Lessons from the Past, Visions for the Future

Celebrating One Hundred Years of Landscape Architecture Education in Europe

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**Lessons from the past, visions for the future: Celebrating one hundred years of
landscape architecture education in Europe**

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Recollecting landscapes: Teaching and making landscape biographies

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One of the challenges of teaching landscape is how to address the everyday landscape: the ever-changing landscape that is shaped through an accumulation of day-to-day alterations by people who live and work in them. It is much easier to focus on what J.B. Jackson has called – in contrast to vernacular landscapes – ‘political landscapes’: landscape archetypes, coherent designs determined by power, ideology or religion (Jackson 1984). The formation of these landscapes can be explained as the result of a succession of interventions by one or more identifiable authors (the Jeffersonian grid, the picturesque park, the highway system, the urban square, the ecological corridor etcetera). But how do we teach students how to read landscapes in a context in which authorship is not so easily identifiable, in which a myriad of actors is at play, ‘designing’ the landscape from below as well as from above?

This paper deals with *Recollecting Landscapes*, an ongoing rephotographic survey documenting a century of landscape transformation in Flanders that can be considered as such a biographic project. It aims at redirecting our attention to the gradual transformation of landscapes, authored by its inhabitants as much as by designers, planners, engineers or policy makers (Notteboom & Uyttenhove 2018). Focusing on sixty landscapes photographed in the early twentieth century, 1980, 2004 and 2014 the project gives an insight into the mechanisms of landscape transformation between large-scale interventions and everyday changes: the continuous re-allotment of agricultural land; sprawling habitation and economic activities; the construction of infrastructure large and small; nature destruction, preservation and expansion; informal and temporary occupation of residual spaces etcetera. Documenting one of the most densely urbanized regions in Europe, *Recollecting Landscapes* records the evolution of a rural-urban continuum shaped by a shared but often conflicting authorship.

Recollecting Landscapes is not only a tool to teach students (and the audience at large) about landscape by explaining its evolution, it is also co-produced with students. Although for docents the project provides a useful aid in ex-cathedra landscape (history) classes, the exchange of knowledge works in two directions: students have also been involved in their making beforehand. Over a period of more than a decade, research seminars and master theses helped to actively produce the knowledge-base created around the expanding series of images of *Recollecting Landscapes*. In the research seminars, groups of students each focused on one specific landscape, which they were asked to address from two angles. A first angle was the perspective of the specialist: among others, biologists, agricultural scientists, policy experts, urban planners and designers were interviewed, explaining the transformation visualized in the image series. The second angle was that of the users: students went on the spot to talk to inhabitants, farmers and passers-by, revealing the micro-histories

and narratives attached to specific places. The interviews were complemented by other sources that further developed the landscape biographies, ranging from publications and archives of local history associations, over geographical atlases, to a broad array of literature on the social, cultural, economic and agricultural development of the landscape under study. The resulting biographies were summarized in a book (Notteboom & Uyttenhove, 2018) and on the website www.recollectinglandscapes.be in the form of captions accompanying each photo-set. In addition, in a series of master theses, the landscape biographies of a selection of landscapes was further substantiated. These played a prominent role as more elaborate case study chapters in the book.

An advantage of this method of teaching is its capacity to activate the student in the sense that (s)he also produces, and not only consumes knowledge. However, this is also the case when writing a paper in a ‘classical’ landscape history class. More important, perhaps, is that working with photographic images as a first ‘entry’ into the landscape and working with interviews of both experts and inhabitants make students aware of the complexity of landscape transformation and its authorship. During the process of making the biography, students step literally in and out of the landscape and alternate an embedded social, cultural and emotional experience of the inhabitants with the more distant experience of the expert. Another reason why this method can contribute to landscape teaching is that it works cross-scale, from the detail to the extent of the landscape as a whole, and beyond to the global scale. Being asked to interpret each element within the frame of the photographic image, students become aware of the effects of the entanglement of micro and macro stories. Also, sending students out of the classroom into the landscape transforms them from passive consumers into active producers of knowledge (and eventually, designers). However, even with the integration of contemporary technologies such as a website, a challenge remains for a project as *Recollecting Landscapes* (but also for landscape teaching and research in general, we think) to open it up for other voices than teachers, researchers, students and specialists. Indeed, for the rephotographic project to reach its full potential it should stay open for those voices outside of academia who actually shape the landscape and induce both vernacular and ‘political’ landscape transformations.

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