

BEYOND ISM: THE Landscape OF LANDSCAPE URBANISM

BEYOND ISM: CONFERENCE REFLECTIONS

To keep the intellectual energy and creative thinking sparked by the Beyond Ism conference alive, we sought out feedback and inputs on where to focus the next level of inquiry and action. We asked respondents to reflect on issues, questions, and provocations for Landscape Architecture raised at the Beyond Ism conference, and in 1 - 2 sentences answer 3 questions:

1. What impressed you about the event, and why? (what was most surprising/unexpected)
2. What was your main “take away”? (what were you left thinking about, in a new way)
3. What would like to see happen next? (how can the provocations be explored further, kept alive)

Post-conference survey respondents

Thorbjörn Andersson (TA) Sen. landscape architect, SWECO, Prof. of landscape architecture SLU/Uppsala
Ellen Braae (EB), Professor in landscape architecture at CU, Copenhagen, Denmark (*impressions of middle part of the conference only*)

Dana Cuff (DC) Prof of Architecture/urban design and urban planning, UCLA, USA

Nadine Gerdts (NG) Prof. of Landscape Architecture Rhode Island School of Design, USA

Susan Herrington (SH) Prof. & Chair of landscape architecture, Univ. of British Columbia, Canada

Björn Malbert (BM) Prof. emeritus, architecture & sustainable urban development, Chalmers U, Sweden

Thomas Sieverts (TS) Prof. emeritus, urban planning, Technical University of Darmstadt, Germany

Jeannette Sordi (JS), Associate professor of design, landscape and urbanism, DesignLab, Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Chile

COLLECTED RESPONSES

1. *What impressed you about the event, and why? (what was most surprising/unexpected)*

DC: I thought the curation of the participants was most impressive. First, I appreciated the combination of young, fresh scholars and seasoned older scholars. Second, I found the broad disciplinary range extremely illuminating. All the participants spoke across academic boundaries, giving everyone much to learn from one another. Third, the range of countries of origin and thus scholarly tradition, even though we might push next time for folks from Asia and the Global South. It was a “risky” group of speakers, and all but a couple really proved worth taking the chance.

NG: *Beyond Ism* sparked a refreshingly open and direct collective conversation with little grandstanding. The dialogue in the plenary sessions and break out groups was honest, critical and speculative while pushing the central question and getting beyond superficial definitions of landscape and urbanism.

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- SH: I was impressed by the diversity of speakers from around the world and from different life experiences. The intellectual level of the event was very high, something that is not easily achieved when you have such a diverse grouping. The hospitality was also very warm and thoughtful. The format was excellent, and I felt that I was learning something new every hour.
- BM: The impressive international participation, with many leading scholars actively involved in the program.
- TS: I was impressed and stimulated by the differentiation, leaving over-simplified concepts behind. As I am not a landscape - architect myself, I learned a lot about the relations of city and nature.
- TA: The energy and the positive ambiance at the conference. Also the level of engagement among the participants, the willingness to take part of Q&A and the active atmosphere. The arrangements were very well prepared, from the graphics to the pragmatics of hosting. I am happy that my school could throw off an international symposium at this level, and this is surely important for future cooperation.
- EB: I'm tempted to say that what impressed me the most was that fact that we were able to spend a whole evening in a very, very cold green house and still have a lot of fun. The sessions I attended were fueled by a very engaged debate among the participants, that was really great and it reflects the number of high profiled academics attending the conference. Well done.
- JS: I was impressed by the diversity of perspectives on landscape and urbanism that the conference offered. Invited speakers, advisors, panelists, discussants coming from different backgrounds (landscape architecture, architecture, urbanism, ecology; design, planning, theory, representation...) and contexts (north and south America, Europe, Africa, Middle-East...) engaged in a three day long discussion that, starting from the case of landscape urbanism, became a deep and compelling conversation on the future of our cities and landscapes and the design disciplines. It is not very common to find such a level of engagement and exchange, and I really appreciated it.

2. What was your main "take away"? (what were you left thinking about, in a new way)

- DC: Strangely, I learned that Landscape Urbanism (or whatever we are going to call it) is not dead, or even in decline but thriving in the interesting work occurring on many different platforms and in the work of many interesting academics and practitioners. I was therefore left thinking about where that community "meets" in print, on the web, or in spatial geography since we don't really have journals, departments/faculties, etc that will nurture its continued growth.

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- NG: How do the entangled threads of theoretical discourse coming from academic departments of landscape architecture, architecture and urban design and planning lead to action? How does the academic discussion provoke new ways to address critical “on the ground” policy and design decisions? (The context of these questions is both the global and local.) How do we actively work to more easily span disciplinary boundaries and recognize our collective responsibility to address pressing socio-spatial urban *and* landscape issues? How do we expand our networks to work with others in disciplines that are equally aligned and grounded in building civic and political vision that recognizes the fragility of ecological and social landscapes we inhabit? As Sarah Jacobs stated in her abstract, “landscapes are always political, always, historical, and always social”; how do we take that reality and move toward cultivating and nurturing urban landscapes that are then livable in a long-ranging social and ecological sense?
- SH: That LU is really a theory developed in the East Coast schools of North America, with very little in the way of built examples. Nonetheless, as a theoretical movement it has inspired, particularly architects, to consider the natural systems of urban environments as the building blocks of design. For landscape architects, it has helped usher in new ways of communicating landscape change as the LU movement coincided with the rise of digital tools and the Internet. Although, as I think the last keynote noted, this has tended to lead landscape architects to placing too much emphasis on the aesthetics of the drawings/diagrams rather than the built work. Another main take away, is the need to include the human dimension of design work, whether urban, suburban, or rural.
- BM: That concept like “landscape urbanism” often are launched and used in specific situations (time and place) due to needs to highlight the importance of landscape knowledge in urban development processes. Thus these types of concepts are not always relevant or even useful in other contexts without time- and place-specific interpretations. I find the ecosystem services approach in Sweden as such a concept of today.
- TS: I felt encouraged in my thinking about interpreting the city both as a piece of culture and a piece of nature the same time, also encouraged to leave the idea of categorical differences of culture and nature behind and to concentrate on the inseparable "double - nature" of men: being "homo - sapiens" and at the same time being an "animal", a "creature".
- TA: It is important that we have these kinds of symposiums at our university to show our level of ambition. I realize it demands resources, but if we want to be a school with international tentacles, and if we want to be part of an international network, we must continue to hold such symposiums and offer our contribution the global discussion.

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Reflecting on content, the necessity of –isms is a crucial question, and needs to be further developed. At the symposium, this broader question was a bit overshadowed by a specific ism — landscape urbanism.

It remains an open question if landscape architecture, with its attachment to ecological systems, is not also in need of isms, but maybe not in the same way as architecture, which goes through styles in a different mode. Conversely, do landscape architects lack theoreticians who can formulate –isms for our field? When *Topos* magazine turned 20 I wrote a text for them about the “waves” that were possible to track over this two decade period. I think we need these types of “bookends” to sum up periods, to navigate the question further.

When asked to elaborate, Thorbjörn provided the following response: Architecture is full of isms through history, so too the decorative arts. These isms are “after-the-fact” constructions often made by researchers who try to group tendencies into “schools” called “xxx-ism.” This is possible to do with architecture and art because these fields deal with artifacts, constructions, artificials, and objects.

Landscape architecture is different. It owns an inherent resistance, founded on biological systems; what we call ecology. This means landscape architecture can’t go through the same vivid pendulum swings as artefactual currents. Landscape architecture is hard to identify through isms, modes, vogues or ideological currents, because it relates to more or less eternal features -- biology, climate, day and night, locality on earth, and of course site, to name a few.

Maybe that is why we not have a developed system of isms in landscape architecture. It can’t be done. Ellen Brae has a point when she says that efforts of trying to formulate isms for landscape architecture emanate mostly from private universities and may be a branding effort. Landscape urbanism is surely a “current” which has enormous difficulties even defining itself. Charles Waldheim arrives from architecture school; he is an architect and has a different approach than landscape architects.

Maybe landscape architecture simply is positioned beyond isms. Interestingly enough, this was the event title, but we did not really get there at the symposium. Instead we tried to answer the rather banal question: --Could this possibly be landscape urbanism? And how about this? Or possibly this? I heard one presentation dealing with criticizing the phenomena of -isms, by Kine Halvorsen from Norway. She offered interesting outlines, I thought.

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EB: As for content: Despite the conference title, many participants still had the ambition to 'prove' that this or that project could be labelled as 'landscape urbanism', even though the 'ism' is apparently blurry and ill defined. Why is 'everyone' so eager to jump on that wagon? Another topic of consideration (I don't know why I didn't see it before) is the fact that private universities are the epicenters of landscape urbanism. Looking at landscape urbanism from a branding perspective opens new doors.

JS: This conference gave new inputs to what has been my preoccupation for the last few years: how important it is to define and name a theory and a set of practices, as landscape urbanism did? This conference reinforced my belief that the discourse of landscape urbanism set a ground for a 'school' whose characteristics are very recognizable, but it also highlighted the need to further elaborate on the landscape urbanism discourse: how theories of landscape and urbanism can be discussed, challenged, and enriched by different perspectives.

3. What would like to see happen next? (how can the provocations be explored further, kept alive)

DC: Good question. The conference/conversation was an excellent event, and it's hard not to want to see that group again (and more new young faces along with new senior scholars). Another conference in 2 years? It would also be valuable to pull together the issue of a magazine based on several of the keynotes. Maybe the format would be interactive, with others from the conference commenting on the keynote essays.

NG: It would be valuable to investigate ways to establish a conference series – perhaps convening annually or biannually – so that future meetings might focus on landscape and urbanism topics either by region or issue. One of the big strengths of the Beyond Ism conference was the fluidity of the discussions – ranging from the political to the aesthetic ... Creating an opportunity for a continued international cross disciplinary and trans-disciplinary discussion seems crucial. Future meetings might delve more deeply into selected topics -- perhaps issues that were touched upon such as: planning and health, migration, digitalization (Christian Larsson) or edges and boundaries of systems and questions of inequality, instability and health (Anne Marie Lister and Greet de Block).

SH: I am interested in what is beyond LU. It has been around since the late 1990s. Your school is at an interesting crossroads to forge new ways of thinking about landscape architecture provoked by the conference discussions, and to address the criticisms leveled at LU. These criticisms are its obsession with the "urban," its lack of inclusion of the human condition as an aspect of design that

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is as important as water flow or beavers, and the needs to include aesthetic considerations in built work.

BM: I see a strong need for landscape knowledge in the current urbanization processes in our country, involving two contradictory processes. One is densification of existing urban centers, where public urban green spaces are at risk. The other is the urban sprawl, where agriculture land is developed for housing and transport systems in the broader context of the main cities.

TS: I would like to participate in an International conference discussing cities and their different built - structures primarily as a piece of nature, and what could be done by landscape - architects to form the city as a kind of "Noah's Arche".

TA: I would hope for having a biannual international symposium of this kind at our faculty. Next time I also hope for a richer participation from countries as Germany and France, and maybe a few others. I would also hope that we can offer those scholars who make an effort to attend a developed image of our school, country and region—so they can learn more about Sweden and Swedish landscape architecture when they are here.

EB: This is a difficult question. If we should walk along the trajectory suggested by the conference title we could consider what would happen if we fragmented the various values associated with landscape architecture beyond LU into a fan of independent 'isms'. If the conference intended to explore what is beyond landscape urbanism, then it would be a provocation to turn this variety of aspects to be considered in their local contexts into 'isms' themselves. What if we were to 'brand' the aspects that I guess most of us would like to see in a site-specific and context depended – endemic – perspective?

JS: I believe this conference created an extraordinary space for dialogue and confrontation. I would like that this space keeps existing somehow: in a journal, a blog, a publication... hopefully setting the ground for a future conference/gathering.