

## THE POLITICS OF LANDSCAPE URBANISM AS DISCURSIVE PRACTICE: UNDERSTANDING PRESENT USES, ENVISIONING FUTURE USES.

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### INTRODUCTION

There is a political side to the theory of landscape urbanism (LU) that is often overlooked. To address this political side, this paper presents a model that looks at landscape urbanism as discursive practice. By focusing on discursive practice, I broaden the narrow understanding of discourse as language or text, to a broader perspective that also articulates the social-institutional practices (including actors and their networks) that are entwined with the language used and the material, or bio-physical aspects of an area. The aim here is to provide an idea for structuring the conversation about the politics of landscape urbanism (or ecological urbanism), in situations that have already been branded as LU or in situations where LU might be considered as a design-option.

Discourse studies maintain that concepts are not mere reflections of reality, nor neutral sources of inspiration. Rather, discourse analysts accentuate the political character of concepts and their use. Landscape urbanism as a concept, to be more specific, incurs questions as to what its introduction does, politically, such as: who is involved, who is not? Who wins, who loses? How does landscape urbanism alter social relations?

There is a wide range of types of discourse studies, each with their own definition of discourse. Some studies focus on discourse as language or text, other studies frame discourse in terms of communication and the norms of an “ideal” communicative rationality. Yet others look at discourse as frame, by which they focus on how, consciously or unconsciously, discourses exist in peoples’ minds through which meaning is given to phenomena. Yet other studies emphasize the role of social-institutional practice in reproducing ideas and concepts and propose a discursive institutional approach (for an overview see Arts and Buizer, 2009). Looking at discourse from the perspectives of frames and social-institutional practices, we argue, facilitates analysis of how new ideas, concepts and narratives (such as those surrounding landscape urbanism) have a bearing upon social and political processes and outcomes (ibid.). A view of discourse that is strongly practice-oriented focuses on how language, text, and the things that people say; work out in practice and vice versa, how these “text-infused” practices strengthen a particular discourse. This paper builds upon the discursive-institutional approach, and develops it further as a lens to examine landscape urbanism. This will render greater attention to the social-political questions that are imbued with landscape urbanism. In so doing, I aim to understand what working from the theory of LU *does*, how it directs the conversation and how it might brush aside other topics. This approach con-

nects to appeals for critical reflection on the political work done by green infrastructure concepts (de Block 2016).

I present a simple model with three sets of questions. Roughly, the three sets of questions relate to 1) discourse, symbolic representations (ideas/concepts that may enable or restrain certain practices and forms of managing the urban landscape, narratives); 2) actors and institutions (the actors and institutions and social practices involved with LU that may make some discourse stronger and others weaker); and 3) materiality (the natural-physical conditions, or physical context and physical manifestations of LU in/with which urban actors engage in urban life and collaborative initiatives). Elsewhere we have worked from these three dimensions as a way to operationalize and explore “landscape governance”, and found that political conflict was displaced and contained in a way that prevented public debate (Buizer et al. 2015). Thus, the model is to be considered as a heuristic device that acknowledges that there is a politics of scale involved, a means by which to learn about what landscape urbanism might mean in different contexts and to help imagine how things might be different. To this purpose, the case of Laak, a socio-economically deprived district in The Hague the Netherlands, will serve as inspiration to substantiate the claim that it is important to take on such a political view on landscape urbanism. To an extent, this is a hypothetical exercise – developments in Laak were never “branded” as landscape urbanism. However, imagining a specific environment aids in reflections on the model.

#### **THE DISCOURSE OF LANDSCAPE URBANISM**

Although landscape urbanism is often loosely referred to as the landscape urbanism *discourse*, it has so far not been critically reflected upon *as discourse* in the above broad sense, as a way of framing that is related to social-institutional practices and that has material manifestations in the landscape. There is already a lively debate about the many adjectival urbanisms and what they stand for, or what they can achieve (Barnett reports 60 and more, Barnett 2011). Similarly, several contributions to the landscape urbanism discourse have emphasized its versatile, even promiscuous character (Waldheim 2016). Steiner makes a case for the establishment of a closer connection of landscape urbanism with ecological urbanism (Steiner 2011). This cause has been followed up by Waldheim (Waldheim 2016). In a somewhat different way, the versatility of the concept resounded strongly at the *Beyond isms conference* that the present proceedings resulted from. At several of the sessions, presentations were given of developments and initiatives with regard to public space that were not initially intended or labelled as “landscape urbanism”. In more than one occasion, members from the audience questioned the suitability of the term for the presented case. Whilst acknowledging that this is, to some extent, a result of organising a conference with landscape urbanism in its title, such questions about the “fit” between the concept and the presented examples, by their implication of “right” and “wrong” interpretations, do the work of reproducing the idea of landscape urbanism as it is known in documented materials and established discourse. Yet, it makes sense to ask these questions, because they may uncover what is taken for granted in applications of the concept and highlight how interpretations may be different.

In concurrence with Aseem Inam, I think that presenting or fixing a “closed” definition of an *-ism* risks ignoring the different meanings and makings of what we want the concept to mean, or what it could mean (Inam, 2014). Indeed, to define “what something is”, arguably invokes conservative forces and tends to consolidate the status quo. This is sometimes useful, but often it is not. Inam criticises the focus in urbanism on architecture on a larger scale, and the obsession for aesthetics and three-dimensional objects, and he draws attention to issues of social and political empowerment. Arguably, ‘the point is [...] to develop a profoundly critical engagement with cities and to offer intellectual and ethical guideposts for transformative action’ as ‘the most powerful means we have for the design of cities is our imagination’ (p 21). In this vein, I have interpreted the conference theme “beyond ism” as a call for thinking beyond “what is”, and towards the question that is provoking the imagination: what landscape urbanism can be. I believe the three-pronged “political” model can facilitate analysing present use, and envisioning possible future uses.

## DEPOLITICIZATION - THE DISPLACEMENT OF THE POLITICAL IN LANDSCAPE URBANISM

With reference to Landscape and Ecological Urbanism, De Block (referring to Žižek) contends that ‘the mobilization of expert knowledge, complex sophisticated technical practices, and the focus on managing local, mainly biophysical, parameters, instead of social priorities, efficiently function together to reduce controversy and reach stakeholder consensus, thus circumventing political disagreement’ (2016: 382). Although reaching consensus and circumventing political disagreement might sound attractive, I concur with De Block and argue differently. The problem with such a focus on consensus is that it has often come with the embrace of neoliberal win-win and no-regret policies that keep in place certain forms of injustice. Simultaneously, consensus-oriented solutions have often brushed aside values that could not be aligned with what has become the “consensus view” (Metzger et al. 2015). We need to remember Mouffe’s statement that ‘[E]very consensus is based on acts of exclusion’ (2005: 11). Various authors have argued that the widespread embrace of neoliberalism and the related assumption of aligning ecology and economy has introduced a “postpolitical” stage in world history (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2015; Metzger et al., 2015). This postpolitical stage is characterised by depoliticization or a political deficit, meaning that there is a lack of space for contestation and agonistic engagement, and little to choose from other than detail (Metzger et al., 2015). Designing cities for the future, in such a world, has become a matter of procedural and managerial governance that is driven by and operating for neoliberalism. This is not to say that developments surrounding landscape urbanism are *necessarily* working in the same direction. It *is* to say that the question needs to be asked.

In response to the emphasis put on the existence of a political deficit, other authors have asked if this emphasis has not taken too much attention away from *agency*, from the possibilities that actors still have to realise change in a world that can never entirely be dominated by a depoliticising, neoliberal logic (Paddison and Sharp, 2007). They argue for more attention to difference, and to a greater role for conflict and agonism to reveal the fundamental differences underlying the choices made in cities.

I agree with the critique that there is a risk in too easily glossing over the socio-political context, in relying on expert knowledge and striving for consensus whilst papering over what is lost on the way. But, why raise this point particularly in relation to landscape urbanism? Indeed, this type of critique is also relevant to other “-isms”. But, landscape urbanism and particularly its belief in the central role of green/ecological infrastructures is a case in point, because it has been criticised for lacking attention for the political, and for taking it too easily for granted that there is great potential in the bottom-up integration of ecological processes with urban growth. In this view, De Block argues, ‘[I]nfrastructure is believed to generate an inclusive assemblage, a landscape for the general “public good”’ (2016:369). Her point is that in fact, it is not. Case studies have expressed a similar concern, such as the study of Littke and colleagues (2015), that observes how in the case of the popular LU Highline in New York – a track of abandoned infrastructure that has been transformed into an elevated park to lift the neighbourhood and the economic value of its real estate – social and political issues have been overshadowed by a concern for ecological and landscape qualities.

However a baby could prematurely be thrown away with the bathwater by refraining altogether from engaging in debates about landscape and ecological urbanism – for such debates can bring together different disciplines to question what futures are imaginable and desirable for urban development. One of the potential attractions of the concept is that it inverts mainstream thinking about the relationship between cities and landscape. It offers an alternative, by taking landscape or ecological flows and networks as the point of departure. Also, it is, purportedly, better able to accommodate and adapt to complexity and changes such as climate change (cf. Sease, 2015). This does not necessarily only have to happen on abandoned land or infrastructures.

In conclusion, the remaining question is how the political can be included in evaluations of landscape urbanism projects, current or upcoming.

## BRINGING BACK THE POLITICAL

To bring back the political in analyses of LU we need to ask whether landscape urbanisms is restricted to the “typical examples” as they have currently been presented in the LU literature and explore the conditions in which LU has so far been implemented, with what consequences. Also, we need to explore the prospects of using the concept more freely, to imagine alternative futures. The latter exploration intends to uncover how we need to operationalize landscape urbanism to facilitate/enable responding to the socio-political conditions that currently stand in the way of a more just and equitable society. Reflecting on what landscape urbanism has, so far, been made to be is part of such an effort, but it focuses on imagining what it could be in a setting that is *different* from the settings in which it is most commonly imagined, and to develop a view on landscape urbanism that is people-focused and that is firmly connected to attention for the politics of scale and place-making. In order to facilitate research on the politics of landscape urbanism we draw upon our three-pronged approach:

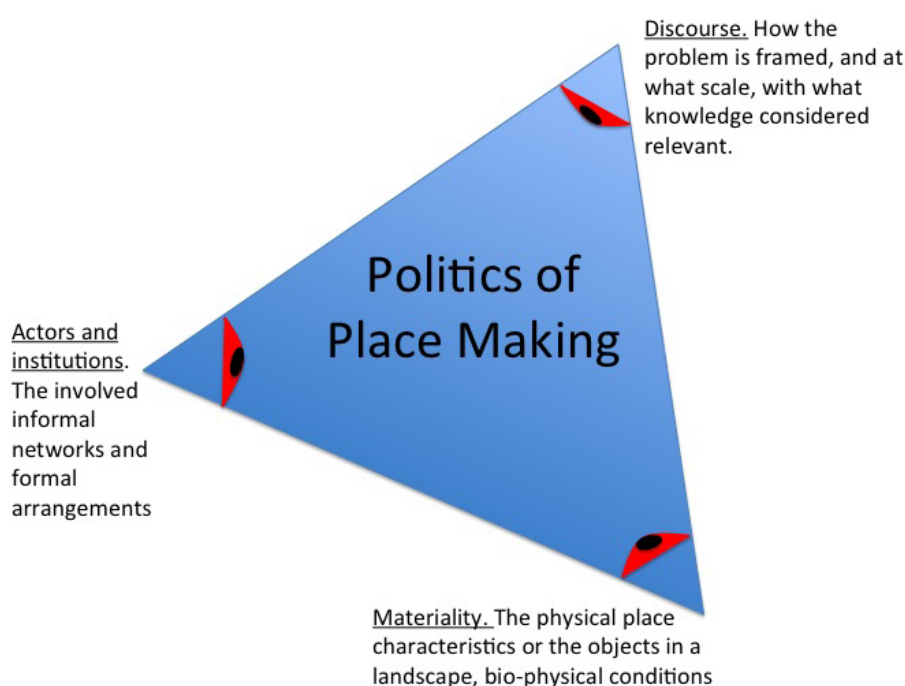


FIGURE 1. Three lenses to look into landscape urbanism

## LAAK

Laak has 40.000 inhabitants, of which 70 percent has a migration background. Although Laak is administratively labelled as *one* of 8 districts of The Hague, residents rarely experience Laak as one whole. In fact, Laak exists of neighborhoods *Molenwijk*, *Laak*, *Spoorwijk* and *Schipperswijk* and *Binckhorst*, each with their own characteristics and problematique. Overall, unemployment is high in comparison with other districts in The Hague, although percentages differ per neighbourhood. A recent report of the Dutch Environmental Assessment Agency *The divided triumph of cities* offers an interesting view on the city of The Hague when it concerns the proportion of people per neighbourhood with a low income, as compared with inhabitants with paid jobs. Laak (deep purple in Figure 2) is one of the districts with a significantly higher number of lowly paid workers than other parts of The Hague. Although the report emphasizes that segregation in the Netherlands is not as strong as in other European cities, it also shows how segregation has become more marked between 2001 and 2012. Historically, the “dividing line” in The Hague is formed by the question whether the neighbourhood was built on clay or sand, with generally higher incomes in the neighborhoods on sand.

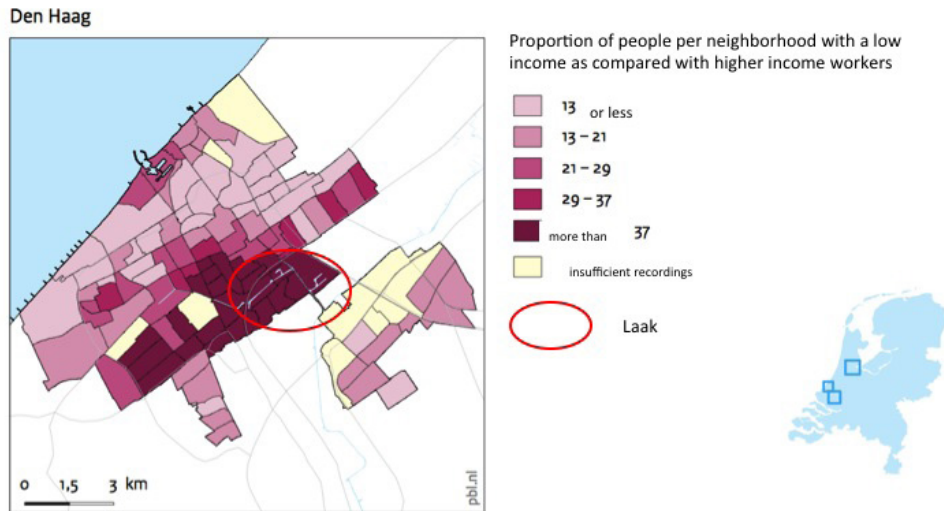


FIGURE 2. From PBL, *The divided triumph of cities*, 2015, modifications by author.

In the north-east of Laak, the industrial area Binckhorst is currently undergoing a substantial transformation. A new tunnel will enter into the city, several buildings have been demolished to make place for new housing and enterprise development, rendering large tracts of derelict land and rapid changes of ownership. Three new bars/restaurants have been opened over the past years, their customers chiefly creative entrepreneurs whose businesses are occupying some of the old industrial buildings of the area. The Binckhorst is separated from the remainder of Laak by a canal.

With this background information in mind, one can now venture to formulate initial questions to imagine landscape urbanism in Laak. Table 1 (next page) presents four columns with, in the first column, the dimensions materiality, discourse, actors and institutions. In the second column, I contrast each of the dimensions with LU theory and practice. The third column presents three sets of questions that highlight the social-political dimension of landscape urbanism. The fourth column summarises key issues in Laak that come to the fore on the basis of the dimensions and the related questions. The fifth column asks for the conditions for LU design options in Laak, to envision possible future uses of the concept.

Concluding, learning from current LU practices by asking questions about its social-political performativity, may provide a window on how this particular “-ism” may, or may not *work* towards a more just and equitable society.

	<b>Landscape urbanism in theory and practice</b>	<b>Questions to accentuate social-political dimension of landscape urbanism</b>	<b>Laak</b>	<b>Design options for LU in Laak? Envisioning possible future uses</b>
<b>Materiality</b> <b>The physical place characteristics or the objects in a landscape, bio-physical conditions</b>	<p>Building upon abandoned infrastructure or abandoned land in cities. Projects are mostly large-scale.</p> <p>What these infrastructures or places often <i>do</i>, politically, is supporting some groups of people while displacing others.</p>	<p>What ‘abandoned land or infrastructure’ is available in the area?</p> <p>What are examples of green space that might be linked to a landscape urbanism approach?</p>	<p>There are many parks and playgrounds in Laak (except Binckhorst), there is, largely, only abandoned land and infrastructure in Binckhorst. Laak has seen earlier blocks of houses demolished to create more open space in the neighbourhood.</p> <p>At a network meeting it was pointed out that from an employment perspective it might be useful to establish better connection between Binckhorst and Laak.</p>	<p>What are the possibilities for breaching with a past of social segregation by a LU-inspired physical intervention such as LU?</p> <p>How can LU serve as a ‘vehicle’ to connect ‘sand’ with ‘clay’?</p>
<b>Discourse</b> <b>How the problem is framed, and at what scale, with what knowledge considered relevant</b>	<p>Discourse of ecological modernisation: a belief in possibilities to align scientifically supported, ecological (landscape?) approaches with economic growth, producing outcomes that do not involve harm or vulnerabilities.</p> <p>Focus on (green or ecological) ‘infrastructure’ as a basis for urban development, as a response to architectonic approach of the past.</p> <p>Landscape considered as an object that can be measured by complex calculations and cartography.</p>	<p>What are the kind of social-economic problems of the area?</p> <p>Who see potential in using LU as an approach to provide answers to these problems?</p> <p>What have other projects shown to be the potential social-political side-effects of LU projects that might be of relevance for the area under study?</p> <p>What issues are included and which are potentially pushed aside by the introduction of LU?</p>	<p>Social problems in Laak seem to be critically related to (increasing) social segregation. Inhabitants hardly frame problems in terms of access to green space or infrastructure. Other issues dominate agenda’s, such as structural conditions behind the relatively high level of unemployment in parts of Laak, or housing property owners who do not invest in widely experienced problems such as mould. At a scale beyond Laak, there is a marked and growing issue of social segregation.</p>	<p>Does landscape urbanism help address the social-economic problems of Laak? Is there a role for landscape/ecology? How? According to whom?</p> <p>More specifically: Does the idea of landscape urbanism create imageries of Laak that address the experienced problems?</p> <p>In terms of knowledge-exchange: can forms of action research, with local groups and networks, be inspired by LU?</p> <p>What types of urbanisms tune into local problem framings?</p>
<b>Actors and institutions</b> <b>informal networks, formal arrangements</b>	<p>Significant role for designers, ecologists, expert knowledge, creative entrepreneurs. ‘Friends-of’ groups supporting the new development (e.g. in case of Highline). Ample resources made available for the projects</p>	<p>Who are (potential) advocates of landscape urbanism projects?</p> <p>How do informal networks ‘traditionally’ work together with formal structures?</p> <p>Who is likely to win, and who to lose, by implementing a landscape urbanism project?</p> <p>Are resources available?</p>	<p>Organisations in Laak are based on different religious backgrounds. There are various government subsidized organisations that have no perspective for the long term.</p> <p>Links between the different neighborhoods in Laak are not strong.</p>	<p>Who are potential supporters of a LU project in Laak? Do these have the mobilizing potential (in the short and long run) to activate a broader network, formally and informally?</p>

TABEL 1. A first exercise using the model

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