

On the role of reflexive theory in landscape architecture

Summary of Vera Vicenzotti's trial lecture for appointment as docent

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Landscape architecture is both a profession and an academic discipline. Indeed, landscape architecture historians have described the field as a young profession-turned-academic discipline that deals with planning, design and management of natural and built environments. As such, it is complex and interdisciplinary. Landscape architects need to synthesize knowledge from very different fields: the natural sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, and the arts.

Furthermore, landscape architecture's main subject, the 'landscape', is not as self-evident as it may seem. We are faced with a plethora of understandings, traditions, and concepts of 'landscape'. In short, landscape architecture is a complex and constantly changing practical, social, intellectual, theoretical, methodological, and epistemological mess. In this complexity lies the strength of landscape architectural practice, but doing justice to it in theory poses a challenge. This is problematic since it ultimately hampers the development of a better practice.

In this lecture, I will argue that reflexive theory can help landscape architects to navigate their complex field. Reflexive approaches are important for contributing to a truthful and nuanced theory of landscape architecture, but also to a sustainable practice and a sound education. I will illustrate this with examples from my own scholarship in which I have been drawing on a variety of theories over many years. I have been reflecting on discourses and practices in landscape architecture by engaging with theories from landscape studies, critical and cultural geography, political philosophy, history of ideas, and aesthetics. The selected examples in my lecture will shift from reflections on landscape architecture in a wider sense to reflections on landscape design—in line with the specialization of my senior lectureship in landscape architecture especially design theory and architecture criticism.

The examples reveal both the multiple roles reflexive theory is playing and the plurality of reflexive approaches themselves. First, I will discuss approaches that reflect on cultural, political and ideological ideas behind planning and design approaches, which can *create understanding* for competing practices in landscape architecture. To do so, I will be drawing on my discourse-analytical research on different approaches to curb urban sprawl, and on work on the history of ideas of European notions of wild nature. Second, reflexive approaches can *provide orientation* to practitioners, academics, and students alike, regarding aspects as diverse as the ideological assumptions and societal implications of their practice, or different textual traditions in academic writing. Third, through developing truthful accounts of current practices, reflexive theory-making can *enable transparent planning and design practices*. I will illustrate this with ideas for future research on the fate of aesthetics in landscape design. Lastly, I will present work that has led colleagues and me to recast landscape architecture as a socio-political project. I will also sketch my ideas for future research on the concept of aesthetic sustainability to illustrate how reflexivity-as-criticality can *open up alternative futures*.