Beyond Best Practice
Re-valuing mindsets and re-imagining research models in urban transformation

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Abstract
"Beyond Best Practice” takes aim at accepted value-systems and conventionally silo-ed working methods grounding two types of practice activity: professional practice and academic practice. It uses a study of planning and design mindsets structuring urban transformation processes to raise methodological questions related to academic research and knowledge-production models. The authors claim “best practices”, typically applied, limit innovation and obscure site-specific values. They elaborate their position that urban transformation tasks demand a new form of relational practice by explicitly reflecting on their own transareal, team-based research activity. The paper outlines a framework of research operation: a process developed through “Collaborations”, a method based in “Conversations”, and a mindset deploying “Speculations” and design thinking. The authors demonstrate the application of this research model through two “Revaluations” and conclude by arguing the value of professional and academic practices that engage divergent points of view and acknowledge their own blind-spots.

Keywords: urban transformation, best practice, design thinking, critical conversation
“From within, it is difficult to even perceive, and so question, the deeper values, motives, models or possibilities for the profession; hence, many professional bodies tend to be slowly fossilizing within the compacting strata of their habits, discourse, and silent assumptions. Entire professions are now susceptible to creative disruption.” (Dan Hill, in Hyde 2012: 7).

Preoccupations
“Beyond Best Practice” takes aim at accepted value-systems and conventional working methods at the foundation of two types of practice activity: professional practice and academic practice. It involves a study of the working mindsets informing contemporary urban transformation projects; and it utilizes that study as an opportunity to re-imagine research and knowledge-production models. This work includes re-valuation of sectorial and disciplinary categories (such as “planning”, “design”, “theory”, “practice”) as well as quantitatively driven research metrics (in particular, their impact on research models and methods). Mobilizing the potentials of design-based research (thinking-through-making, reflection-in-action) the Beyond Best Practice project is, at base, a methodological inquiry with pragmatic intent. Our purpose is not to critique “best practice” knowledge, per se. At issue is how such knowledge typically gets put to use, and how relying on best practice can limit innovation in planning and design.

In procedural terms, our project delineates a testing ground for new modes of knowledge creation. We want to understand and experiment with how collaborative thinking happens. By questioning how planning and design activities structure urban transformation processes we hope to support sustainable urban transformation goals by advancing more integrative design and planning practices. We are interested in how people make ideas together and how those ideas re-make urban landscapes. In taking up the practical research question of how globally recognized best practice models get applied in always local urban settings this project challenges the dominance of quantitative metrics in sustainability measures, as well as the very notion of ‘sustainable urban development’. Urban development has long been measured by real-estate value-sets based in a 20th century growth economy model, and deployed through urban expansion projects predicated on a tabula rasa condition for new building. Today’s planners and designers work under different economic assumptions (more circular and less growth oriented economic models); they contend with multiple value-systems (cultural, social, economic, heritage, environmental, ecological, etc.); they tackle different problems (remodeling already built-up areas rather than constructing on unbuilt terrain). For this reason we propose sustainable urban transformation as the conditio sine qua non for creation of urban environments aligned with a sustainability ethos.

Foregrounding transformation, Beyond Best Practice interjects a site-specific, qualitative worldview into the sustainability discussion. For us, site-specificity reaches beyond heritage preservation, positing the idea of site as a complex set of relations that undergo constant redefinition and revaluation. Adopting a relational perspective undermines the validity of a “more boxes checked equals better result” approach to measuring sustainability ”success”, since itemized, inventory-like assessment formulas cannot account for synthetic, qualitative, or relational outcomes. By rendering such outcomes unmeasurable, these formulas effectively view them as value-less.

As a “critical project” Beyond Best Practice tries to make sense of how we make sense of, and make material worlds (Kermode 1963: 3) It is an intermediary preoccupation, drawing on critical discourses developed in various fields, from literature to theology, science to rhetoric (Ramirez 1995). This scholarly enterprise concerns operational ground between the
(conventionally framed) beginning and end of a research process to expose underlying, co-present value-sets mediating how we work our way from one research question to the next. Engaging in (not only examining or documenting) “real world” and research activities, a good part of our effort involves parsing out those different values to identify more precisely how we work together, and with others. This paper captures what might best be described as a fictively (scientists might prefer ‘analytically’) stilled moment in an ongoing, value-laden, knowledge-creating process. At the same time, Beyond Best Practice takes on the impractical task of conveying, in generally accepted disciplined tones (White, 1982), lessons from an always specific and looping, multi-vocal process - one giving voice to, and valuing the always present subjectivities structuring any research work.

**Collaborations**

Our team consists of three researchers. No, not good enough. We must admit our value exceeds the academically credentialed. We must permit ourselves to be recognized as more than that. We curious individuals hold jobs in the academy. Trained as designers we have migrated toward design research, from design doing to design thinking. We consider the investigative undertaking as a cooperative, fundamentally exploratory process; a non-linear iterative journey that includes serendipity and unpredictability, embracing unexpected process discoveries in an open-minded and open-ended mindset (Frazer 2013, Brown 2009, Schön 1983, Archer 1965 and others). We know how to play by the rules. We also know rules are made to be broken.

All together, we three researchers lay claim to partial knowledge in multiple arenas related to the study and making of constructed environments: architecture, landscape architecture, landscape planning, urban design, and urban planning. Individually, we arrive with baggage from many points of origin, having received design and planning, philosophy, literature and journalism educations in Sweden, France, Germany, and the United States over a span of thirty years. Collectively we harbour a passion for examining how our formation informs our pedagogies, practice and research. As a team we rely on each other for critical otherness as we reflect upon our values, mind-sets, and habitudes. Ours is a practice of shedding light upon, and imagining alternatives to, our own (academic) practices.

In part, ours is an exercise of “research in and on action” - an opportunity to “think about how we think,” to reflect on those habits-of-mind that lie in the shadow of, yet structure, everyday scholarly and professional endeavors. In part, it is an exercise in cooperation to navigate different fields, exploring them in theory and in practice. As an exercise in collaboration, it also necessarily becomes a project about communication. Professional communications around urban sites in transition require on-going articulations of separate understandings and framing values; so too, academic meta-level-reflections on those professional communications. Not everyone participating in the professional discussion feels passionate about (let alone interested in) the academic one. Our critical project takes shape where latent potential for re-valuation resides, in the conversational meetings, translations and transferences between these two practice realms, in often murky communicative waters where value-differences must be repeatedly illuminated and explicitly stated for projects to succeed.

**Conversations**

Many day to day working languages (in the academy, in the profession) share common terms, yet those terms acquire different meanings depending upon the value-framework prefiguring their utterance. When diverse disciplines share terminology it can pose significant hurdles for inter- and trans-disciplinary collaboration. Undertaking team projects as “in conversation” makes it easier for divergent discourses to converge. Conversation unfolds as a continuous process (it
starts without knowing when to end and could include several occasions) and involves more than just talking. Ideas communicated by images, figures or gestures feed into vocal exchanges, and it depends to a large extent on the activity of writing – as documentation, reflection, speculation. Adopting “critical conversation” as a research method means more than having just an ordinary conversation. Yet, at the same time, there is something important in the conversation being simply ordinary.

The force of language helps us work through associations, hints, and deviations, discoveries made by one in the other one's utterances, continuously, to construct thought, or text, or knowledge, where only fragments and limited insights existed before. We constantly unpack (our travel bags and our travelling ideas), translate (from and to English, German, Swedish, French), making every effort to be precise about intentions. Conversation sharpens thought. It helps to distinguish, for example, between “planning” as a professional discipline (what planners do), “planning” as a technical framework (rules, prohibitions and permissions), or “planning” as discourse (a label for all kinds of discussions on urban change). In conversation, we ask over and over again: What do we mean by “beyond best practice”? When does our practice work best? We traverse. We converse. We disagree. We speak our minds. We animate differences to clarify shared intentions. We interpret each other’s work and words.

The generosity of mindful interpretation – interpretation being neither true nor false but always more or less useful - is never a minor matter: “To understand at all is to interpret. To act well is to interpret a situation demanding some action and to interpret a correct strategy for that action.” (Tracy 1987: 9) Allowing ourselves to follow the conversation where ever it might go brings us close to playfulness, but playfulness with its own real discipline and rules. Conversation is “a game where we learn to give into the movement required by questions worth exploring” (Tracy 1987:18) Playing around; dancing around thoughts, the way designers dance around a problem (Lawson & Dorst 2013); seeking out possibilities in the spirit of Roland Barthes, moving from work to text (Barthes 1979); rethinking scholarly traditions that tie authority to authorship (Barad 1996); the process resembles a ping pong game between the already known, where past language, schemes, representations and routines serve as a backboard (maybe a blackboard?) to bounce off new ideas, visions and techniques formulated in conversations and collaborations. With this iterative see-saw-seen again routine of articulation and reflection, we aim to illuminate how design researchers ‘work’.

**Motivations**

In applied research terms Beyond Best Practice outlines and tests an iterative, transdisciplinary and integrative knowledge creation process we believe useful to planners and designers doing sustainable urban transformation projects. This process matters because today we face many “wicked problems” (Rittel and Webber 1973). These problems demand new professional mindsets if we want to transform today’s complex, mosaic and constellated urbanscapes (Ascher 1995, Sieverts 1997) into more sustainable environments. Working with these urbanscapes requires moving beyond the modernist-inflected, sectorial design and planning models that defined “manageable” problems by isolating what in fact prove to be interdependent design and planning issues. Such silo-ed approaches cannot manage situations where action taken in one sector has consequences for another.

Most European building regulations and urban planning codes date from the 1950s and 1960s, and were devised under silo-ed institutional frameworks. They reflect faith in masterplanned developments, constructing on untouched green-field (tabula rasa) ground, and conceiving entire city districts through standardized procedures. Planners and designers have
since recognized the shortcomings of expansionist growth, accepted the value of urban regeneration, acknowledged the failures of urban districts produced like industrial objects and seen the importance of integrating unpredictability into long-term planning (Watson 2014, Roy 2009, Sieverts 2008, Hillier 2007). Nevertheless, structural hindrances prevent this knowledge of the limitations associated with 20th century practices from positively influencing 21st century day to day planning practice and procedures (Swedish Delegation for Sustainable Cities 2012). Sectorial approaches also constrain academic work pursued in the field of theory. Journals specializing in planning theory seldom address design research issues. Likewise, design theory journals rarely demonstrate interest in planning theory. The silo-ed nature of scholarly discourse hardly fosters a trans-areal mindset.

As long as such 20th century principles and mindsets continue to provide the conceptual horizon of 21st century to both academic and professional practice activity, we will struggle to align how we work with the wicked problems our work strives to address.

Speculations
Many sustainable urban development manuals propose picking up the best of previously tested practice from one setting, or situation, and reusing it again in another. In urban planning and design, importation of best practices can take many forms. Formal design solutions can be transplanted from one global location to another, regardless of differing climates, site conditions, architectural traditions and use patterns of public space. Best practice also applies to project administration (importing proven organization models); public participation (importing tested information-gathering or sharing procedures); technical performance (importing energy saving protocols to improve project metrics). All fall short when it comes to supporting sustainable planning goals.

Formal design imports may offer convenient, photogenic solutions to pretty-up a vague masterplan picture, but rarely acknowledge the particularites qualifying a local site. Project administration imports often become ineffective when faced with variation in systems of governance and management. Public participation imports leave little room for situation-driven improvisation. Technical protocols measuring outcomes against expected returns cannot account for unpredicted”gains” secured through unforeseen advantageous arising from site-specific processes. In short, imported examples of best design practice rarely actualize the real value of a development site’s distinctive, place and time-based conditioning circumstances (physical, social, ecological, political, etc.). With their focus on end-game scenarios best practice-based development models disregard in-situ qualities, and often lead to generic, “1-size-fits-all” solutions. Conversely, appreciating (in the double sense of recognizing and increasing) in-place value lies at the root of “site-specific” urban transformation. The activity of picking up Best Practices, whole cloth, from one situation and dropping them down in another suggests a blind faith in what worked “over there” coupled with blindness to the as-found site conditions and in-place resources characterizing “over here”. In calling for a move “beyond” best practice we mean to question that blind faith and see past that site-blindness – to recognize site-specific potentials, qualities and values already existing in place. A key motivating bias of this research might be stated thus: for best practices to accrue value, they must be translated, not simply transplanted.

Writing in the MIT Sloan Management Review, Gratton (an organizational theorist) and Groshal (professor of strategy and management) propose “signature processes” as an alternative to the widely accepted best practice business model. The authors explain the difference this way: signature processes arise within a company, best practice arises outside it (Gratton & Groshal
Critiquing best practice as typically adopted by corporations and managers, Gratton and Ghoshal advocate for “bringing something from the ‘inside’ out”. They argue that going “Beyond Best Practice begins with optimizing values found in place”.

Similarly, we argue that truly sustainable urban transformation principles should make better use of resources, optimize existing value and in-situ assets. They should create frameworks for evolution and adaption of urban projects over the long-term, beyond the momentarily import. Going beyond best practice means to shift attention from project to process, from quantity to quality, and from generic to site-specific.

A viable urban transformation model must produce concepts and processes applicable in more than one place, over time. It needs to include generative strategies. This means to detect, interpret and communicate the conceptual and fluctuating aspects of design and planning processes, often overlooked. To be made intelligible these “evolutionary” elements need a theoretical framework of a kind other than usually connected to development-driven planning and design as form-making. We argue this framework can be retrieved from design thinking.

To go beyond best practice means leaving room for design thinking to come in. Over the last 20 years, in realms such as science, business, and IT, the “design habit of mind” has increasingly become recognized as a way to frame, make sense of, and find innovative solutions for wicked problems. (Thienen, Meinel, & Nicolai 2014) Paradoxically, urban transformation might be one of the last bastions where the value of “design thinking” will get recognized as the (co-)structuring of ideas, purposes, procedures, images, concepts and spatial, functional, relational materializations. Recent studies point out advances in urban transformation and planning activity based on designerly approaches (Braae 2015, Diedrich 2013, Dell 2011, Tietjen 2011, Seggern 2008, Overmeyer 2007). Design, here understood as “making sense of things” rather than styling or lending form (Krippendorf 1989) generates knowledge in the mode of “a special type of opportunistic response – a projection of a possible future ... in response to a change in condition or need” (Deming & Swaffield 2011). But, this design knowledge remains tacit – it has not yet been raised. Many changes have occurred in current urban planning since the instatement of asset-updated regulations and methods. Design thinking (Cross 2001) holds promise for an agile form of knowledge creation that can react to these changes earlier than other forms of academic or administrative endeavor. A designerly mindset “constellates the ever-shifting collection of physical and non-physical systems that interact to configure contemporary urban landscapes ... assembling ... physical forms, infrastructural interconnections, development models and social agents needed to create urban conditions.” (Kahn 2007).

Arguing for the “value-add” of design-thinking as a process innovation requires explaining how design-thinking involves a mixture of creativity and analysis, combining speculation with careful research. The route of design discovery is never linear. Designers frame a question, try on a solution, discern how that first solution fails, and use that learning to re-frame the initial task and its assumed goals. The iterative design thinking process constitutes a habit of mind that adopts an open approach, rerouting the “established channels” along which thought operates. Design thinking constructs relationships between things previously perceived as unrelated; it separates what has been previously been tightly associated. It creates new value by “crossing the line” (in English – “acting unacceptably”) messing with and disrupting what we have been taught as the “right way” to work. The first action in a design thinking model is to “design questions”, to ponder the problem from various angles (general and specific) until a meaningful question can be found. By framing and reframing problems, design thinking offers an alternative to “solving the wrong problem” by importing a best practice answer that may not actually apply.
To demonstrate what this can mean for design and planning, next we offer revaluations of two current urban transformation challenges through the lens of design thinking: how to conceive and materialize urban green spaces, and how to remodel derelict industrial areas into urban districts.

**Revaluation: urban green**

Urban transformation in Europe often means densification of the built up urban fabric, which poses the question of where to leave room for urban open spaces, especially those accommodating plants. The more European cities densify, the more value urban green space acquire, in monetary terms and in terms of social, cultural, ecological worth. Urban green – such as parks, squares, alleys – perform positive functions for biodiversity, microclimate, stormwater drainage and personal health, often ingeniously combining water engineering solutions with new open spaces for recreation. On the other hand, urban green places a burden on cities, requiring costly maintenance to control biotic growth and decay processes incompatible with other urban practices.

Municipalities tend to focus their attention on the public green spaces - the ones they have the authority to shape and maintain, the ones by the color green on city maps. Yet those maps provide a reductive picture, overlooking all sorts of private green spaces, like gardens, courtyards, estates, company grounds, sports clubs, and golf courses. Transforming urban environments to create a self-sustaining hydrology, a rich biodiversity, and a balanced climate must build on a comprehensive picture that includes private and public green. It is impossible to tackle sustainability issues through the public space alone.

To devise meaningful policies with sustainability goals it is important to consider these facts: Most urban public spaces (such as streets and parking lots) are not green and most urban green spaces (such as gardens) are private. If a city wants to increase the amount of urban green because it needs more surface area for water infiltration, it would probably be better off promoting a law prohibiting the sealing of private gardens than planning more public parks. If a city wants to increase the amount of public space afforded to recreational and cultural activities, they might be better off claiming grey instead of green space – providing public squares instead of green roofs or walls. As long as cities continue to pit green versus grey, and public versus private (meaningless but commonly accepted dichotomies), urban transformation questions will get posed the wrong way, false land use conflicts will be fought, best practice will be applied in nonsensical ways, and the value of the urban green will only diminish further (Lindholm 2012).

Conventional best practice approaches obscure the importance of site-specific design and treat the affordance of urban green benefits as a purely quantitative issue. More recent examples, such as the “All London Green Grid”, a “policy framework to promote the design and delivery of ‘green infrastructure’ across London” (Mayor of London 2012), suggest an alternative framing of grey, green, public and private relations resulting in a more integrated planning and design strategy.

**Revaluation: urban harbour districts**

Urban transformation in Europe often means remodeling derelict industrial districts into lively urban neighbourhoods. Old harbour areas count among the most prominent transformation sites because of their situation by the water – the presence of water being recognized as a particular asset for contemporary European urban life. These areas have literally “made it” from the value-less refuse of 20th century heavy industry into places of highest urban value, in financial, real-estate and development terms and as social, cultural, and ecological assets.
However, reviewing how derelict harbour areas have thus far been integrated into the urban fabric reveals an all too often generic redevelopment pattern. The stable economic conditions of late 20th century fuelled large investments and rapid development implementation, leading to standard programmes erected in a global style architecture on formerly cleared port grounds — office complexes, luxury housing, shopping centres, restaurant and leisure facilities, complemented here and there by a preserved old crane, lonesome warehouse or historic facade. Programmatically and formally, transformed harbour areas look very much the same all over the world, despite greatly differing local geographical, social and historical circumstances. Apparently, the global problem of harbour transformation has generated a global solution, acknowledged and communicated as best practice: many a European harbour city today features a numbing homogeneity of dwelling deserts for the rich and office environments for the employed, in lieu of lively diverse urban neighbourhoods.

Recent research presents alternatives to this standard development (Diedrich 2013): In Nantes, an evolutionary “plan and guide map” replaces the common masterplan, driving harbour transformation from close on-site observation. In Lisbon, a temporary bike trail helps overcome property conflicts between port authority and city, making formerly closed off harbour grounds accessible for people to appropriate in inventive ways. In Amsterdam, the NSDM area has developed long-term uses from initial improvisations and performs as a lively urban district in social as well as economic terms. These exemplary harbour transformations projects (among others) cannot be summed up by a universal best practice “recipe for alternative transformation” - yet they do rely on a common mindset: design thinking. To entice local answers to the global question of harbour transformation, design thinking has lent them the framework to create situated knowledge, to work across scales, to weave complex actor constellations, to negotiate project narratives, to co-create with users already on site, to refine the management of transformative processes, to build the project around a structure of public open spaces, and to promote a new form of aesthetics favoring the ephemeral and evolutionary instead of the static and finite.

Transvaluations
In critical thinking terms, our Beyond Best Practice project harbors diverse motives with respect to accepted “best research practices” within the academy, and beyond: To identify, and parse out, the unacknowledged habits structuring day to day knowledge production. These habits of mind get established early on, by education; they get reinforced often, through professional working methods. Habits of mind establish horizons to thought and action, and as such present real practical targets of theoretical, critical, innovation oriented work. To push past those limiting horizons demands engagement with divergent points of view, to notice blind-spots in the workings of one’s own mind. We draw on Roland Barthes’ conviction, relayed by German scholar Ottmar Ette, that sometimes only a “productive forgetting” and “prospective unlearning” of habits opens up the vital forces needed for exploring future dimensions of knowledge (Ette 2011: 26). We want to deliver knowledge usable in any situation, without devolving into a generic formula. Instead of advising what to do we venture to question how things get done. Instead of a prescriptive “best practice recipe” we look for habit-inhibiting generative forces: ways of thinking, ways of problem framing, ways of value spotting, ways to fuel processes of communication. To sketch out a new conceptual horizon for 21st century practice we search for questions and pursue research vectors that provoke and promote critical conversation, rather than pose questions that invite quick answers or follow known paths. Conversational situations bring
preconceptions to light, exposing unspoken assumptions, expectations, and value-systems lying behind our research protocols (scientific/artistic) our professional interactions (as planners and designers), our evaluation metrics (short/long term), and our team-working methods (collaboration/delegation). Following through on these motives we propose an alternative research model based not on collection, analysis, discussion and conclusions of already acknowledged matters-of-fact, but on the observation, labelling, discussion and elaborating on matters-of-concern (Latour 2008) arising from the communicative activities of our networking actions.

Our experimental communicative style draws on a Barthian “archipelagic” writing mode, a multitude of micro-texts brought together in ever changing configurations, refusing hierarchical subordination in favour of an open constellation (Ette 2011: 47). Our “archipelagic” conversations germinate ideas in the process of finding form through writing work, the skype discussions and email exchanges that led to this paper; ideas that will be re-valuated still again in future conversations with peers in conference salons conceived to further entice elaboration of thought. This form of communication has epistemological value as a mode of knowledge creation that transgresses conventional design research, in the mode of critically constructive (helpful and materially productive) conversation.

To formulate the not-yet-discussed, to outline the not-yet-outlined, to pre-figure what is going to be processed within the research work, to invite and support dialogue-in-becoming, between different mindsets, we envision the process as a “goldwashing”, fostering an ability to detect and contextualize new grains of value; ideas, innovations, visions and techniques being formulated as we go along. We conclude these activities, aims and findings as a process of “designing common value constructs”. In opposition to the common negotiations between power forces (as in urban planning), we use collaborative conversations not only to bring all values to the table, but also to design new value sets, altogether.

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