

The Creative Landscape: Experimenting with a hybridised teaching strategy

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Biography

Dr. **Shannon Satherley** is a Senior Lecturer in Landscape Architecture at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) School of Design. Since 2003 her teaching has focussed on design studios taught with external communities and clients, and recently, on incorporating creative arts methods into teaching in the landscape design studio. Her research is focussed on the conception of landscape meaning, on design in post-industrial landscapes, and in the pedagogy of authentic learning. Shannon is Vice President of the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (Queensland Chapter), and a Registered Landscape Architect with P² Landscape Architecture.

Abstract

There is a tension in contemporary design studio teaching between the prevailing instrumentality of the 'learning outcomes' approach, and the facilitation of student learning through creativity. Authentic learning opportunities sometimes reinforce this tension, with clients defining prescriptively pragmatic design briefs; but they can also create space for a balance between teaching to administrative imperatives, and the creative development of student designers. Such a space has been created in our Queensland University of Technology undergraduate landscape architecture 'ReGenerate Studio', in partnership with the Brisbane Powerhouse. This arts-focused client is enabling experimentation with a hybridised teaching strategy, in which students approach the Powerhouse landscape as a place of creative inhabitation, using art and storytelling to explore it, and to present installations and/or performances within the landscape, expressing the qualities they perceive, and visions they have of it. At the same time, they undertake familiar foundational landscape exploration and design processes, and bring both together to germinate design concepts. Over two years, the degree of creativity evidenced in student design work has visibly increased, while still meeting required learning outcomes. This hybridised teaching experiment is demonstrably affording our students learning experiences embracing the creativity, as well as the pragmatics, of landscape architectural design.

Keywords design, creativity, landscape architecture, landscape inhabitation, authentic learning, embodiment

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Introduction

There is a tension in contemporary design studio teaching between the prevailing instrumentality of the 'learning outcomes' approach, and the facilitation of student learning through creative experience. In a professionally accredited degree such as landscape architecture, this manifests as a struggle to balance the teaching of required technical knowledge and skills, assessed through evaluation of representations of learning, with a creative, embodied approach to landscape design studio teaching emphasising process over representation. Authentic learning opportunities can sometimes reinforce this tension, with 'real world' clients defining prescriptively pragmatic design briefs for students. However, they can also create space for the desired balance between teaching to administrative imperatives, and the creative development of student designers.

Such a space has been created in our Queensland University of Technology (QUT) undergraduate landscape architecture 'ReGenerate Studio', in partnership with the Brisbane Powerhouse. This arts-focused client is enabling experimentation with a hybridised teaching strategy. The overarching curriculum requirement of this design studio is to consolidate students' existing foundational design knowledge and skills, and so the teaching strategy is to offer the security of the familiar, while at the same time introducing unfamiliar methods of creative arts practice. I invite the students to approach the Powerhouse landscape as a place of creative performance: to use art and storytelling to explore and inhabit it, creating an installation and/or performance within the landscape expressing the qualities they perceive, and visions they have of it. They use this process of creative landscape inhabitation to germinate their landscape design concepts.

In the first two years of this studio there has been a visible increase in the degree of creativity evidenced in the student design work, as well as the meeting of the more technical aspects of the learning outcomes. This hybridised teaching experiment has arguably afforded students access to new creative learning experiences, and a new way to approach landscape architectural design. This paper unpacks the tension between teaching about landscape as an embodied creative experience, and the assessment of the *representations* rather than *processes* of creativity inherent in unit learning outcomes. The hybridised teaching strategy is further explained, and the resultant creative learning illustrated with student work and commentary.

The Creative Landscape

As a landscape architect, I define 'landscape' as a 'dynamic nexus of ecological, social and cultural systems and processes ... organisms and inert forms'; a domain 'perpetually being re/created by these systems, processes and organisms' (Satherley (a) 2016, 101). This phenomenological understanding draws on Ingold's notion of 'creative inhabitation' (1993, 162), in which landscapes are always works in progress, continuously reconstituted and made meaningful through what Olwig describes as our 'performing ... inhabiting', or 'dwelling' in the world' (1996, 630-631). Tilley further explains landscapes as having 'massive ontological import from the moment we conceptualize [sic] them as being lived through, mediated, worked on and altered, replete with meaning and symbolism and not just looked at or thought about' (2004, 24-25). Herein lies the rub of teaching landscape design: I argue that it should entail creation through landscape *in*habitation, not only through the application of ideas and skills applied *onto* landscapes. In this way a tension exists between design studio curriculum and syllabus: between the facilitation of truly authentic student learning through the creative inhabitation of landscape, and the meeting of the administrative imperatives to teach to learning outcomes.

Landscape architecture education at QUT has been creating 'authentic learning environments' for many years: i.e. those in which, as defined by Herrington and Herrington (2006, 1-13), students learn through situated engagement within real-world scenarios, or through learning opportunities resembling real life applications of knowledge and skills. However, sometimes these can actually reinforce the aforementioned tension, with clients setting limits to creative authenticity through their desire for purely technical 'solutions' to material 'problems'. Lyon argues that this reflects a growing suspicion of 'magic' or 'mystery' in design education, a distrust of a perceived lack of rationalism in works of imagination (2011, 117). She cites Buchanan's description of professional design practice being increasingly preoccupied with 'technical problems' and their 'economic implications', often at the expense of 'individual innovation and creativity' (Buchanan 2007, 42-43). However, my conversations with leading Brisbane landscape architects consistently reveal that while they value the acquisition of technical design skills by our students, many equally value – if not value more highly – their capacity for critical *and* creative thinking (personal correspondence 2003-2016).

It is argued that learning outcomes can evidence the pursuit of authentic learning in a unit (QUT 2016a), and indeed, by defining what is to be achieved, they can play a positive role. However, they can limit the authentic experience of creative freedom in student learning by, as Doughty suggests, 'undermining curiosity, imagination, reflection and criticism' (2006, 19).

Many academics have experienced the frustration of having to mark down a brilliant piece of student work because it does not quite meet required learning outcomes. The QUT website lists four 'Characteristics of Authentic Assessment', one of which involves 'learners representing [sic] their learning in a mode/medium of representation relevant to professional practice' (QUT 2016b). The measuring of a student's ability to 'represent' creative thinking is challenging enough, but far more so when the *process* of producing that representation is the vehicle for learning, in a far more significant way than is the finished representation.

A Hybridised Teaching Strategy

Authentic learning environments can also create space to balance teaching to learning outcomes with the creative development of student designers. An example is the landscape architecture 'ReGenerate Studio', now in its third year in partnership with the Brisbane Powerhouse: a contemporary multi-arts venue. The students' Design Brief is to 'respond to the identified landscape integration and functional needs of the Brisbane Powerhouse, and propose a basic site plan to ReGenerate the whole Powerhouse landscape as an open system generating creative energy ...' (Satherley (b), 2014-16). This Brief calls for creativity in learning *process* as well as *representation*, as acknowledged in one of the three unit learning outcomes, that students should be able to '[a]nalyse design briefs, problems or scenarios, and *critically and creatively apply* relevant knowledge to formulate sustainable landscape design propositions [Emphasis added].'

The hybridised teaching strategy in this unit incorporates processes of creative arts practice into the familiar processes of landscape design. It draws on Ellsworth's understanding of people not as 'having bodies' but 'as *bodies* whose movements and sensations are crucial to our understandings' (2005, 27). As Olin identifies, we understand phenomena not only through interpretation of the symbolic: but through the bodily knowing of landscape inhabitation. (2011, 76). This teaching strategy facilitates students' intellectual interpretations of the landscape's signs and symbols, and their apprehension of it as a dynamic sensory and creative domain.

Brisbane Powerhouse describes itself as 'a *generator* and art is in its foundations, part of an ongoing creative narrative with the building ...' (2014). It is the creative processes of art-making and storytelling that are harnessed to help students apprehend these existing narratives, and to add to them by germinating new landscape design ideas from these creative practices. They begin their design journey in the 'traditional' manner by appraising the existing landscape, and at the same time explore it through art and storytelling to create 'landscape interventions' in the form of installations and/or performances. This process informs every

stage of the development of their initial design concepts and final resolved site plans. The intention is to provide a sense of security in familiar processes: a safe place from which to explore the freedom of creative experimentation. In his discussion of what is common to art and design, Buchanan identifies a 'quality of mind' that is shared in the beginning of the art/design process, which includes the 'capacity for wonder or astonishment', which he describes as 'both the sign and the source of creativity and originality'. Citing Descartes, he argues that wonder is 'the beginning of our creation of meaning' which fades as familiarity with something increases and we move beyond initial discovery to 'the interpretation and the fixing of meaning' (2007, 44-45). Hence it is important that this creative practice be part of the students' earliest inhabitation of this landscape, before they have become too familiar with it.

In cultural landscape theory, an 'insider' is someone who *belongs* to a place, identifying *with* it, while an outsider merely perceives *an* identity *of* a place (Relph 1976, 45, 49). Few of our students consider themselves arts venue 'insiders' (show-of-hands surveys reveal few students have ever visited the Powerhouse prior to taking this studio), and the 'landscape intervention' process takes many outside their comfort zones. Part of its purpose is to encourage the students to start exploring and thinking about their project site creatively and performatively, like a Powerhouse 'insider'. It guides rather than prescribes the ways they perceive and interpret the landscape, as opposed to the traditional appraisal process. Further, it asks students – unusually – to begin germinating design concepts at the earliest possible stage in the studio process. This is pedagogy as 'sensation construction ... a force for thinking as *experimentation*' (Ellsworth 2005, 27).

The creative 'landscape intervention' is completed in the first four weeks of semester. In the first week we visit the Powerhouse and explore the history and post-industrial fabric of the landscape as well as learning about its current functions and identified shortcomings. Students begin their familiar traditional process of landscape appraisal, and are asked to prepare for their second studio by identifying a space in the Powerhouse landscape that they respond to strongly in some way (positive or negative) due to its sensory qualities.

In the second studio the students are introduced to the process of the intervention. Numerous precedents for art practice within landscapes are introduced, including the wide range of contemporary work represented in the V2_Institute for Unstable Media 'Knowledgebase' (2014-16), and the Red Earth website (2015-16). The work of landscape architects Latz and Partners is also included, as an example of professional designers using storytelling as a design method. Their ground-breaking design for Park Duisburg Nord in the decommissioned A. G. Thyssen steelworks in Germany began with the lead designer writing stories inspired by imagining the site's main derelict blast furnace as a mountain circled by ravens or a dragon

(Weilacher, 1996, 126; Latz and Latz, 2001, 151). The students are invited to explore these precedents and choose a *process* of creative landscape intervention which they think appropriate to adapt within their chosen Powerhouse landscape space, or else submit a proposal for their own process to be negotiated with teaching staff. Their intervention can be a performance, an installed object or objects, a guided walk, or other experience designed for other people, and they are encouraged to understand it as an experiment in which there is no 'right' or 'wrong', just 'interesting'. Thus they begin their creative exploration with artistic *process*, with their appraisal of the landscape conditions, providing a scaffolding enabling them to open their minds to fresh ideas.

The students prepare to experiment with the application of their landscape interventions on site in the third week of the studio, and in the fourth week they must present, perform, or have others perform them in the Powerhouse landscape. In order to address the unit learning outcome to '*creatively apply relevant knowledge to formulate sustainable landscape design propositions*', three criteria are written in an effort to primarily assess the criticality and creativity of the student's landscape inhabitation *process*, with the lesser emphasis on the assessment of their final *representation* thereof. These criteria assess: each student's expressed critical reasoning behind their selection of intervention process; the creativity of how they applied the process (experimentation and 'failure' are encouraged); and their reflections on what they can or cannot draw from the *process* to influence their landscape design concept development.

Creative Learning within the Landscape

In the first two years of this project, the degree of creativity evidenced in many of the students' work has visibly increased (anecdotal, based on informal staff observations), while still meeting the overall unit learning outcomes. There is a sense that many students genuinely come to 'inhabit' the Powerhouse landscape, moving nearer to being 'insiders', rather than designing it from the outside and placing their ideas *onto* the landscape. One student describes this sense in an email, stating that the process of developing his own intervention, and of engaging with those of other students:

'... enriched my understanding of the powerhouse landscape. My final concept proposal for the unit, was an abstraction of the performance task - a landscape incision that sought to distil and celebrate the rituals present within the powerhouse campus; the macro, such as the rising of the tide; the micro, a lone busker playing his guitar' (Student a. Email August 01, 2016).

It is clear that for some landscape architecture students, a creative arts approach already informs their relationships with landscapes, or at least it comes easily to them. An example is the work of a student whose landscape intervention comprised a series of delicate Goldsworthy -inspired insertions of found driftwood into an existing topiary garden, delicately arranged in such a way as to lead visitors through the space from shrub to shrub, to suddenly discover a hidden lookout point and piece of landscape heritage fabric (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Student b Landscape Intervention (detail). Image: Satherley, 2015.

Her resultant design concept (Figure 2) and final site plan for the entire landscape (Figure 3) follow this same logic, creating a journey of discovery, revealing five distinctively different aspects of the landscape to the visitor in turn. She explains how her 'representation of early site investigation was a resource I used throughout the rest of the studio as it captured and retold early inspiration and understanding of the site' (Student b. Email August 03, 2016).



Figure 2 (left). Student b Design Concept (detail). Image: Student b, 2015.

Figure 3 (right). Student b Site Plan (detail). Image: Student b, 2015.

For other landscape architecture students, this sudden immersion in creative practice involves a substantial challenge: to translate their existing knowledge and basic skills in the analysis of design briefs and appraisal of landscapes into an entirely new way of working and being in the landscape. In response to a request for feedback on the process, the following was received from a student with an engineering background, who by his own account viewed design projects as problems for which a purely technical solution should be sought. Rather than paraphrase his words, I quote him almost in full to illustrate the potential for actually *learning* creativity that this hybridised teaching strategy affords:

'Initially I was sceptical about how this process would help to inform my design process and admit that I missed the link between the activity and the site being a place of creative thinking and performance ... I failed to understand that by having a freedom of thought and expression in a manner not normally undertaken by landscape designers was a good way to kick-start this process and make me better able to understand the types of activities that occurred on site. It wasn't until I had completed the installation processes and started to explore options for a big idea did I realise that I could think back and draw upon this abstracted form of thinking to help my design process' (Student c. Email July 27, 2016).

This student's landscape intervention took the form of five installations around which he guided the class group while telling the story of the works' genesis. It was the story of someone who had no idea what to do, and so who repeatedly visited and walked around a landscape, seeking some kind of idea. He began to notice where his path of movement flowed easily, and where it became stuck, and so he re-presented this journey in a series of five 'footprint' installations, and performed it as a 'walk' (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Student c Performing His Landscape Intervention. Image: Satherley, 2015.

Combining this embodied creative experience with his knowledge of the landscape's electricity-generating past, the student developed a design concept titled 'Transmission' (Figure 5), proposing a plan to draw creative energy out of the main Powerhouse building and circulate it around the landscape. It capitalises on areas where this energy can flow easily, and unblocks areas where it can potentially get 'stuck'.



Figure 5. Student c Design Concept (detail). Image: Student c, 2015.

This evolved into a final site plan in which creative sophistication was well integrated with a highly resolved degree of clever functional design (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Student c Site Plan (detail). Image: Student c, 2015.

This student's initial (unconsciously) performative inhabitation of this landscape was the genesis of his creative incorporation of new meanings within it. His *process* was itself the primary authentic learning; his representations of this learning – the intervention and design drawings – captured and communicated only *some* of its richness. This year, the student

himself suggested to me that he might attend the new class of 'ReGenerate Studio#3' students, and talk to them about what he learnt through this process of creative landscape intervention, because, as he wrote to me:

'In hindsight, I think that if I better understood the link at the time I would have had a lot more fun with the process. I can see now that the outcome of my final design can be traced back to this initial phase and I am sure that without this seed being planted my ideation and design generation process would have been less creative and a more technical response to the brief' (Student c. Email July 27, 2016).

Conclusion

In a professionally accredited course like a Landscape Architecture degree there is a need to ensure the imparting of core technical discipline knowledge and skills such that students can be considered professionally competent. However, part of professional competency is arguably also the capacity for creativity, a harder 'skill' to teach and assess in a learning outcomes focussed teaching model which emphasises the assessment of representations of learning, rather than the processes of learning.

The hybridised teaching experiment being undertaken in the ReGenerate Studio is clearly appropriate to landscape design within an arts venue such as the Brisbane Powerhouse, but is also potentially transferable to other landscape typologies and design briefs. This experiment with creation through landscape *inhabitation* is demonstrably affording our students genuinely authentic learning experiences, enabling them to embrace and integrate the creativity, as well as the pragmatics, of landscape architectural design.

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