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Let's Walk Urban Landscapes. New Pathways in Design Research

Leibniz University Hanover, Herrenhausen Palace, Hanover

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Experiencing the landscape involves movement. And there is no better way to experience landscape than by walking, which not only involves visual experience, but rhythm, kinaesthesia, balance, and so forth. This has been written about extensively, for instance by John Dixon Hunt and Bernard Lassus. Lassus connects the presence of landscape to its multisensory perception, concluding that as soon we perceive landscape with all of our senses, we have a sense of place. [1] Recent scholarship on walking has extended the topic from a means to experience space to a means to research, activate, and design space. The Italian group Stalker, for example, has developed a method of walking as a collective mode of expression as well as a tool for mapping the city and its transformations, of gathering stories, evoking memories and experiences, and immersing yourself with others in a place. Henrik Schulz discussed walking as a tool with which to address large-scale design issues. [2]

Walking should be given serious thought in the discourse of landscape architecture, not only informing its intentions, but also—as the symposium 'Let's Walk Urban Landscapes' postulates—the processes of design and design research. For if walking serves so well as a way to experience landscapes, then landscape architects could and should use it to get to know and understand the subject they are working on: the (urban) landscape, its users, its issues, its components. Walking is a tool that can be used in all stages of the design process.

Contemporary urban landscapes are characterized by flexible and dynamic relationships, congestion, layering, and interpenetration of landscapes and settlements into a spatial and temporal continuity, undefined and unbounded, consisting of types of urbanity that are hard to distinguish. Thus planning and design in urban landscapes requires a holistic understanding of a site, a city, a region that cannot be acquired from statistics and overview visualizations only. Walking through a region offers more direct and interactive encounters with a landscape and its inhabitants. Proceeding from a narrative and non-hierarchical understanding of the world around us as *Raumgeschehen*—as innumerable *spatial performances*—the perception of a landscape creates a more complex picture of the environment and its dynamics. [3] 'Studio Urbane Landschaften'—the initiator of the conference in conjunction with Leibniz University Hanover—is developing formal approaches for such an understanding of living environments from a human perspective, and used the rather experimental format of this conference—putting together lectures, a walking experience, and a concluding workshop and exhibition—to test its ideas.

The opening lectures by Antje Stokman, Martin Prominsky, Hille von Seggern, and Sabine Kunst aimed at a discussion on theories of design research, knowledge production, and design, strongly suggesting that traditional research methods fall short when addressing the multi-layered, diverse and ever-changing nature of urban landscape, which rather asks for new modes of transformative knowledge production. This all being true, the implied assumption was that these new modes—grassroots methods like real-life laboratories and co-design—are the only means to address these issues, whereas in its essence the field of landscape architecture has always been both multidisciplinary and specific, and every landscape architecture design is in essence a 'real-life laboratory', whose outcome can never be totally predicted, since every design is a first for this specific issue at this specific location in this specific context.

Experiencing the landscape by walking was not only the subject of the symposium, but also its form. With the aim of 'testing a new design research approach linking experimental, intuitive and rational capacities by involving all participants in the creation of new knowledge', the format of the symposium could be defined as narrative and non-hierarchical in itself. The mix of lecturing, creating, discussing and reflecting, and particularly walking, dissolved the dichotomy of speakers and audience into an equal engagement of participants. All participants walked through different areas of Hanover's urban landscape, in several workshops testing different methodologies for engaging with the urban landscape: Storytelling (exploring urban landscapes through telling, listening, and creating local storylines), Playing (designing urban landscapes in the 'spirit of play'), Navigating (design-oriented cartography), Setting Out (experiencing the landscape in the here-and-now), Moving (choreography to investigate hidden social rules), and *Wandern* (a specific, strenuous form of walking, maybe closest related to the English word hiking). Whereas the resulting pop-up-exhibition remained a fragmented collection of objects, without truly bringing the gained knowledge together into something new, the experience of this 'walking as research tool' was refreshing

and fascinating.

The workshop on *Wandern*, chaired by Henrik Schultz, was probably the one more directly connected with the topic of walking and landscape perception. Being a rhythmic and strenuous act, *Wandern* is more than a means to perceive ones surroundings, but causes a sequence of different psychological states: engagement (intensively perceiving space), flow (encouraging intuition that stimulates association), and reflection (on both experiences and ideas). Step by step, walkers change their perception of the landscape and the traversed *Geschehen* (taking place), constantly crossing the threshold of change. The assumption is that this sequence of different walking modes—the active engagement of the fresh mind and body, the blank mind of flow caused by exhaustion, and the consequent reflective mode—stimulates the complex, iterative process of design.

Is walking a research method, or even a design method, as was stated so easily? I would not go so far, but it is definitely a tool for research and design, to be used in conjunction with the many others we have in our toolbox. Is it even new as a research tool? Of course not. However, what was made clear is that its uncharted possibilities are not anywhere near exhausted.

1. Lassus, B. (1998), 'The Obligation of Invention', in *The Landscape Approach* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 77.
2. Schulz, H. (2014), *Landschaften auf den Grund gehen. Wandern als Erkenntnismethode beim Großräumigen Landschaftsentwerfen* (Berlin: Jovis).
3. The notion of *Raumgeschehen* was coined by Hille von Seggern, one of the founding members of Studio Urbane Landschaften.