



How tomorrow's
practitioners will
learn today

Educating Architects

Thames & Hudson

EDITED BY
NEIL SPILLER & NIC CLEAR

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I dedicate this book to my two sons Edward and Tom, and to all the people featured in this book, teacher or student. It has been your day-to-day toil and victories that have made this book possible.

Neil Spiller

Drafting chair and table, 2013 (Dino Paxenos / Modern50.com)

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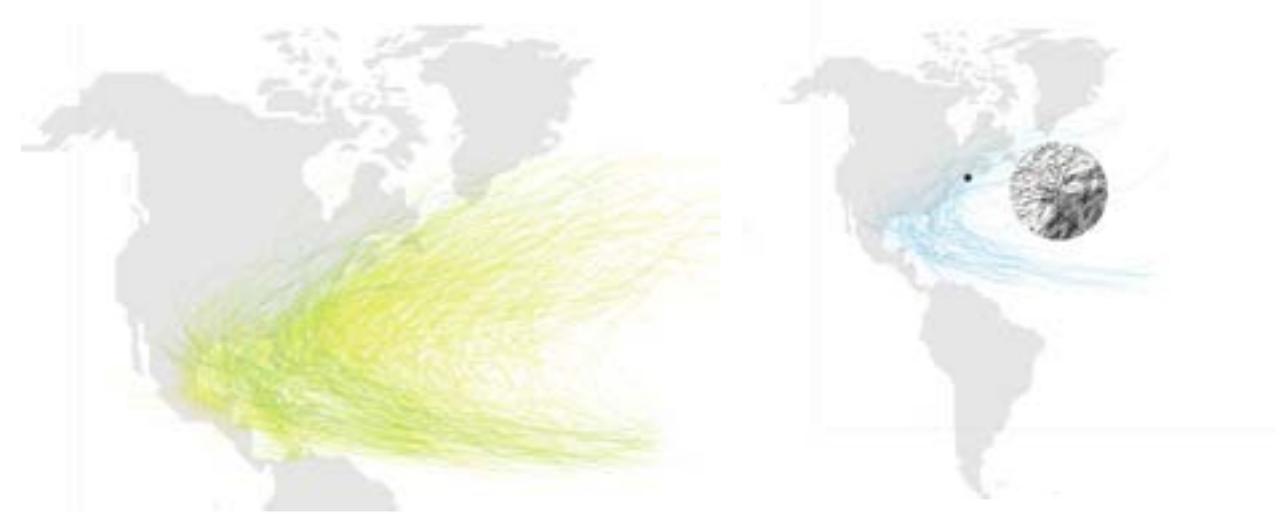
Working the realities of landscape

- Ed Wall, Academic Leader for Landscape, Department of Architecture and Landscape, University of Greenwich

Landscape practice is a series of intricate and interwoven operations that are social and spatial. As landscape architecture, it is informed by physical sites, constituted by a convergence of processes. In her essay 'Site Citations', Elizabeth Meyer suggests that the design of sites has been 'central to establishing landscape architecture as a discipline.'¹ Despite the associations it has had with art, architecture, engineering and horticulture, she claims, landscape architecture is differentiated from other disciplines by its relentless engagement with site throughout the design process. By reading sites as social and spatial entities, it is becoming a design practice that is essential to addressing contemporary circumstances: environmental damage, economic uncertainty and social inequality.

Rising tides, storm surges, earthquakes, landslides, mass migration, summer holidays, urban farming, accelerated supply chains, waste management, industrial pollution, urban growth, rural neglect, global media events, constant surveillance, police presence, cultural diversity, intangible land values and cloned new towns: these are the everyday processes and forms of our landscape. They are not extreme occurrences against a background of balanced ecologies, just societies and shared lives - the daily experiences and spaces of a landscape in constant change. They are the frequently dirty and sometimes delightful realities of landscape that are the focus of landscape architecture.

Previously constrained by its embrace as a scenographic medium, landscape has in the past represented the unreal. In *The Production of Space* (1991), Henri Lefebvre claims that a landscape that 'offers an already clarified picture' is a 'mirage'.² He is concerned that as



above
Guy Nordenson, Catherine Seavitt and Adam Yarinsky, Mapping of Hurricane Patterns, New York, 2010

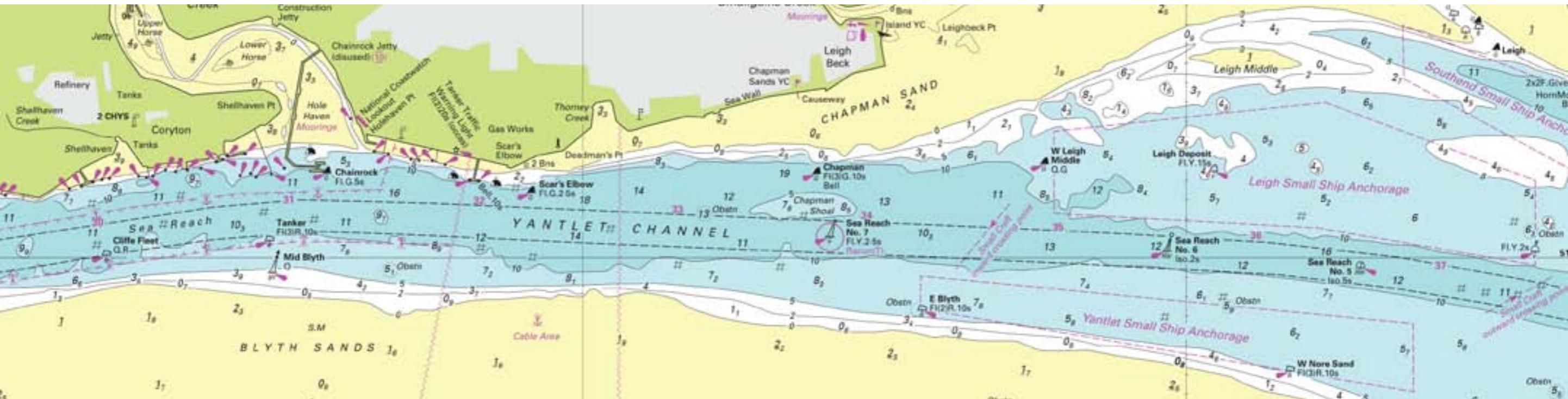
above right
Guy Nordenson, Catherine Seavitt and Adam Yarinsky, Multi-scalar Ecologies of Hurricanes, New York, 2010

a representation of space, it falsely claims a transparency to real life that is misleading. But this illusion, which James Corner also recognizes in *Recovering Landscapes* (1999), is never permanent.³ Corner sees it as a 'veil of pretence', unable to conceal the 'erring realities of life'. For him, this narrow definition of landscape as scenic interrupts its ability to engage with the urgencies of contemporary life. Instead, by focusing on understanding sites as tangible forms and processes, landscape architecture is able to advance as an inventive social and spatial practice.

Realities

The London landscape has many competing realities, but the Thames and its surrounding river basin are among its most prominent - a context that has for centuries framed both the everyday and the extraordinary. There are fewer more dramatic events than the Thames flood of 1928 and the North Sea flood of 1953, which transformed the relationship of the city with its river. The overwhelming combination of surging tides and heavy storms provided grounds for the construction of the Thames Barrier, which opened in 1983, and flood defences around the North Sea, and continue to motivate a discourse about the effect of flooding on the city's infrastructures in the context of a desire for further urban growth.

Everyday events also unfold at the scale of individuals. The direct action of Trenton Oldfield, a lone protester who waded into the Thames in 2012 to disrupt the annual boat race and the elitism it represented, offers a contrast to these regional floods. The protest was a fleeting



moment of interruption, which has since drawn a lengthy political reaction. This single action opened up questions of education, migration and the legitimacy of protest itself, and highlighted a landscape indivisible from the social constructs from which it is made. Other acts of resistance, for example at Taksim Gezi Park, Istanbul, in 2013, and Zuccotti Park, the temporary home of Occupy Wall Street protestors, two years earlier, highlight how the presence of people comes to define these landscapes. They also reveal the significance of less tangible regulatory contexts, which are not immediately evident to the observer in constructing the lived reality of these places.

But behind these occurrences are clues to their composition and what they mean to design practice. What exist are processes rich in information. For landscape practice, the task is to translate this site knowledge creatively, interpret social actions spatially and understand dynamic ecologies effectively. These realities of landscape are embedded with an abundance of data that is both immediate and

Imray Laurie Norie & Wilson,
Measures of the Thames,
London, 2010

concealed; to uncover this and work the information imaginatively offers landscape architects exceptional grounds for their practice.

Designs

The Thames environment provides many contexts for landscape practice in London, and is the geography from which the *All London Green Grid* emerged – a strategic open-space and green infrastructure framework, initiated by the Greater London Authority, which grew from the initial *East London Green Grid* plan.⁴ The two strategies recognize that green and open-space networks should be read, as Peter Beard describes in the *East London Green Grid Primer*, ‘as infrastructures in themselves.’⁵ This metropolitan-scale mapping quantifies the contribution of existing and potential open spaces. Beard further observes that these green and open spaces are ‘placed as deliberately as their engineered counterparts with their own rational contribution.’ This embraces an approach to landscape based on spaces and processes,



Greater London Authority,
Opportunities Across the
All London Green Grid,
London, 2012

rather than objects, and one that designers can engage with through the layers of evidence as they are revealed.

Working with landscape as an infrastructure also offers a scale of operation necessary to understand this vast geography. Even the term 'grid', adopted for London's open-space and green infrastructure strategy, implies what Corner describes as 'a vast surface for flexible and changing development over time.'⁶ Although the *All London Green Grid* is not an orthogonal structure, the sense of order and exacting dimensions that would be expected from an engineered approach offers, Corner continues, 'autonomy and individuality of each part' within it.

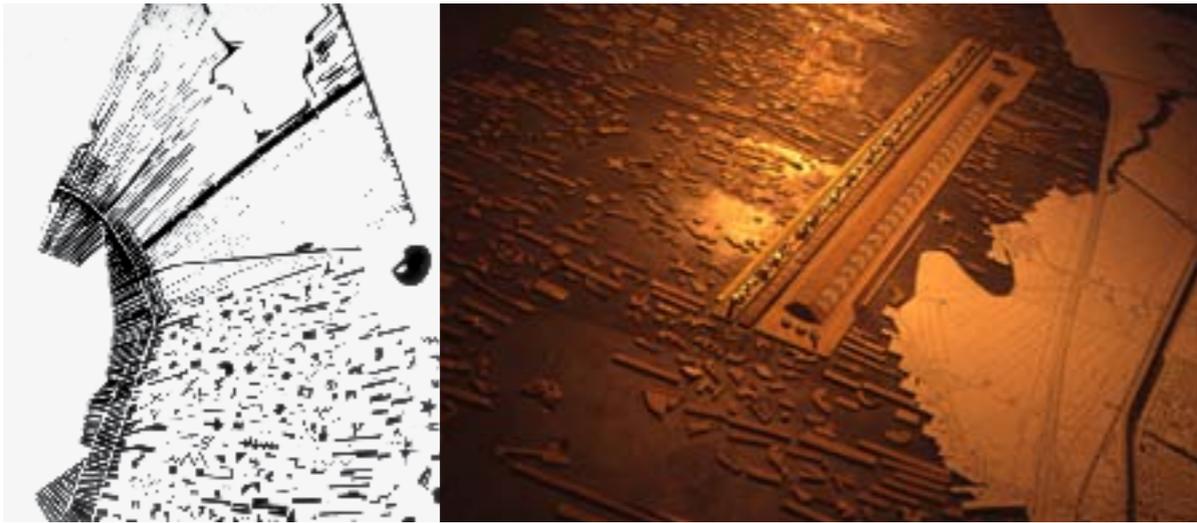
As the grid is realized through built projects, the distinctness of local discourses, regional politics and global trends, economies and climates are likely to be more closely felt. Work with the manageable elements of landscape, which Beard recognizes as contributing in a 'measurable and quantifiable way to the functional hardware of the city', needs to be carefully mediated with the unplanned.⁷ How the instability of climatic events can be engaged with will require hybrid solutions that are social, technological and ecological. The aim of the *All London Green*

Grid to increase access to open space will necessitate a generosity as to what is permitted in these spaces, as well as who is allowed in.

Working with water and preventing flooding is central to the grid's framework. Addressing the increasing development of green spaces and the subsequent inundation of drainage networks has also been the focus of much landscape architecture practice. Area frameworks that were prepared from the *East London Green Grid* considered directly the absorption of rainwater by the landscape, creating conditions that allow communities to adapt to climate change. The Thames Barrier represents a harder infrastructural approach to flooding than the *All London Green Grid*. After the North Sea flood in 1953, when thousands of people were killed, a barrier in the river was considered necessary to protect London. But in the Netherlands, the flood led to a national strategy, transforming the country's relationship with the sea. The Dutch have a long history of managing the threat from water, and the Delta Works system was built along the coastline as the latest of a series of flood defences that have defined the population's relationship with its environment.

These challenging conditions have significantly informed the work of Adriaan Geuze of landscape architecture firm West 8. As a highly engineered environment, the landscape of the Netherlands is a frequent setting for his projects. Geuze takes an inventive approach to site information by opening it up through the design process. His portfolio of work, which presents the conceptually abstract alongside rigorous site research, demonstrates an ability to recognize the dramatic, as well as the ordinary conditions of landscapes. For the 1990 Prix de Rome-winning project located between the Dutch towns of Breukelen and Vinkeveen, Geuze investigated a landscape of transportation infrastructure, landfill waste and water bodies. Principal to the design is a 5km (3-mile) terminal that simultaneously facilitates a centralized water-management system, a national waste and recycling treatment on which a new city could emerge. But importantly, and in contrast to Field Operations' masterplan for the Staten Island landfill site Fresh Kills (2006),⁸ Geuze embraces the unsightly processes of the landscape, openly working with the unseemly juxtaposition.

West 8's design for the Eastern Scheldt Storm Surge Barrier (1992) also accepts the exposure of the Dutch polder landscape, recognizing its position in the migration patterns of a number of bird



species. The artificiality of the infrastructure is elevated through a stark arrangement of dark- and light-coloured shells, providing an ideal resting environment for the coastal birds. The project is an ecological design for a seabird sanctuary, commissioned by the Ministry of Water Works, which realized a vivid and unequivocally constructed landscape. These projects are not abstract patterns developed in detachment from the sites, but designed with the clues offered, information gleaned and data collected.

West 8, VAM 5 terminal,
Breukelen-Vinkeveen,
The Netherlands, 1990

The analysis of social and ecological conditions demands a widening of site considerations to regional territories and climate. As environmental change becomes a global concern, landscape architecture in North America is at the core of disciplines that are proposing responsive strategies. For their project for the New York–New Jersey Upper Bay, Guy Nordenson, Catherine Seavitt and Adam Yarinsky of Princeton University aimed to reconceptualize relations between hard and soft infrastructures by setting out what they describe as an ‘adaptive strategy’.⁹ This is an approach founded on understanding the specificity of the multi-scalar ecologies of the bay, which included shipping, public parks and coastal development, as well as storm patterns and climatic data. Their research, which interrogated the challenges posed by climate change, mapped the history of storm patterns and conditions of the land.

Reading the evidence of the landscape is fundamental to these design approaches, which build from the ground up. The geographic data collected from maps, quantitative measures recorded during fieldwork and other research methods are common among landscape architects. Digital technologies are also becoming accessible, allowing designers to propose more open systems. Challenging the dominance

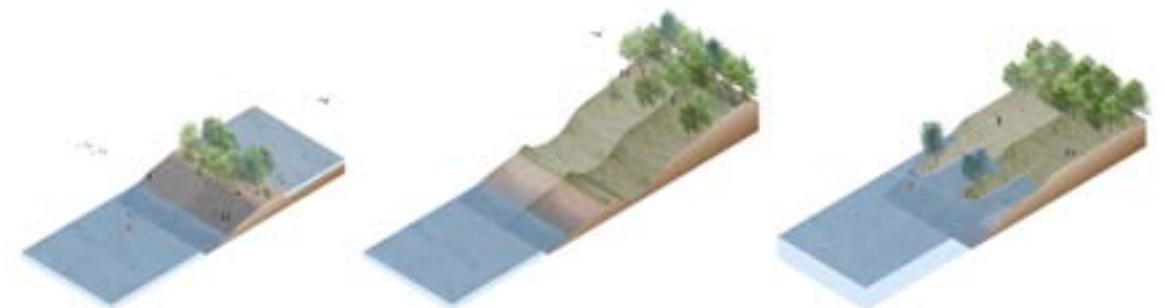
of traditional masterplans, remote sensors, digital mapping and positioning systems enable real-time data to be considered in the development of designed landscapes over time.

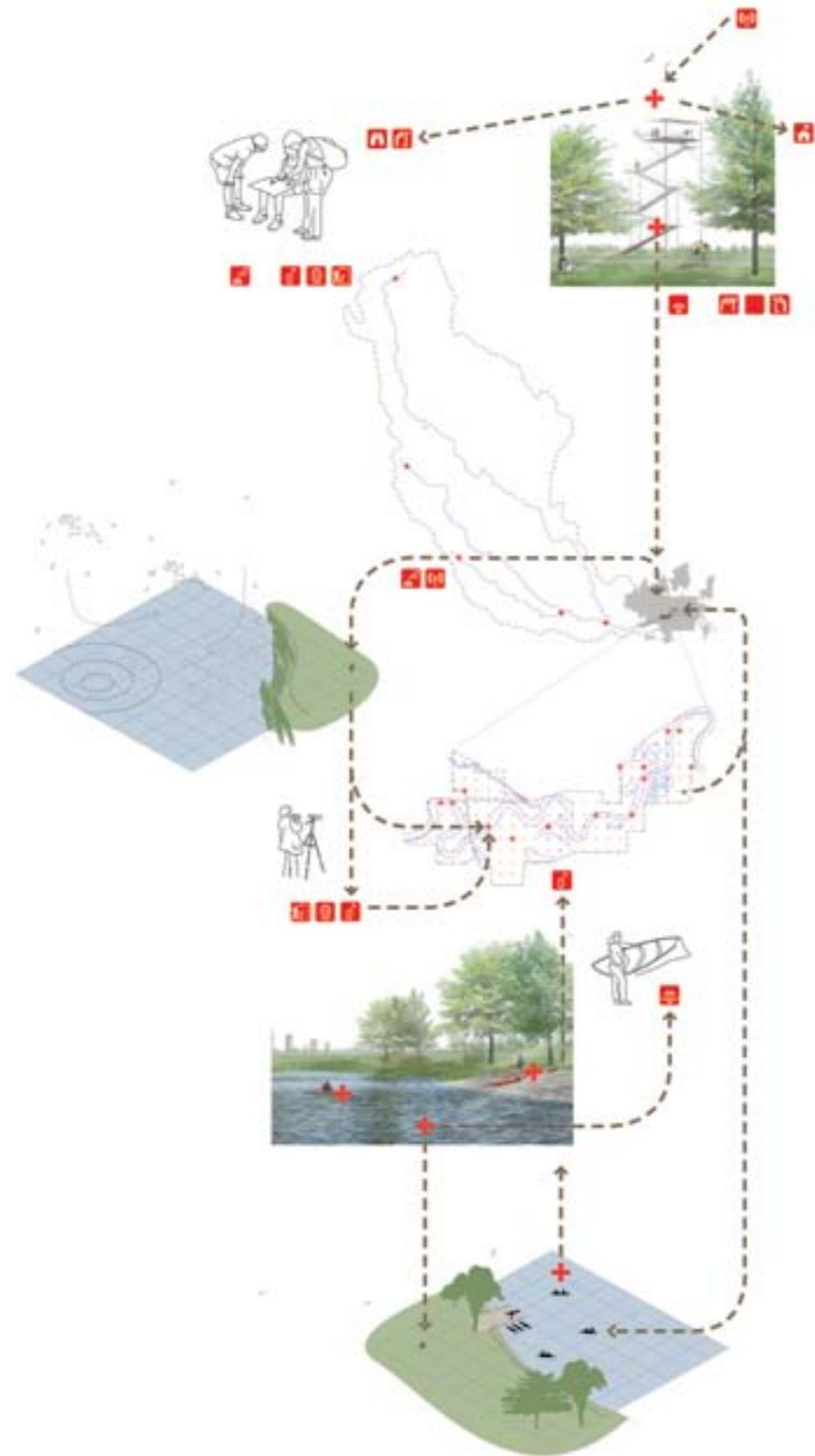
Project Studio’s Water Works Park proposal (2011) for a park in Des Moines, Iowa, embraces this approach. The site has for decades been a sophisticated complex of water-management systems, surrounded by a recreational park. In developing a more integrated urban park, the design offered a responsive strategy, rather than a fixed masterplan. The proposal set out a grid of digital sensors and observation points that read the flows and shifts across this dynamic landscape. Measurements of flood levels, visitor numbers, routes taken, bird sightings and soil contamination were recorded by park rangers, resident artists, visitors and a grid of digital sensors, establishing a database from which the design would be built and informed over time. Such methods engage directly with ecological flows and everyday social interactions. They recognize the potential of site data, not to pragmatically prescribe responses to what is revealed, but rather to open up possibilities through working with such complexities spatially, to define a landscape practice that interrogates, tests and imagines.

Caution

Advocating a landscape practice that engages with real issues of contemporary life should not be left unqualified. Lefebvre expresses a concern for landscape as a ‘mirror and mirage’, a representation where landscape can ‘introduce an extraordinary element into an ordinary context’, and also warns against the misconception of a ‘creative capacity’ that landscape can instil in the viewer, along with the

Project Studio, Water Works
Park, Des Moines, Iowa, 2011





Project Studio, Water Works
Park, Des Moines, Iowa, 2011

'illusion of transparency' that accepts space as neutral forms.¹⁰ What is proposed here, however, is accepting the immediately accessible and interrogating what is not. It advocates understanding the political interrelations that have formed these spaces, and requires the designer to recognize the incompleteness of knowledge and anticipate when it has been obscured. It also requires designers to interrogate the partiality of all site information, understand the sources of secondary data and question how any new data generated by a design will be used.

The challenge is then to work with this data spatially. To be useful in material practice, rather than just points on a map, the collected data must be translated into spatial form. New techniques must be developed to expose these sites and methods, and enhanced to develop them as designs. This does not negate the significance of traditional methods and established techniques of drawing, but rather highlights the need for specific approaches to each encountered landscape. Site investigations are defining innovative designed landscapes. Rather than abstract approaches based on the individuality of the designer, working with the realities of the landscape offers greater potential for inventive designers to engage with the immediate and difficult relations with our environment. These ways of working landscapes reveal what Corner describes as 'alternative sets of possibility' through creatively engaging with site conditions.¹¹ They are embracing sites that can be understood spatially, opening up landscape practice as a speculative and transformative process that can work in new and fascinating ways.