

New strategies to act within the uncertain about the value of altering institutionalized design methods with unexpected

CAROLA WINGREN

Professor in landscape architecture

Department of Landscape architecture, planning and management, SLU

Alnarp, Sweden

carola.wingren@slu.se

Abstract

In an explorative effort to develop new knowledge and to challenge the uncertainty of future landscapes affected by sea level rise, a performance involving a choreographer and a group of master students in landscape architecture was carried out in Höganäs 2014. Aiming at developing a better understanding of landscape forces, the task was to perform the future coast line and the threatening waves and to answer questions such as “Where will the water be?”, and “What will be threatened?” Even if the task was provoking and questioned by students, their critic finally turned into curiosity and choreography as method could be introduced. A specific understanding seemed to be developed about forces between land and sea, and about the responsibility as designing landscape architect. The project indicates the high value of using choreography (art) as a tool to “re-value” complex landscape situations and to open up for questions about the professional.

Keywords: landscape design, climate change uncertainty, choreography



Introduction

When designing and planning in conjunction with the insecurity of climate change, institutionalized methods such as master planning become too static and are insufficient. In an explorative effort to develop new knowledge and to challenge the uncertainty of future landscapes affected by the threat of sea level rise, a performance orientated experiment involving a choreographer and a group of thirty master students in landscape architecture, was carried out in Höganäs 2014. Aiming at developing a better understanding of landscape forces, the task was to perform the future coast line and the threatening waves and to answer questions such as “Where will the water be?”, and “What will be threatened?”.

Forced to use “the whole body”, and not only “the drawing hand”, the students felt provoked and argued that “choreography and dance is not landscape architecture”. There seemed to be a common idea about what is included in landscape architecture methods and practice, something that must have been institutionalized in former education at the university. Drawing by hand seemed to be an accepted method, while moving or dancing seemed not to.

Even if the task was provoking and questioned by students, their critic finally turned into curiosity, and choreography as a method could be introduced in one phase of the design process. A specific understanding seemed to be developed, not only about forces between land and sea, but also about the responsibility to involve individual experiences when designing landscapes within the public realm. The performance and a public debate held after a week’s work became a “free-room” for the students, where the influence of institutionalized practices or strategies was not wanted, permitted or existing, and where an alternative understanding could be developed.

A parallel could be drawn to the way in which artistic PhDs or PhDs like my own (Ehn 2012, Wingren, 2009), use phases of “free-room” in the research process for a different and more individualized knowledge production. Such processes provoke a system where a more neutral and repeatable methodology is the norm (institutionalized), but are still important to integrate for dealing with research fields integrating artistic processes such as the field of landscape architecture. The requirement for neutrality and repeatability within the institution (university) complicates this kind of research where exploration involving difference and singularity is required (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T935mVxM6OM>).

If there is a point in institutionalizing artistic exploration/research (which I believe there is), new methods are to be tested. One could be to integrate profession related methods in institutionalized research processes (sketching, drawing etc), another to use methods from other professional fields, here focusing on the artistic ones.

The project described in this paper through its preliminary results indicates the high value of using choreography as a tool to “re-value” complex landscape situations, and to open up for questions about “the professional mission” of the landscape architect; responsibility, objectivity, individuality, activism, or power within design. The altering between “normal” professional methods such as drawing (institutionalized), and “abnormal” professional methods such as moving/dancing, have in the end been integrated within the academic research process by conceptualizing or “idéating” on an artistic base (again institutionalized).

The interaction where artistic investigation can support interdisciplinary research has been put forward as prosperous (Rust 2007), why testing such research processes integrating “salon”/”institution”/”salon”/”institution” in sequential and new research strategies further, could be worth trying again. To develop research methods in the interface between artistic practice and landscape architecture and design in this way aims at integrating them within academia in

interdisciplinary collaborations and to deal with major challenges for a sustainable and resilient society.

The aim of this paper is to highlight an interdisciplinary, innovative, and explorative research practice, that can act as inspiration or foundation for developing methods, concepts, and theories to evolve new strategies in the interface between landscape architecture and other professional fields within academia as well as out in practice.

Framing the research about dislocated or changing landscapes

The research field within which this work is taking place can be described and understood on different levels. The first is connected to the communication of climate change, and the potential within story telling for its understanding; how different techniques of storytelling can explain the uncertainty within landscape, the reasons for landscape changes, and also how to relate to these changes within planning and design in the interaction between different professional fields. The storytelling as a tool for understanding will be described and discussed more shortly as a background for the next that relates to the experiment introduced above, where choreography is used as narrative and investigating tool within the professional design process of landscape architecture.

The reason for introducing these methods is that climate change implicates new and extreme situations within planning and design, that ask for methodologies giving a better understanding for the processual. I have in former work discussed and questioned the institutionalized master plan as the most used representational tool for describing the landscape and its changes (Wingren 2009). In this paper I push the discussion further, beyond plans and models, and involve alternative artistic explorations of choreography as a way of altering the institutionalized methods of sketching and drawing, with others that may act as pauses or “salons” to give a possibility for new strategies to be introduced (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T935mVxM6OM>).

Since many years, I have worked with changing or “dislocated” landscapes (practice and academia), seeing them as places where chaos and order interact incessantly affecting aesthetic feelings and experiences (Wingren 2009). Within these landscapes and their cyclic or sequential interaction between “chaos” and “order”, people often aim for the settled and recognizable that can be easily understood, recognized and even found beautiful. In my research this landscape is described as an “ideal landscape” as a common term to use in discussions about landscape values, to avoid misunderstandings caused by differences in cultural preferences, memories etc (Wingren 2009a, 2009b). The concept has been developed through highways within old city structures, new cultural aesthetics on cemeteries (Wingren 2011, 2013), and now as a changing coastline caused by climate change.

Sea level rise has only been part of my work since 2009, when introducing it to a master course in design. At that time little was done in relation to sea level rise in Sweden and the understanding and knowledge about the issue was less than today, and the student’s work became part of Malmö’s consultation report about sea level rise (Malmö stad 2010). The processual change that sea level rise imply with a future continual loss of land and values, was difficult to capture within these static drawings and documents. Therefore I searched for new inspiration within descriptions such as “water is everywhere” or “the line between land and sea is a gradient that can never be something else than a momentary one” (Mathur & da Cunha 2009). Quotations of this kind became a foundation for future applications and the finally formed project “Under the threat of rising sea levels - planning and design of a changing landscape” that dealt with sea level rise, planning and design and its communication. The project was financed by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap - MSB), and involved a landscape architect (me) interested in alternative

communicative methods, and two geographers; one specialized in landscape history and mapping and the other in climate change and landscape valuation.

The aim of the project has been to find new ways for planning and design of a changing coastal landscape, within the projects three principal perspectives; Landscape as descriptive unit, Conditions for planning, and Change, communication and design. Within the third perspective involving choreography as method to better understand and communicate the dynamics of landscape change, the aim has been to break up ingrained ways of describing the landscape (in maps, plans etc) and introduce a more dynamic view on tools and methods for communication, based on curiosity, creativity and interdisciplinary openness.

The area dealt with in the overall project has been the west coast of Skåne (Öresund) which is a Swedish region that compared to an overall national situation is extremely threatened by sea level rise (approximately 1 cm per year), mainly because of the lack of land rise in southern Sweden. In maps of the area the limit between land and sea is precise, stable and fix. In reality water moves back and forth every day, influenced by the winds, the weather, and the moon, and high level of the sea may already today in bad situation be 2,5 meter above “mean sea water level” because of these fluctuations (smhi.se). On the top of this, there is the new situation of sea level rise caused mainly by global warming and that is expected to become at least 1 meter above the actual sea level within a period of hundred years (IPCC, 2011). It is a global issue to find physical measures to diminish chaos and human suffering. But it is also a local issue, as every place is different and people in these places acts differently. To understand more about this situation there has been collaborations within the research project with different municipalities along the Swedish Öresund coast, and especially with Höganäs.

Communication in relation to climate change and to design of the uncertain

In research that deals with climate change, the understanding of it and how it affects people and communities, the role of storytelling or narrative is often emphasized. One aspect of this is how the historical key moments affect the understanding of the impact of climate change (Hamblyn 2009).

Another is the importance of long time series of data which make the establishment of a common history possible (Sörlin 2009). A third direction describes how the connection to the local (especially indigenous people who live close to nature) creates a better understanding of climate change and its effects, than the global crisis stories without connection to a local community (Bravo, 2009).

Working with storytelling in Höganäs aims at raising the awareness of climate change and its effects on the landscape, and it has been taken as a prerequisite that narratives of different kinds within different artistic disciplines and especially bodily experiences, can influence understanding, discussion and result of a design process dealing with climate change and adaption. Therefore it seems relevant to include choreography within the field of storytelling or narrative in relation to landscape architecture, as the experience of scale and spatiality within the landscape include movement to a high degree (Cullen 1961). And even if it by some is disputed whether art and artistic research could be used as tool for raising awareness about social issues, environment and climate change (Malcolm, 2000), the artistic performance and research described and discussed in this paper, gives nourishment to such thought.

Landscape understanding through corporeal investigations

A spatial understanding is crucial for investigations linked to the human being, movement, space and landscape change, and important literature for landscape architects in relation to spatiality principally dates back to the 1960th and onwards (Cullen 1961, Gehl 1971, Lynch 1981). But a spatial understanding also implies a connection to philosophical and geographical works orientated towards the human relation both to space and place, and the articulation of it in relation to human actions and

experiences (Bachelard 2000, Casey 1997, de Certeau 2002, Kwon 2002; Lefebvre, 1991, Tuan 2001; Tuan 1974).

The understanding of space that has been focused in the actual choreographic experiment has almost been orientated towards movement, still involving other aspects such as sound. And as a profession of materiality, there is within landscape architecture a need to describe a materialized space involving qualitative descriptions of hard materials, or more processual materials such as sound, water or vegetation, that may change through seasons, hours, aging and actions (Dee 2011, Hunt 2000, Mathur & da Cunha 2014, Olin 2011, Spirn 1998). The processual that is embedded within landscape architecture already involves the thought of a changing and uncontrollable environment, but with the new facts of climate change these processes becomes different and sometimes accelerating. And the experiment of introducing movement and the whole body of the designer early in the design process as done in Höganäs, is a way of introducing process also within the body of the designer (or even the public) herself.

"Site Specific Performance" or artistic exploration through human movement in relation to space and place implies a deepened exploration of the border between choreography and landscaping as explorative methods. Several practitioners within choreography describe and investigate space also in relation to societal change and landscape politics (Birch & Tompkins 2012, Hunter 2007, Kloetzel & Pavlik 2009 Pearson 2010).

Particularly interesting from a landscape architecture point of view, is the collaboration that took place between the choreographer and dancer Anna Halprin and her husband, the landscape architect Lawrence Halprin. The various workshops that they undertook in collaboration between landscape architect and choreographer, examined both spatial dynamics and social processes (Merriman 2010, Wasserman 2012), and Lawrence Halprin used the movements of his wife Anna Halprin and her dancers to understand space and through notations visualize and gain knowledge about how to design. In collaboration with her, he also introduced workshops where dancers and architects worked together in interdisciplinary investigations of a public space.

The choreographic experiment – the performance and its story

Höganäs municipality is threatened from two sides (Nordic sea and Skälderviken), and it seems as the peninsula of Kulla (Kullahalvön) will in future become an island again, as it where many years ago. Very little of this change is taken into account by the politicians, and even if planners are alarmed by the situation, new houses are built in threatened areas. A new library has been placed in low land close to the sea only some years ago, and in the harbor area there is a debate going on for a new high building. When discussing with the mayor of Höganäs in 2014, he tells that "he believes and believes not in sea level rise" (film in production), and confirms in a way by that the difficulty to understand and admit the reality of global reports such as that of the ICCP panel (IPCC 2011), and the difficulty to understand it locally (Bravo 2009).

In the same way the awareness of climate change was not important in the beginning of the process among the master course students, especially in 2009 when sea level rise was not yet a big issue on the agenda. Therefore an idea about involving methods that could deeply influence the students started to germinate, and the answer was found at a conference within Art and Geography in 2013 where important contacts where also taken for the future work

(<https://urbanculturalstudies.wordpress.com/2012/09/07/art-and-geography-conference-lyon-feb-2013/>). Even if inspiration came from these presentations and literature, the method was developed intuitively in a quest for an experience of threat in relation to landscape values, as well as understanding of the forces with which the sea will in future influence land. A contact with an Irish choreographer became important for the implementation of the movement experiment and later the work of the Halprin's couple became an inspiring part as well (Merriman 2010).

Emotional reactions

When contacting the choreographer in autumn 2013 she was asked: *"Could you please make the students walk the line and dance the waves so that they understand what it's all about"*. The movement exercise was introduced to the students as a one week exercise of a ten week long course, and as such only a smaller part of the planned design process. The exercise sheet that students got a week before the exercise should be done, involved movement (practice and performance) during a week in February 2014, and the investigation questions given to the students included: a) How do we understand the line between land and sea (horizontally and vertically), b) Which strategies can we use to adapt to climate change, sea level rise and inundations, and c) How do we communicate instable structures and the design of the uncertain.

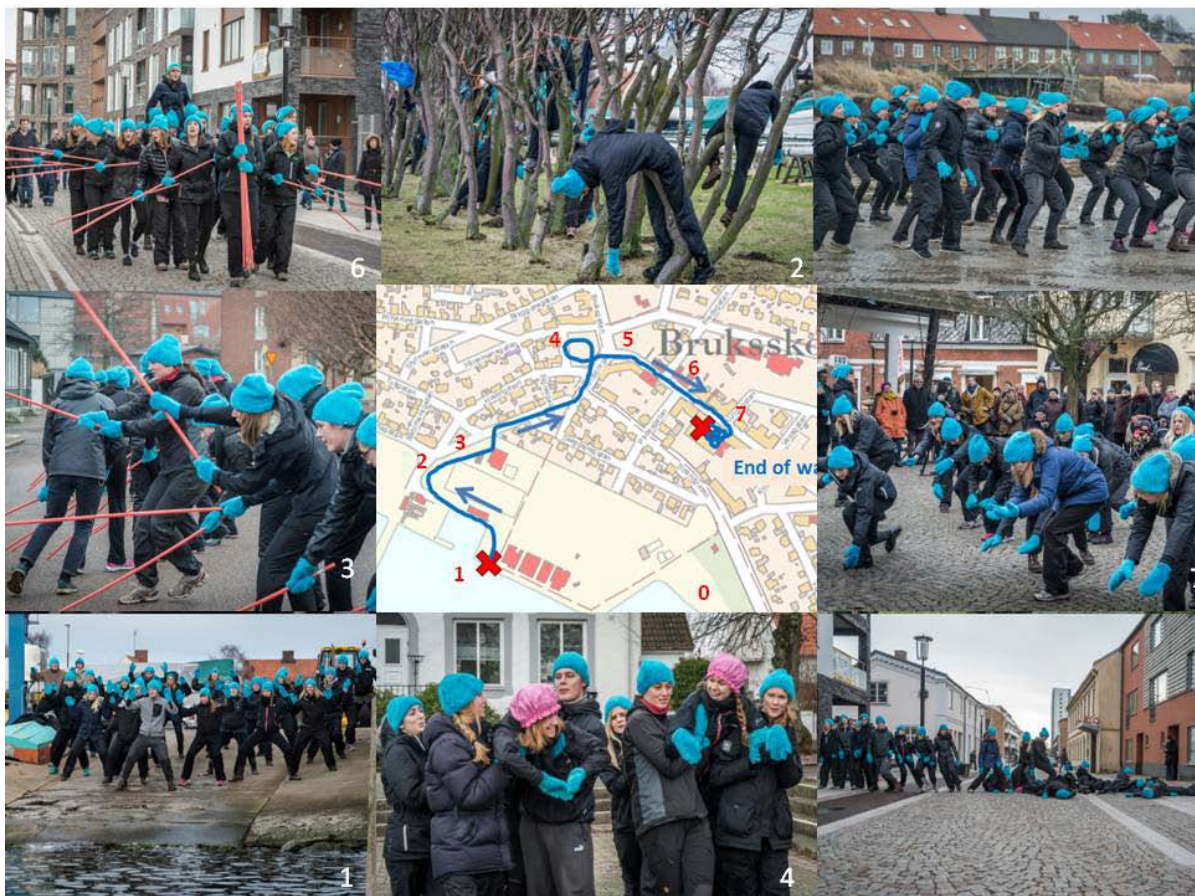


Fig. The walk through Höganäs

The strength of the students reactions in relation to the exercise was surprising, as different methods “out of the box” such as comic drawing or clay works were embedded and accepted within the pedagogic course idea. These methods had been tested in this course as well as in former courses, with positive result and reactions. To integrate movement and choreography turned out to be demonstrably different, and the course was by some labeled “the dance course” even if this exercise was only one week long.

The method of dance and movement was for example not accepted by most of the students, as part of a landscape architects methodology to understand space or landscape changes. After three to four years of study the students seemed to have a common idea about tools appropriate for their future profession, and nobody seemed to know about or at least to have the idea to integrate, the practice of

the Halprin's, collaborating through dance and choreography within an interdisciplinary practice. And performing in public space seemed for many students to be part of an agitating or political understanding of space, that had nothing to do with the task of a landscape architect who should draw changes in space preferably with a pen or a computer, and asked to do so by a paying client and not just a general society or public. A third interesting finding was that while the choreographer was ready to introduce an atmosphere of catastrophe, the landscape architect student's wanted to show a more positive performance involving *both* threats and options within the landscape change.

It seemed that the students had a common institutionalized idea about what could be part of a landscape architect's professional practice, and it principally involved finding solutions through drawing and model making, and not arguing and performing in relation to climate change as threat.

Technical and physical aspects

There were also physical and technical aspects that differed from a "normal" project, implemented with the institutionalized methods of drawing. One was that the students (dancers) and their bodies were not prepared to the physical challenges of hard work. Some got injuries or inflammations that made it difficult for them to participate fully in the end of the week (still they did, but with pain). Another difference was the need for a bigger format or training space, where the studio normally used for drawing and design was too small and filled with drawing table. A bigger, more flexible, but also more expensive space, was therefore hired at the University for training.

A third issue was the need for sound (music and water sounds) both for training and performance. This called for a sound expert to be part of the team (actually a PhD student working with sound), to prepare sound tracks that could be used as amplifier of a feeling, an atmosphere or a movement. Technical sound amplifiers were also needed to train but also influence a public while performing. A fourth issue was the importance of documentation as the result was momentary and not as in "the institutionalized" practice of drawing a paper copy to put in an archive or exhibit on the wall. This implied the involvement of a photographer and a filmmaker team that documented both training and performance (one short version 7 minutes and one 35 minutes with interviews) and photo (1600 pieces). And finally my task was in addition to the project leading function, to search for props where we in the end stuck to snow sticks, blue hats and gloves, swimming hats for some, and also some geese dummies.



Fig. Poster and props

Communication and interaction with the public

Using new methods such as performance through choreography involved both asking and paying for permission for the activity to the local police office, as well as announcing the performance with a poster (also facebook, newspaper and web page). The performance day, Saturday 22nd of February, involved a possibility for the public to practice dance and movement in a school beforehand, to be involved in the performance later that day. None came to the training in the school, but more than hundred people came to walk with the students for half an hour through their town from the harbor area to the square in front of the library. Many also followed inside the library, where a debate about sea level rise in relation to Höganäs took place within the frame of the students' exhibition of comics (fanzines were also sold).

Performing sea level rise seemed to make the theme in itself as well as the students' work more interesting to media. The project was presented and debated in the newspaper, on radio and in television (both locally and nationally "Landet runt"), and it seems as the project in a way can validate the thought about the strength of the local story as generating an interest and understanding for climate issues (Bravo 2009).

Most of the work took place in 2014, and had after that continued through a new project at Falsterbonäset in 2015 focusing on sea level rise and erosion, in collaboration with the choreographer and a researcher within engineering, in a new interdisciplinary collaboration. But the start for the research done could be drawn back to 2009 within the Malmö project (the understanding phase). Then there was a phase preparing for the action to take place 2010-2012 (the preparation phase), that included to find collaborators and search for funding. The action phase that goes on from 2012-2015 has included collaboration with municipalities in the Öresund region and especially Höganäs and Vellinge (Falsterbonäset), other researchers and landscape architects, students, and of course the choreographer. The reflection phase (2014-2016) that involves notations, turns over into an "idéation phase" that includes building new institutionalized worlds out of the research undertaken outside academia in "salons" held with the choreographer and others like the photographer, the filmmaker, teaching practitioners etc. This idéation phase could be compared with Rust's where he describes how artistic inquiry can inform inter-disciplinary research (Rust 2007).

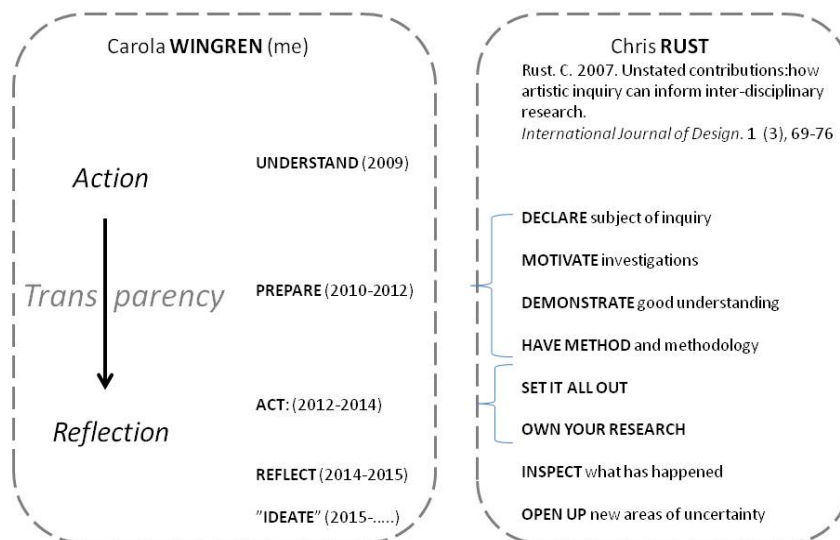


Fig. Comparison with Rust's conceptualization

Idéating through alternating action and reflection as well as chaos and order

If analyzing this activity involving choreography within the design process, the method could be seen as a sequential interaction between action and reflection, a tool already used within the dissertation “The artistic practice of a landscape architect: knowledge development through an autobiographical study” (Wingren 2009). Here the autobiography is involved as an interpreting tool to understand and describe the action of a practicing landscape architect, before analyzing it within research. In a parallel but different way, choreography and movement is introduced in the Höganäs case instead of drawing, and the analytical tools of film and photo has replaced the autobiography. In the same way as the diary notations in the thesis becomes moments of order or stability through which everything is seen and understood, the film and especially the photos becomes similar points of stability within the sequential research process of Höganäs. Another moment of stability or order within the sequential experimental research process is for example the performance.

The conceptualization has again been important in the same way as in former work (Wingren 2009). Instead of using a matrix, intuitively sketched notations inspired by Halprin’s work is part of the conceptualization process where concepts such as *Wall*, *Row*, *Collaborate*, *Play*, *Remain*, *Tourment*, *Rizzel* and *Haka* has been superimposed on the map with the student’s activities and movements.

Conclusions

The story about the Höganäs experiment can act as an object for research about the possibilities to act within design and planning of the uncertain. The work is based in an environment that could be described as a “free-room” for a different but important knowledge production. At the same time as it provokes, it seems to give room for “thinking otherwise” for “asking differently” and for “opening up questions”. This “free-room” could also be described as a “salon” giving space for an individual and different setting, other than the institutionalized.

The experiment introduced in Höganäs is more of a start that will be elaborated further through new projects where new adaptations may be tested. This year a similar work has been done within the issue of sea level rise, but more in relation to engineering and erosion. The experiment could however be pushed further to involve also important social issues of societal change or other.

It is important to point out that such experimentation with alternative method involves difficulties of different kinds that may obstruct a new thinking or alternative experimentation within research. They need to be dealt with if alternatives to the institutionalized should be investigated. Some of the difficulties are the following; Alternative methods may be provoking to the institutionalized and may therefore be difficult to finance. They may also be difficult to accept within education where students try to professionalize more in line with the accepted. A third issue deals with physical difficulties that may involve the bodies’ training, the configuration of the room, and that new technical means are needed that are not calculated within the institutionalized expenses. Therefore the value of “the salon” (the experimental area) where it is possible to leave the institution for a moment to investigate within another sphere than the already established is important to protect and work for.

This project has potential impact for artistic research, both to bridge over between different fields within planning and architecture, and also to involve other disciplines such as engineering and specifically artistic ones, in this case choreography and dance. The social relevance relates to the option that artistic research methods can offer for interdisciplinary work and research, especially for landscapes in process and where profession specific methods for architecture seem to be too static and insufficient. The aim is of course to contribute to a planning and design of future landscapes in change in a way that better handle people’s feeling of being in chaos and insecurity.

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