession. *Landscape and Agency* highlights how people engage in working landscapes over time – landscapes that have distinctive pasts and tangible, planned for, hoped for and lived futures.

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