

SLU Landscape “Living Lab” research project report

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This report concludes a 12-month research period (Jan – Dec 2020) supported by the Urban Futures platform, host of the UF Synthesis Lab, to study SLU Landscape as an experiment, or ‘living lab’, in day-to-day collaboration motivated by shared commitment to showcase and mobilize the potential of the Landscape field at SLU, to contribute to the university mission to build a more sustainable world.

The first part of this report - synthesizing knowledge - focuses on project outcomes. It was prepared for the bi-annual SLU Landscape Steering Group strategic meeting (18/11/20). The second part - project background - provides details on the research project’s motivations, aims and activities. The full report was delivered to the SLU Urban Futures research platform acting director, Nina Vogel, December 2020.

A note on the research period: During much of 2020, COVID 19 has forced SLU Landscape to adapt its operations, protocols and programs. To deliver a report that fairly and accurately represents the breadth and depth of efforts expended by the SLU Landscape “living lab”, and the lessons the outcomes of those efforts can teach us, I’ve drawn on my full 5 years of direct experience with SLU Landscape, in addition to observations made these past 12-months.

PART I SYNTHESIS: What is SLU LANDSCAPE? How does it work?

SLU Landscape – what is it, exactly?

SLU Landscape (SLU L) refers to three distinct, yet interrelated constructs: A *conceptual construct* - SLU L designates an abstract ‘vision’ of collaboration and shared identity across the Landscape field at SLU; a *functional construct* – SLU L is an ‘operative entity’ made up of SLU staff who drive and oversee particular activities related to that vision; and an *institutional construct* - SLU L denotes an ‘innovative organizational arrangement’ that allows five separate existing institutional entities to speak and act with equity, as one, in the interest of strengthening the Landscape field’s position at SLU and in turn, SLU’s position in the Landscape field, nationally and internationally.

The UF supported research project has two aims: support the ongoing development SLU Landscape as a vision, a functioning entity, and an institutional arrangement, and deliver to the UF research platform shareable knowledge, of use by others at SLU and beyond, who hope to improve their inter- and trans-disciplinary collaboration capacity and competence.

SLU L exists within an academic institution that, like most academic institutions, presents barriers at many levels to actualizing collaborative work. Observing how SLU L operates to realize its vision through already established programs, and how it strategizes pathways for future growth, is the main thrust of the research activities. Recognizing when SLU L operations do well at realizing the SLU L vision, and acknowledging when they do not, are equally important to a research project that aims to derive applicable knowledge and transferable lessons by synthesizing findings from a range of experiences, voices, and modes of engagement within the SLU L “living lab.”

“SLU Landscape makes it easier to remember that there are other landscape resources with relevance to our research and courses... it helps prevent further fragmentation, keeps landscape visible... it’s not an organizational structure per se, but it’s an organizational structure in your head.” *

“SLU Landscape days have helped to keep connections and to form new ones, gives visibility”

“ we [the SG] don’t perceive themselves as a team – that we are going to do something together...this is why abstract and visioning work doesn’t work yet...”

“I would be happy if the newly employed had a clear picture of SLU L and took part, and if we could evolve the working relationship of the WG and SG – maybe we need more support capacity – a facilitator or administrator...”

KEY FINDINGS CONCERNING THE CONCEPT, OPERATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENT OF SLU LANDSCAPE

SLU L / the *CONCEPT*

Realizing a shared Landscape identity at SLU remains key to the success of SLU L. SLU L has cultivated a core group of interested and engaged Landscape staff, but the concept of SLU L as a shared identity, and how it functions on an operational level, remains opaque and “mysterious” to many SLU L staff.

Findings: Current participation/ engagement levels reflect only a narrow slice of SLU’s Landscape field activities and actors. The initiative has struggled from the outset to interest a broad mix that would accurately represent the extent of SLU Landscape resources (Urban veg/ Govt + Management, etc.) Most of the engaged SLU L staff are also involved with the landscape architecture programs. This “SLU L core” has a history, which brings some advantages but also proves a hindrance when working to include other groups, inside and outside SLU L. Over the years, staff engagement in SLU L has varied but been limited, neither growing from within its 5 member organizations nor expanding outwards.

Conclusions: SLU L needs to place more emphasis on getting its messages out at all levels if it wants to achieve the mission of “galvanizing all the multi-disciplinary landscape resources at SLU”. SLU L needs to admit it has shrinking, not expanding involvement. Inactive groups within SLU L need to be identified, approached and encouraged to take part, in order to legitimize the vision and realize the collective mission.

ACTION: Communication work needs a champion. Maria Wisselgren wants to be that champion.

SLU L / the *OPERATIONS*

SLU L depends upon small groups of individuals to set goals, run programs and expand staff engagement. Where individual responsibilities and tasks are clear, SLU L operates well, its programs continue to evolve thanks to the passion of staff, and the concept of shared identity gets realized. Where tasks are unclear and managerial/strategic oversight lacking, SLU L functions poorly, and programs/ initiatives risk stagnation.

Findings: Concrete limited-scope activities with clearly documented protocols work well. Finitely scoped, practically-oriented, concrete actions with established procedures that can be easily followed have been the most successful. Current examples include 4 annual initiatives launched by SLU Landscape: Call for Ideas, SLU Landscape Days, PhDs and Teachers Forum. (Focus on reinforcing these, especially during COVID).

“Fluffy/less defined planning initiatives” consistently fail to gain traction to advance the SLU L concept. More abstract visioning efforts that depend on collective consensus around scoping, agreements on delegation of tasks, and individual accountability consistently fall short. Examples include Steering Group (SG) action planning and strategic planning efforts, communication planning, etc. (Consider setting such efforts aside, especially during COVID).

“SLU Landscape needs a facilitator to keep going. The SG and WG just don’t have time for that”

“it’s a problem, the staff are still not aware of what the concept of SLU Landscape is...”

“we need to think more about communication”

“we can learn a lot of lessons from COVID. SLU Landscape can plan things jointly ...”

“I think the WG is working well, our roles are settled, we understand what we need to do, we do it...”

“we/the SG have never been good at doing things between meetings, we don’t prepare. Sometimes we feel like we are starting all over again at every meeting”

“SLU Landscape needs to maintain consistent protocols, schedules, activities. This remains extremely difficult”

“establishing the WG has been beneficial...”

“If SLU L has 5 units, each should take a turn as SG chair”

“the SG lacks leadership capacity...”

“SG meetings are an opportunity to speak and meet together, to develop collaboration based on common landscape issues, shared concerns...”

“the PhDs and Teachers Forums are successful. The CFI is still strong...”

“things work well when there are clear timelines, procedures in place, and people adhere to them...big abstract goals and plans... large fluffy items, those things fail. Maybe we [the SG] should tone down the big ideas/ambitions, and work closer to the ground”

“the PhDs Forum is very important. It’s a “conversational counter-space” to the larger competitive research environment.”

“... with the PhD Forum, we really got together; now we know each other in the different campuses in a friendly professional way; we cultivated a conversational culture - inviting, respectful and based on trust”

“SLU Landscape has ‘created a context’ for activities. It’s more coherent than a bunch of one-off things”.

Mandates need to be clarified. Unclear mandates to the Working Group (WG), weak managerial/facilitation capacity in the WG and SG, and lack of clear role definition by SG members, hampers work processes between the two groups. However, WG and PhD’s Forum members have worked internally to define clear roles, translating into smooth work processes and forward-thinking action planning in these two arenas of SLU L activity.

Poor communication between the SG and WG impairs effectiveness of both. Informational exchanges lack regularity between the SG and WG, and internal communications between the SG chair and vice chair are not transparent enough to other SG members.

Conclusions: Clearly defined roles and transparent, regular communications are key to productivity. With new SLU L goals for expansion and collaboration (eg. with UMEA) clear roles and mandates for the SG, WG and facilitator need to be explicitly defined and actively followed.

ACTION: Operations need facilitation and management. To help manage / translate ambitions into action hire a facilitator with good managerial skills.

SLU L / the ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENT

SLU Landscape offers 5 entities (SOL/LAPF/AEM/UF/MOVIUM) a ‘space’ to build a collaborative culture and strengthen the overall standing of Landscape at SLU, to mutual benefit. The SLU L SG provides a rare setting where 5 unit heads can together explore and define collaboration opportunities.

Findings: Institutional hierarchies still hold too much sway over how the SG operates to realize the potential of the new organizational arrangement. The SG doesn’t model a culture of collaboration. For example, the “protocol” to switch off SG Chair responsibilities between SOL and LAPF reinforces existing institutional /departmental power structures instead of supporting an equitable landscape ‘coalition’ of 5 entities. The SG was from the start conceived as a group of ‘equal voices’ tasked to speak, with equal weight, for their respective landscape units. As such, the “SG Chair” must be treated as a managerial role (with responsibility for developing and distributing meeting agendas, moderating meetings, conveying collectively agreed upon SLU L ‘messages’ to SLU bodies beyond SLUL), *not* as a hierarchical position (the Chair should not presume to hold greater power or access to other external SLU actors than any other SG member).

Matters of economy pertaining to the five separate units comprising the collective SLU L take undue precedence over collaborative decision-making. Conflating collaborative arrangements and economic arrangements stands in the way of beneficially pooling knowledge and experience across all five SLU L entities.

Conclusions: The SG should focus on realizing more fully its potential as a living-lab – a new arrangement for testing ways of working collectively and collaboratively. To support a SLU L coalition, the SG needs to admit that competitive forces still exist, and reflect on how those forces contribute to current failings to achieve the SLU L vision of shared identity through operational means.

ACTIONS - Rotate SG CHAIR role annually, between all 5 entities. Disentangle matters of 'economy' from 'collaborative' actions. SLU L entities can operate and negotiate from separate positions about economic matters, but should operate as a 'collective' around defining and working to realize collaborative goals.

Reflections on the necessity for risk - moving the SLU Landscape "living lab" forward to benefit all SLU

SLU Landscape offers a compelling research "case" for UF and its Synthesis Lab because at every level (conceptual, operational and institutional) this experiment requires individuals to think and work in unfamiliar and even at times uncomfortable ways. Central to any serious futures-oriented research platform must be active advocacy and support for new ways of working and thinking. The SLU Landscape living-lab challenges existing organizational norms. It poses threats to existing power structures. Taking risks lies at the foundation of the SLU L "living-lab" experiment to develop and test new inter and transdisciplinary formats for collaboration.

Accountability issues that surface in SLU L operational settings have their roots in SLU L as a novel organizational arrangement. This is because the majority of individuals involved in SLU L operations misperceive their task as simply to administer pre-established sets of routines, instead of embracing their leadership roles as active participants in a living-lab experiment dedicated to creating opportunities for collaboration, knowledge sharing and collective benefit, within institutional frameworks that structurally stand in their way.

In recognition of these serious obstacles, when evaluating the SLU L Living-lab, this study does not adhere to normative academic 'assessment culture' (where success gets measured based on "stated goals achieved"). Instead, it treats instances of failure to meet expected outcomes as extremely fertile ground for generating knowledge and lessons-learned that can contribute to future accomplishments.

Looking ahead, SLU Landscape needs to shift gears. First, it needs to accept and embrace its experimental "living-lab" status. Then, it can acknowledge and accept its failings to date as having value, and reframe those failings as lessons pointing the way to more effectively realizing SLU Landscape's stated goals of cooperation, collaboration and communication between its 5 members.

PART II_PROJECT MOTIVATIONS, AIMS and WORK PROCESSES

Joining Landscape forces at SLU – the driving concept behind SLU LANDSCAPE

SLU Landscape began in 2015, launched by LTV faculty as a collaboration, co-operation and communication initiative. The driving concept of SLU Landscape was, and remains, simple: *strengthen the identity of the Landscape field at SLU, and support its development through collaboration, communication, and knowledge ex*

change. SLU Landscape (SLUL) is thus best understood as an “open tent” harboring all landscape-field education and research activities and actors at SLU.

At the same time, SLUL is more than simply an all-embracing title. It also operates as a resource network that creates and supports collaboration opportunities for individual staff, research groups, educational programs, academic departments, research platforms, and university faculties at SLU who share an interest in animating the landscape field’s potential to contribute to a more sustainable world.

Aimed at strengthening collaborative capacity in landscape research and education at SLU, SLUL has since the beginning focused on inter-disciplinary engagements within a university context, with the aim of developing tools for synthetically bridging geographically isolated, and historically separate academic research and teaching domains.

Over the course of its existence, SLU L has evolved into an action-oriented and activity-driven resource network offering Landscape staff at SLU the chance to pursue synergistic and synthetic work. It does so by creating collaboration formats and forums driven by ground up suggestions, and then supporting those formats and forums, over time.

SLU Landscape - vision and values

In all its undertakings SLU Landscape adheres to the vision and values expressed in the LTV Faculty Strategy. Its steering and working groups promote and oversee results-oriented projects and future-oriented planning efforts in three areas:

|| Cooperation/collaboration, with joint actions and knowledge-production opportunities;

|| Culture building/staff development, with “Calls for ideas” and knowledge-sharing Forums;

|| Strategic leadership/communication by goal setting, visioning and information-sharing.

[For more on the history and current activities of SLU Landscape see the 2018-2020 Strategic vision report https://www.slu.se/globalassets/ew/org/andra-enh/ltv/landskap/2018-2020-slu-l-report_final.pdf]

“Learn by doing” at SLU - An experimental “living lab” in collaboration

Since its inception, SLU Landscape has adopted the “learn by doing” approach associated with the American pragmatist philosophers John Dewey and Charles Sanders Pierce. Its purpose is to develop and test new ways of animating university resources in the landscape field. Operating on the “living lab” model (which advocates for mining usable knowledge from a project-in-process rather than waiting to distil findings only after a project is completed), SLU Landscape extracts and applies lessons learned along-the-way, to keep improving the quality of its activities and the effectiveness of its working processes. As a “living lab” SLU Landscape forms part of a recognized and growing trend toward more widely, collaborative, problem-based, and creative approaches to knowledge production. *[For more on the relevance of learning labs to Futures oriented research, see “Transforming knowledge systems for life on Earth: Visions of future systems, and how to get there”, Ioan Fazeya, et.al, Energy Research & Social Science 70 (2020) 101724].*

Functioning within a strictly organized institutional context that adheres to conventional definitions of scientific research, SLU Landscape encourages and embraces creative approaches to producing the “know-how” required to productively collaborate. This type of collaborative-capacity building initiative always faces many obstacles, arising in part out of particular settings (in this case, SLU) and in part out of long-standing academic institutional culture in general, which remains oriented around competing for, rather than sharing, limited resources. Overall, SLU Landscape aims at three levels of meaningful impact for SLU: 1) supporting cooperation among, and individual development of, SLU’s landscape educators and researchers; 2) delivering LTV Faculty a prototype for enhancing productive exchange within and between departments; 3) offering the University a transferable example of how to reduce structural barriers to collaborative and transdisciplinary work.

Motivations_why host a SLU L living-lab in collaboration capacity building?

Assuming that one reason to support Future research platforms is to transform knowledge systems to better meet future needs, SLU has an interest in strengthening its in-house multi and transdisciplinary research and knowledge production processes to better align with the pressing demands of complex sustainability challenges, and SLU Landscape could help evolve the institution in that direction. As Fazeya, et.al, note, to better meet future needs, learning and research practices “need to foster continuous learning rather than over emphasise achievement of specific output measures. Learning should be collaborative, operating through loops of collective action, evaluation, revision and further action.” (2014, p. 14)

After 6 years, SLU L keeps evolving. Rather than instituting rigid or hierarchical operational structures, it functions as a dynamic model of collaborative effort, a ‘living lab’ committed to testing new ways of working across research areas as well as academic and non-academic sectors, while continuing to operate within established university organizational structures. The initiative is also deeply committed to optimizing the inherent multi and transdisciplinarity of the Landscape field, in general, and its configuration at SLU, in particular, to offer the university an in-house model for transdisciplinary work modes. To realize and test this potential, SLU Landscape collects, galvanizes and animates university resources in landscape, functioning as a living-lab for collaboration and synthesis work. SLU Landscape’s 2020 report states that ‘internationally, landscape research and education are increasingly seen as key vectors of transdisciplinary and action-oriented work on crucial societal challenges like resource scarcity and climate change’, and that ‘landscape research includes many models in one knowledge area; as a composite field, it sets the stage for synthesis work.’ (SLU Landscape 2018-2020 Report and Strategic Vision).

Aims_what can be learned from the SLU L Living Lab research project?

This SLU Landscape Living Lab research project aims to extract applicable knowledge and usable lessons from the SLU L “collaboration experiment”. Part of the UF Synthesis Lab, it aligns with two of the SLU Urban Futures (UF) Platform goals, as stated in the UF 2020 Workplan and Budget: “To identify main success factors for interdisciplinary projects, collaboration projects and external communication projects” and “To strengthen the transdisciplinary and

collaborative capacity of SLU in research and education across researchers-teachers and students.” The project involves two types of activity:

- Meta-level engagement with SLU L Steering and Working Groups, PhDs and Teaching Forums, to encourage meeting long-term SLU L strategic goals through achievable action plans, and
- Documentation and evaluation of SLU Landscape collaboration and cooperation processes to assess areas of success and failure, and extract lessons learned.

Research Findings are intended to support the ongoing development and evolution SLU Landscape and contribute to the UF platform mission by producing transferable, usable knowledge to strengthen the University’s transdisciplinary and collaboration-capacity.

Activities (proposed & realized)_how to carry out this research project

Proposed research activities: The SLU Landscape “living-lab” research workplan, developed late fall 2019, was structured around four on-site field study visits (April, June, September, and November 2020), and one virtual visit in January 2020. Each field visit was conceived as an occasion to engage face-to-face with individual staff directly involved in driving SLU Landscape activities, including all members of SLU L Working Group, Steering Group, staff teams responsible for driving the SLU L Call for Ideas project and SLU Landscape days, the PhDs Forum and Teachers Forum. One meeting was scheduled with LTV Dean, Hakan Schroeder, for April 2020.

The purpose of the field visits and meetings was two-fold: To learn about and critically reflect on SLU L working processes and protocols through direct engagement with the people formulating and animating those processes; and to observe and participate in bi-annual SLU Landscape Days (April and September) when SLU Landscape sponsored activities are organized, and ongoing work of SLU L initiatives is communicated to the broad SLU Landscape community.

The project work plan clearly stated that the staff involved with SLU Landscape operations (the SLU Landscape Working Group, Steering Group, Teachers Forum and PhDs Forum) would be responsible for providing the researcher with the information required to document SLU L work procedures, communication and collaboration processes, and initiative outcomes. Project reporting and delivery of research findings to the Urban Futures platform thus depended on availability of said members to participate in evaluation meetings, and to willingly share their knowledge and experiences.

Due to Covid-19, all 2020 on-site visits were canceled, meetings were switched to virtual format.

Actual research activities: The observations and findings in this report reflect the willingness and openness of the majority of SLU L staff to provide the needed information to document SLU L work procedures, communication and collaboration processes, and initiative outcomes.

Between January and November 2020, I met four times with the Working Group members, the Steering Group, and representatives from the PhDs’ Forum, and once with the Dean of LTV, and the Chair and co-chair of the Steering group.

Representatives of the Teachers Forum declined to either meet or provide information on their working process during 2020. In addition to the meetings outlined in the proposed research plan, I held one meeting on working process with Lars Johansson and Ingrid Sarlov-Herlin (vice-chair and Chair of the Steering group); three meetings on matters related to SLU L communications with Catherine Kihlström (SLU Landscape communication consultant); one meeting with Asa Bensch (co-founder of the Teachers Forum); two meetings to discuss the SLU L "Call for Ideas" with Maria Wisselgren (responsible for the SLU L Call for Ideas) three meetings with Gunilla Lindholm (Steering Group / Working Group liaison).

Note: Quotations in the margins of the first section of the report are extracted from statements made by SLU Landscape staff during the meetings listed above.

[end of report]