

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

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Abstract

When designing and planning in conjunction with the insecurity of climate change, institutionalized methods such as master planning become too static and 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 involving choreographer and a group of thirty master students in landscape architecture was carried out in Höganäs 2014. Aiming at developing 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.

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 public debate) 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 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 (I believe there is), new methods are to be tested. One could be to integrate profession-related methods (sketching/drawing) in institutionalized research processes, another to use methods from other professional fields such as art. The project described in this paper indicates the high value of using choreography as 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 (“salonified”), 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 sequential research strategies integrating “salon”/”institution”/”salon”/”institution” could be worth trying again.

Keywords: landscape design, climate change, uncertainty, choreography

Key references

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T935mVxM6OM>