Advanced Landscapes

Guest-Editor Ed Wall charts the history and successes of the Advanced Landscape and Urbanism group at the University of Greenwich where he is Academic Portfolio Lead, and illustrates the exploratory nature of its pedagogy.
Landscape Architecture students at the University of Greenwich use composite drawings to explore the production of new landscapes, formed through design strategies, architectural interventions and daily practices that intersect urban processes.
Advanced Landscape and Urbanism was formed in 2015 as a loose grouping of graduate students, design tutors and academics interested in the design of landscapes and cities. The aim was to activate and frame an expanding field of landscape – from within traditions of teaching landscape at the University of Greenwich, since 1965 – defined by the projects produced rather than adopting positions, restricting practices or narrowing definitions. Advanced Landscape and Urbanism began with conversations about teaching landscape, with James Fox, a design tutor in the School, asking: ‘What is landscape at [the University of] Greenwich?’ It has since become a collective platform to explore possibilities of landscape teaching and landscape research. Formed at the intersection of Master’s, PhD and academic practices, it encourages new approaches to research and design experimentation that investigate the environments, tools and lives of landscapes.

Cesare Cardia, *Contested Boundaries and the Appropriation of Space*, Advanced Landscape and Urbanism, University of Greenwich, London, 2018

The operations of this MA Landscape Architecture project proposal aim to question the practices and boundaries of urban development to establish moments of negotiation within a new landscape of socio-spatial relations.
Five years on, this article reflects on the investigations that have driven research projects, student designs and collective endeavours in Advanced Landscape and Urbanism. It is informed from many conversations, including a four-hour semi-structured group discussion exploring future pedagogies focused on the design and research of landscapes and cities. Advanced Landscape and Urbanism is framed in three ways. Firstly, an emphasis on landscapes being socially constructed through interrelations between individuals, people and the worlds they produce. Secondly, an embracing of diversity of landscape approaches, resulting in projects created from unique combinations of experiences, methods, skills and ambitions – but differentiated through focused research projects and structured design studios. Third, Advanced Landscape and Urbanism embraces tensions within and between landscapes, working with the complexities and contradictions that landscapes entail, as much as with the potential agency of landscape relations.

‘Landscape’ informs all the ways of thinking and working in Advanced Landscape and Urbanism. The term ‘landscape’ is used to denote entanglements of relations – landscape as physical and immaterial relations between people and the environments around them, from the immediacy of locales in London (from where most projects originate) to more distant places and less tangible times. While appreciating the urge to focus on ‘what’ landscape is – particularly conventions of design practice that consider landscapes as physical places to visit, study and transform, or as representations of places within visual arts and literature – projects address more critical concerns for ‘how’ landscapes are produced and ‘who’ has the opportunity to be part of these processes. Not denying the impulse to explore landscapes spatially and visually, projects give less emphasis to ‘what’ the products of landscape are. Designs do not ignore the significance of the physical conditions of existing landscapes to be rigorously studied or an obsessional eye to how design narratives are conceived, developed and refined. They instead emphasise the importance of critically ‘working’ images and texts in order to understand and represent the complexities of landscapes. Such relational approaches to landscapes, which are investigated in Contested Boundaries and the Appropriation of Space (2018) by MA Landscape Architecture student Cesare Cardia, are core to the exploration of sites and the necessary refinement of methods and designs – explored through extraordinary drawings that aspire to make exquisite marks on the ground.

Advanced Landscape and Urbanism employs the term ‘Advanced’ to emphasise that experimentation should be at the forefront of an expanding and creative field of landscape. From this restless position there is a constant searching for future forms, practices and questions of landscapes. Free from the necessity to realise designs within the professional field of landscape architecture and urban design – where the stakes are high in regards to what communities, clients and ecosystems can gain or lose – Advanced Landscape and Urbanism explores critical questions that investigate the conditions of landscapes, from the intimately small to the unfathomably large, addressing concerns of climate change, migration, digital technologies, spatial justice and urban growth. Helena Rivera, a design tutor in the studio, argues: ‘These are projects that can only happen in the university!’ Working from this position also provides a critical perspective towards conventions of landscape, whether inside or outside the university, in order to further landscape knowledge and practices. The expectations of research culture for producing innovative bodies of knowledge should be no different than the demands on design practice for addressing unique conditions of landscapes in ways that may not have been undertaken before. Student projects such as Mais Kalthoum’s Island Factories (2018) on the Isle of Dogs in London illustrate the potential of working with future scenarios of climate change and the responsibilities that Global North countries have to communities under threat in the Global South. Her iterative process of gathering information, synthesising and speculating – focused through extended periods of reworking – resulted in a proposal that made explicit ‘how’ and by ‘whom’ an elaborate ecology of landscapes was produced.
Relations-Between

To focus on the relational dynamics of landscapes is to emphasise the significance of change and time. But while the notion of change is commonly accepted, including growth, inhabitation, erosion and decline, within the context of practice there are difficulties designing and realising dynamic landscapes. Doreen Massey, in her 2006 essay ‘Landscape as Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains’, gives emphasis to ‘constant movement, the inevitability and inexorability of process (rather than entity); on flow rather than territory’. While she accepts that this can be understood as ‘a conceptual issue’ and that ‘in the practical conduct of the world we do encounter “entities”’, she also argues that ‘change cannot be rejected’. She continues: ‘The stake is not change itself (the denial of it in the past or the refusal of it in the future), for change of some sort is inevitable; rather it is the character and the terms of that change. It is here that the politics needs to be engaged.’

Advanced Landscape and Urbanism projects question relations of ownership, occupation and development of landscapes through writing, drawings and models, attempting to visualise activities, discourses and processes that are often obscured from view or understood in more social or ecological terms. The influence of theoretical concepts, through the works of landscape architects, social scientists or political ecologists, provides essential references connected to immediacies of uneven urban development or loss of biodiversity, through empirical research and site-specific design. A collaboration that began in 2015 with Sayes Court, a Deptford community action group led by Roo Angell and Bob Bagley, has opened up conversations around practices of globalisation, arrivals of refugees and community initiatives on the River Thames. The collaboration provided the basis, in 2016, for the first issue of Testing-Ground, a journal developed by Advanced Landscape and Urbanism, and the context for student projects such as Altan R Dervish’s Deptford Covenant (2019) that confronts the intricacies of streets, journeys, buildings and development.

By working with the social constructedness of landscapes, student projects have been able to address environmental concerns (such as climate change and ecological justice) and economic issues (such as urban development and gentrification) but with a focus on what is at stake for different individuals and places entwined in these processes of change. The writings of the landscape architect Jane Hutton and of the sociologist Caroline Knowles are a significant reference for this relational understanding. In her 2013 exploration of ‘reciprocal landscapes’, Hutton highlights the material relations between landscapes created and destroyed through design projects; while Knowles’s Flip-Flop: A Journey Through Globalisation’s Backroads (2014) traces the entanglement of places and lives in the material relations of global supply and manufacturing chains. Rather than focusing on the artefacts of finished projects and the conditions of physical places, as most landscape and city design ventures do, Advanced Landscape and Urbanism gives a greater interest to the relational aspects of landscapes, such as the processes from which they are produced. While studios may be initiated from London, design projects simultaneously investigate wider geographical relations between locations of resource extraction, global flows of materials, competition between cities for development and the implications for the people and places involved. Hutton argues that ‘Conceptualizing the sites of material production as integral rather than external to design would shift theoretical concerns of the landscape project without necessarily shifting its site boundary’.

Mais Kalthoum, The Island Factories, Advanced Landscape and Urbanism, University of Greenwich, London, 2018

Three Island Factories are proposed by University of Greenwich MA Landscape Architecture student Mais Kalthoum for London’s Isle of Dogs, creating inhabitable islands for Global South communities impacted by rising sea levels.

The Leisure Island Factory creates artificial floating landscapes of leisure – reminiscent of Robert Smithson’s Floating Island that was drawn by the artist in 1970 but only realised by a team led by Balmori Associates in 2005 – constructed as barges and aggregated to form new inhabitable places.

New industries are proposed in the Island Factories to confront and mitigate the impacts of rising sea levels that are caused by global climate change and that make some towns, cities and countries uninhabitable.
This approach is taken by John Joseph Watters in his Master’s project for Angerstien’s Wharf (2015), where the flows of materials become the basis from which a new network of public spaces and actions are proposed. Such projects, Hutton continues, have ‘the potential to both examine the ways in which nonadjacent spaces are designed contiguously, but also to speculate about how these reciprocal relationships might be designed themselves’. Design and research projects aim to make more visible the individuals involved, the tools that they employ (in the design process and within sites) and the varying and multiple relations that they have with their environments. Patrick Geddes’s Valley Section drawings that emphasise relations between practices of work and landscapes of a typical valley, first published in 1909, are key references – but with greater concerns for people and places entangled in contemporary processes of urbanisation, future devices of landscape and yet-to-be-explored relations between them.

Angerstien’s Wharf is Europe’s largest sea-dredged aggregates terminal where huge piles of aggregate are constantly evolving and shifting amid a complex system of conveyors and structures. This MA Landscape Architecture proposal inventively brings public access and interaction in direct juxtaposition with the wharf’s industrial operations.

The flows of materials become the basis from which a new network of public spaces and actions are proposed

Aggregates are dredged from across the North Sea, connecting Angerstien’s Wharf to a wider network of marine landscapes. The wharf is also located in London where metropolitan land values question the future of such a large-footprint industry that provides essential materials to the higher-value urban developments.
Differentiating-Between
If each landscape is considered unique and if we advocate for site-specific combinations of research and design methods to understand and reimagine these places, then an embracing of difference in ways of working can be considered an essential aspect of Advanced Landscape and Urbanism. Simultaneously, to learn from experience, to build on what has been achieved before, and to avoid a homogenisation through diversity has required a clear structure that frames common issues, sites and practices. A differentiated diversity is at the core of Advanced Landscape and Urbanism, across those who teach, research and study, between projects, and across definitions. Each tutor and academic is encouraged to provide a focus based on his or her expertise. The Master’s programmes consist of contrasting studios so that a diversity of practices and projects can be fostered within focused design discourses and research agendas. From within a common discourse agreed by the tutors in Advanced Landscape and Urbanism each year – such as exploring relations between ‘development’ and ‘maintenance’ as set out by New York artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles in her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1969) – studio tutors interpret and give direction and coordination though design briefs that narrow further, geographically and thematically. There is an intentional distance between the approaches taken by design tutors, from studios focused on ‘Landscape Politics’ to ‘Nothing Architecture’ and from ‘London National Park City’ to ‘100-Mile City’, aiming to highlight the infinite possibilities in practising landscape. The contrasting studios are maintained by the different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds of design tutors whose own training in fields of urban design, architecture, art, literature and philosophy – and of course landscape architecture – informs their approach.

Student projects are pursued in small collaborative studios, where sharing knowledge and participating in critique are essential activities to realise individual designs. Advanced Landscape and Urbanism has no singular style, but through pedagogical invention and an emphasis on specific research and design methods, as well as techniques of advanced representation, we have developed and encouraged several ‘ways of working’. These include three composite drawings, termed ‘base drawing’, ‘operational drawing’ and ‘scene’, that each mark significant moments in the design process: firstly, concluding the research with a single drawn foundation from which proposals can be generated (base drawing); secondly, visualising the complex relations that are the basis of the design proposal (operational drawing); and third, an image that communicates the construction of the landscape as it is experienced (scene). Each studio employs these ways of working with base drawings, operational drawings and scenes differently; however, the questions asked are consistent: What are the conclusions from the research as represented in a single drawing? How can the processes of making landscapes, through social, architectural and ecological means, be represented? How can the experience of landscapes be constructed and communicated?

Tensions-Between
From within and between the messy entanglement of landscapes that we perceive, experience and create, there are frequent tensions and contradictions. How can design projects challenge dominant practices of urban development, which favour beautification and gentrification over spatial equality and secure tenure of housing – while at the same time creating visually stunning designs? How
can practices of transforming landscapes and cities address global climate change when the use of carbon-emitting materials such as concrete and the sourcing of building materials from distant countries remain prevalent? As Jane Hutton states: "The material assemblies of constructed landscapes generate ecological, economic and social conditions in situ, yet are embedded with the relations of their own production, concealed through the processes of commodification." The search is not for solutions – or even to identify problems – but rather to make some sense of the past while asking questions of the future. By focusing on ‘how’ landscapes are created, and by ‘whom’, as a means to produce speculative proposals, many of these contradictions can be explored. MA student Rosie Martin's process of developing proposals for homeless men on the Old Kent Road personifies many of these struggles. She states: "These moments of process cannot always be seen in the final outcome."

‘Changing the world’ through landscape projects, as advocated by postgraduate coordinator Benz Kotzen, requires understanding of the means through which such ambitions can be achieved and the ability to effectively communicate them. These relations of landscapes are not passive, but focused actions directed to establish rigorous research projects and speculative designs. 'What is landscape at [the University of] Greenwich?' James Fox asked in 2015: it is, and always will be, defined by the excellence of research, design and teaching pursued by the students, tutors and academics involved, and Advanced Landscape and Urbanism is their collective endeavour.

Notes
2. Quote from group interview/conversation with 12 members of Advanced Landscape and Urbanism, conducted on 20 February 2019, with discussion on the future of landscape education through consideration of projects inside and outside the university.
8. Ibid.
9. For more on base drawings, operational drawings and scenes, see Ed Wall, ‘What... is Landscape?’, in Karsten Jorgenson et al (eds), The Routledge Handbook of Teaching Landscape, Routledge (Abingdon), 2018.

George Armour,
Edgelands,
Advanced Landscape and Urbanism,
University of Greenwich,
London,
2019

Focused base drawings developed by MA Landscape Architecture students provide for unique readings of landscapes, such as of this peripheral urban landscape near London's Heathrow. Mappings of many conditions of wetness provide a unique lens through which to establish bold infrastructural interventions and more subtle, localised actions.