# ‘I like the sound of falling water, it’s calming’: Engineering sensory experiences through landscape architecture


## Abstract

Post-industrial wastelands have been given increased attention by landscape architects since the late 1990s. Through their redesign, landscape architects argue that the sensory qualities of wild nature benefit people’s health and well-being and improve the urban ecosystem. In this article, I argue that such landscape designs mark a shift from designing nature as such, to designing the *sensation of nature*. By following discussions within cultural geography on landscape design, affect and emotion I scrutinise how landscape design orchestrates the sensation of nature. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in two recent landscape designs—the ‘High Line’ in New York City and the Copenhagen plaza ‘Under the Crystal’—I show how the landscapes orchestrate sounds, smells, tactilities and views by accommodating seasonal change, succession, local weather conditions and by staging elements such as plants, water, fauna and the sky. The engineering of such natural processes and sensory qualities is argued to complicate the ways landscape design mediates sensory experiences and performative practices in the city. I therefore call for geographers to pay greater attention to the subtleties that lie in such orchestration, in order to better account for the ways that landscapes come to produce their affects.



*Keywords*: landscape architecture, performativity, landscape urbanism, affect, sensory experience, High Line, Under the Crystal.

## Introduction

Historically, urban green spaces have provided Western cities with open areas where people can relax and enjoy vistas. To employ an old analogy, green spaces function as the 'green lungs' of the city, providing both the breathing spaces for the urban population and ecological biotopes for the 'natural environment.' Geographers have been instrumental in theorising notions of landscape[1] and relating processes of urbanisation to the production of designed landscapes within the urban structure.[2] Particularly, social and cultural geographers have argued for understanding landscape architecture and design as emblems of socio-spatial control and circumscription.[3] By introducing the concept of 'urban nature' geographers have brought attention to the processes through which 'nature' is reworked through material and social processes in the urban setting.[4] Such concerns for the production of landscapes and 'urban nature' therefore question what the landscape is but furthermore how it works; they call for 'a shift from the analysis of what things represent or mean to how they work and produce their effects'.[5]

This article aims to respond to such a call by accounting for the embodied experiences and performative practices of two contemporary landscape designs: the High Line in New York City, and Under the Crystal in Copenhagen. These designs are interesting as they illustrate a recent trait within landscape architecture known as landscape urbanism. Focussing in particular on the redesign of post-industrial wastelands and unused pockets in the urban structure, landscape urbanism aims at redesigning such wastelands into eco-friendly spaces for public leisure, foregrounding the landscape design as a 'sustainability fix' that inspires economic growth *and* improves ecological urban conditions.[6] Proponents for the landscape urbanist approach argue that the landscape provides 'a medium uniquely suited to the open-endedness, indeterminacy, and change demanded by contemporary urban conditions…a model for process'.[7] A core concern for landscape urbanists is therefore the belief that the landscape design can embrace the challenges faced in the contemporary post-industrial urban condition by bringing people into a more intimate relation with the 'natural' processes of shift and change.

A growing body of literature within cultural geography has paid attention to how the 'aesthetic/affective effects'[8] of spatial design 'engineer' visitors' experiences. This is evident in the (post)phenomenological studies of libraries,[9] airports,[10] shopping malls,[11] high-rise buildings,[12] landscape architecture,[13] and gardens.[14] Finding inspiration in discussions around the ability of design to edify social practices,[15] and for social practices to circumvent designed affordances,[16] this article scrutinises landscape designs, by paying attention to the instruction and engineering of sensations and affects. The main aim of the paper is to present a geographical critique of how landscape designs are claimed to embrace natural processes and function as media that in open-ended, indeterminate and unforeseeable ways enable residents to develop more intimate ways of relating to the landscape and to themselves. This is done through two ethnographic vignettes that take account of the ways sensory experiences and embodied practices are instructed through choreographed and orchestrated engagements with seasonal change, the weather, falling water, and the sky. Through these ethnographic accounts, it is argued that the sensory and performative affects of such landscape designs are not as professed, open-ended and

indeterminate, but rather channelled into specific, purified sensory engagements with a sanitized version of 'nature'.

Rather than presenting a case comparison, the choice of cases aims to scrutinise similarities *despite* diverging aesthetic expressions, geographic locations and local climates. The first case is the elevated park, the High Line, in New York City, designed by landscape architects James Corner Field Operations (James Corner), designer Piet Oudolf, and architects Diller + Scofido & Renfro (DSR). The High Line is a former freight train corridor, cleaving its way down Manhattan's West Side. After its abandonment in 1982, it was left unused and was overgrown by plants. Amidst discussions about its future use throughout the 1990s, support was mobilised for it to be redesigned into a public park. The first of three phases opened in 2006, and the last section was completed in 2013. The park stages a luscious imitation of the 'wild nature' replete with 'pioneer species' such as *Ailanthus Altissima* (Tree of Heaven) and *Betula populifolia* (Grey Birch) that spontaneously set root on the tracks in its process of dereliction. The park provides Manhattanites with 2.33 km of elevated walkway, dispersed resting places, and views over Manhattan and the Hudson River.

The second case is the plaza Under The Crystal, by the harbour front Kalvebod Brygge in Copenhagen, designed by landscape architects Stig L. Andersson Architects (SLA) in 2009. The plaza, provides a 4,500 square metre publicly accessible space, allowing the Danish bank Nykredit's iconic headquarters building – The Crystal – to present itself unhindered while also providing views towards the harbour. The square is sparsely decorated, only with nine light masts, three benches, 11 trees and a 10 cm deep pond. However, from April to November the plaza 'comes alive' as 2,475 vessels that are sunk into grills in the ground create a total of 540 metres of vertical water walls that traverse the plaza in 10 rows, turning on and off in sections of varying heights of up to two metres. The design aims to create a transparent space, yet is replete with stimulating elements such as water, mist and lighting.

In the following section, the article situates the landscape architectural approach within wider trends in landscape architecture. I then turn to post-phenomenological debates within cultural geography before presenting the two vignettes that draw on ethnographic research carried out in the spaces from September 2012 to April 2013. In concluding the article, I present the main findings and discuss the implications for geographical studies of landscape architecture.

## The sensation of nature: landscape architecture and urbanism

Frederick Olmsted or Calvert Vaux's 19th-century designs of parks, such as Central Park in New York, were born out of a need to provide breathing spaces for the growing urban population as industrialisation and rapid urbanisation increased pressure on Western cities. Such parks were hallmark designs as they placed the landscape as the medium through which answers to urban pressures were provided, aiming to make visitors 'feel as though they were in an unspecified and unbounded natural setting',[17] offering 'an escape from the city, not connection to it'.[18] In addition to the belief that the park could ameliorate the industrialising metropolis, Matthew Gandy argues that Olmsted's vision reveals a desire to extend 'nineteenth-century conceptions of bourgeois domesticity into a public realm.'[19] Urban parks are argued to develop alongside the rise of a modern

conception of the self; an autonomous self, superior to and separate from 'nature'[20]. Providing 'fresh air' to the urban populace was not solely related to the creation of cleaner, more sanitary urban environments, but was 'as important as improving the populace as such' and therefore wielded an interest in shaping 'new identities for a newly annexed population.'[21]

Today, such a vision of the city – containing spaces of recreation to ensure a productive and healthy workforce – sounds familiar. Much of contemporary landscape design is inspired by Olmsted's 19th-century vision,[22] yet differentiates by adopting a broader interest in ecology. Landscape architects today, propose a harmonious relation to 'nature' and foreground not an idealised vision of a picturesque nature but rather the 'neglected, marginal, interstitial and stigmatised elements of the landscape'. [23] It is argued that 21st-century landscape architecture acts as a corrective force to the 'purported failure of traditional design practices',[24] while also paying attention to ecological pressures such as heat island effects, physical degradation, soil contamination, and decreasing air quality. Often targeting post-industrial wastelands where spontaneous nature has been allowed to set root, contemporary landscape architects recognise the 'restorative social and ecological effects' of such 'wilderness' and 'ecological succession'. [25] According to Gandy the recognition of the sensory and aesthetic qualities of wilderness reveals how 'biodiversity [serves] as an organisational focus for new approaches in urban design.'[26] Wilderness and biodiversity are staged as an 'ecological simulacrum' where the spatial form takes shape through ever changing sensibilities; what Gandy labels 'entropy by design'.[27] In order to understand how contemporary landscape architecture creates such 'entropy by design' I want to turn to the two cases.

Mainly associated with North American landscape design, landscape urbanism is a landscape architectural response to the post-industrial condition, posing the landscape as a medium 'uniquely capable of responding to temporal change, transformation, adaptation, and succession'.[28] Pioneered by Charles Waldheim and James Corner, landscape urbanism is both an intellectual project, professing an ecological advocacy, and a postmodern critique of rationalistic planning and design. The approach emerges out of a wider philosophical critique of modernism, and argues along the lines of flat ontologies that propose 'We have never been human'[29] or, for that sake, 'Modern'.[30] By levelling out of a human/non-human hierarchy landscape urbanists claim to reconceptualise the city not as something that is produced but rather as processually emergent.[31] Corner argues, that such processual understanding of the city allows to conceive of contemporary, post-industrial challenges as hybrids that count 'all life on the planet…deeply bound into dynamic relationships'.[32] The implication of such relational focus lies in conceiving landscape design not as a 'scenographic screening' of architectural spaces, but rather as *the* medium that can bring people into more harmonious living with and alongside 'nature', and *the* model for future cities to evolve.[33] As such, landscape urbanism is concerned less with giving form, than with 'choreographic techniques'[34] that give direction through the ever-changing flux. Acknowledging the agency of weather, animals, plants and bacteria serves as the guiding principle.

Landscape urbanism has been influential outside North American soil, especially on Central and Northern European practices.[35] In the Scandinavian context, SLA landscape architects have been at the forefront, professing what they label 'process

urbanism,' which stresses the hybrid notion of the urban landscape,[36] and encourages a flux-inspired appeal to our senses through changing tactilities and textures. By using ephemeral media such as mist, lighting and smells, their aim is to create a series of kinaesthetic, auditive and visual shifts that stimulate surprising sensory experiences. The approach seeks to offer a more elusive, biomorphic aesthetic that is ever changeable and ever adaptable to shifting weather and climate conditions, also claiming to make visitors relate to natural processes of the environment.[37] By embracing such entropy, and making it the guiding principle for design, the approach marks a focal shift away from designing nature, as such, to designing the *sensation of nature*.

Such a focus on the design of sensory experiences of nature has arisen alongside an increased recognition of the role of 'nature' in promoting human wellbeing in cities. Coming particularly from the scholarly work of environmental psychologists, emotional 'effects' of nature are measured in relation to developing subjective vitality,[38] physical and emotional restoration,[39] or the feeling of relating to nature.[40] While these studies offer insights that can underpin decision-making in urban planning,[41] I argue that such subject-centred accounts are problematic because they assume a division between the material environment and the experiencing subject. I avoid this division by turning towards debates in cultural geography on emotions, affects and performances of landscapes and designed public spaces. A core contribution from the latter writing lies in thinking about landscape not as something humans see 'out there', but rather as a way of embodying the world—or, as John Wylie argues, as 'the entwined materialities and sensibilities *with which* we act and sense'.[42] I argue that understanding the landscape through the body, as the affective domain *with which* we see gives attention to the ways that landscape design 'inscribes social and political power into the landscape.'[43] I want to follow such way of thinking to consider how the *sensation of nature* orchestrates and choreographs particular sensory experiences and performative practices.

## A geographical critique of landscape architecture

Disputing the binary conception of nature and society as separate entities – for example, the tale of human triumph over nature through technological superiority – Marxist and neo-Marxist geographers have shown how complex processes of hybrid metabolisation[44] reinscribe nature as a culturally mediated social construction.[45] Following this approach geographers have scrutinised the role of landscape design in advancing processes of 'ecological gentrification',[46] providing a 'sustainability fix'[47] that promotes entrepreneurial urban development, and serves 'to underpin real estate speculation'.[48] However, Noel Castree criticizes such Marxist approaches for fostering an instinctive suspicion of any talk about nature 'as it really is'.[49] The risk lies in overlooking the ambivalent and complex ways the binary logic of nature/culture is hybridised,[50] and thus in reducing the idea of 'nature' to a material environment acted upon, rather than a world of its own, acted from within.[51]

The recent upsurge of work within cultural geography that looks towards Science and Technology Studies and Actor Network Theory has aimed to address this supposed lack of attention towards the agency of nature. With an aim to 'reinterpret the role of nature in cities',[52] the relational approach pays heed to the agency of nature and ecology in developing 'a politics for urban wilds',[53] which promotes a more representative politics

of nature while also paying attention to 'the practices involved in *doing* urban greens, …the unspoken, the embodied, and the relational acts that make conservation, cultivation and so on possible.'[54] Such human-plant relations have particularly been given attention by 'authors writing under the umbrella of plant geographies',[55] seeking to 'trace the wider, unstable performances of power that reconfigure the ways in which we understand our gardens'.[56]

The agency of the material and non-human realms is likewise gaining recognition in non-representational studies of landscape and garden design within geography. Notably, Thrift studies the garden not simply as a product of human design, but instead as an accommodation of the 'shift and change' of the natural environment, expressing the 'unbounded…flow of life'.[57] He acknowledges that the designer can enhance, transform and circumvent the *atmospheres* of places in ways 'to better capture and even produce affect'.[58] Gernot Böhme also recognises this when arguing that garden design reveals how 'a certain quality of feeling can be produced through the choice of objects, colours, sounds etc.'[59] While the staging and choreography of a landscape scene can seem causally instructive, the point lies in considering how the affective domain of such a landscape situation emerges as 'provisional and unstable' and 'made up of material objects, living things, *and natural processes'*.[60] When I conceive landscape architecture as unstable and provisional I therefore wish to acknowledge the space as agentic, in the sense that it can 'produce relational sensibilities'.[61]

As argued by Ash Amin and Thrift 'a series of practical spatial arts—stage practice, film set-ups, choreography, *landscape design*',[62] allow 'human beings to influence their own body states.'[63] With its enhanced focus on creating sensory experiences that bring people into closer connection with the natural processes of urban nature, contemporary landscape design can be argued to induce such 'enhanced stimulus to the body…to transfigure viewers by bringing them into intimate relation with these spaces.'[64] Sensually the design 'bring[s] out an affective response…a way of being that can evoke a feeling of openness and inclusiveness'.[65] Yet, John Allen reserves suspicion for such supposed inclusiveness and openness; he argues it expresses an ambient, phenomenological power, which transparently *seduces* visitors to feel the space 'through the invitation to mingle, circulate and inhabit.'[66] Peter Kraftl and Peter Adey similarly argue that spatial design 'attempt to stabilize affect, to generate the possibility of precircumscribed situations'.[67] I want to follow Allen's scepticism towards claims made by designers to promote openness through design, and apply such scrutiny to the design principle of 'sensation of nature'. To do this Kraftl and Adey helpfully argue that spatial design practices are put to work in an affective domain that '*is* political or ethical… [because] the invocation of affect is a powerful force for intervention'.[68] Therefore, I wish to explore the ways that affects on the High Line and on the plaza, Under the Crystal produce a range of possible, yet scripted sensations and actions. The design practice therefore becomes a 'collection of possible points upon which … bodily action may operate'.[69] The potentiality of bodily operations sits well with Wylie's conception of the landscape not as produced, but rather actualised through embodied engagement with the materialities and sensibilities *with which* we see; a formulation that lends itself to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's recognition of the sensory qualities of the world existing outside the body, becoming 'that *with which, according to which*, we see'.[70] The

(post)phenomenological approach considers the affective domain of a designed space as something existing in and of itself, yet, actualised through embodied, sensory and performative engagement. When considering how landscape designs come to produce their effects, I therefore turn towards the embodied and performative engagements with the landscape situation in order to account for the ways affects are stabilised; and, in the case of landscape architecture, how *sensation of nature* engineers an 'open-ended-stability'.

The epistemological task of studying such spatial affects has been widely discussed within the emerging body of work that explores the performed and embodied experiences of urban spaces.[71] In particular, ethnographic approaches have made use of multiple methods ranging from auto-ethnographic studies, participant observation and walk-along style interviews. Following relational perspectives, it is argued that it is not simply enough to ask what a place *is*, but rather 'what it is like for you, for them, for now, and for then.'[72] In studying how people experience the two spaces, I have systematically observed people and typified dominant practices of the space. Rose, Degen and Basdas argue that walk-along interviews allow researchers 'immediate and intensive access to very detailed ways of seeing, talking, touching, hearing – thus accessing the feel of place to participants'.[73] Following this line of thought in gaining 'intensive access' to people's 'feel of place' I undertook semi-structured, survey-style interviews with 15 people at each site as they visited the space, some being stationary and others on the go, asking people about their reason for being there, having them describe what they had been doing or currently were doing there. However, as I am interested in the embodied and performative orderings of the spaces, I do not want to argue that people's responses are 'clear, if often emotional, opinions delivered to the interviewer [sic.] in unambiguous ways…taken at face value by [the] researcher [sic.]'.[74] Rather, I aim at reiterating Van Maanen's point of comparing observational and presentational data, crafting a weaving movement between observations and statements.[75]

## The High Line

The re-design of the High Line was driven by a wish to maintain the 'wild nature' that grew prior to the design, retaining the 'Alice in Wonderland experience'[76] of being 'in another world'.[77] The design team aimed to preserve the look of the elevated rail line before reconstruction but, as Corner argues, not in the form of preserved nature, rather as 'transformed nature'.[78] DSR claim their translates the 'biodiversity that took root after [the High Line] fell into ruin in a string of site-specific urban microclimates'.[79] These microclimates entice an atmosphere of 'the intimate, and the social',[80] which guides people away 'from the frenetic pace of the city to the slow otherworldly landscape above.'[81] Through choreographing 'access points [that] are durational experiences designed to prolong the transition'[82] from street to park, DSR reveals a preoccupation with (slowing down) speed and (extending) temporality. The slower pace of this 'textured, "pathless landscape where the public can meander in unscripted ways'[83] aims to compensate for the heavily scripted linearity of a pathway oscillating between nine and 18 meters in width. By stimulating perceptive engagements in ways that are supposedly open-ended and 'unknown', DSR contends that rather than giving clients what they demand, it aims at showing 'what their desires really mean'.[84] Thus, the site-specific

urban microclimates provide the medium for people to experience what they are not consciously aware of desiring.

*'Even though it is designed you kind of get the feeling that you are seeing the hand of God'*

The most remarkable feature of the High Line is undoubtedly its elevation, hanging in mid-air, inspiring an escape from the sidewalk while providing vistas over the city to the East and the river to the West. Swarms of people move along the stretch, taking in the vistas and performing a modern urban ballet; a spectacle reminiscent of the 19th-century *flâneur*, wandering the streets of the metropolis, but infused with the modern day middle-class, globetrotting tourist. People stroll up- or downtown, cross-cutting traffic junctions, released from noise, stress, hustle and bustle.

As Christoph Lindner argues that the High Line interrupts the accelerated everyday in New York by producing a landscape of slowness and respite from the city, yet in doing so predicates on 'the culture of speed it resists'.[85] A vast amount of the visitors are, as I myself was, tourists visiting the park along other iconic New York sights with cameras shooting away at the views of the city as family or friends pose along with wide, bright smiles. Yet, 'local' New Yorkers also frequent the space, using it either as a short cut on their way to, or from, meetings and work, or as leisure space on afternoons and weekends. At times the hordes of people can make it difficult to pass through the narrower stretches of the park, slowing down the pace of 'commuters'. The pace up here is different, and the slowness allows for a different way of walking the city.

A tourist from Utah in his late 60s explained how the park allowed him to 'get out of traffic…free from the stress, you can see the city from above… here we can stop and look, yeah dwell at details that catch our eye.' Similarly, a visiting male couple from Boston in their mid-30s, one of whom used to live in the Meatpacking district, explain how they 'get to see and get around the city in a new way, literally…if we were walking down there [pointing towards the street below] we wouldn't get to see any of this, and wouldn't notice these views of the city.'

The choreographed view-points direct visitors towards what the same couple termed as 'tableaus of the city', inspiring city gazing while also serving as the backdrop for taking 'selfies'. This is most blatantly staged by the big core-ten steel frame, luminously glowing at night overlooking West 26th Street, inviting people to frame the scenic image of the cross-way. People often stop or guide their partners to pose in front of the frame, immortalising the moment for the family album. Equally, the transparent glass bays placed at the foot of the amphitheatre-like benches overlooking the traffic on 10th Avenue, frame the chaos below as if seeing it from inside a water tank, cancelling out the noise, smell and rush of the traffic, reducing it to a mere movement of visual images. While the framing of the surrounding environment suspends the park from the 'normal city' below, the sensory attunement is not cut off from the surroundings. As Andreas Wesselman argues, the park 'does not completely or radically depart from the metropolis below'.[86] Rather, visitors are (constantly made) aware that they are in an 'unnatural' natural space.

Staging wild nature in luxuriantly growing flowerbeds, small forests and patches of ornamental grasses creates a varied landscape of surprises. People are 'drawn towards,' and 'astonished' by the plants and beds, demonstrating a conscious awareness of the

mimicked wilderness 'as if it were in a museum', iterating the joy of seeing something wild, yet controlled. Gandy argues that such 'ecological simulacrum' presents a form of 'neo-pastoral urban spectacle' where the juxtaposition of the wilderness against the urban form produces a unique 'wasteland aesthetic'.[87]

The aesthetic is amplified by the variegated smell-scape of blooming flowers and birch pollen during spring, and swamp-like green patches and decaying grasses and weeds during fall, underpinning a visceral feel of the seasonal change. As the fieldwork extended through the mild Indian summer into autumn and ultimately winter, people's attention never waned. Spring's bloom descends into autumn's foliage and by winter the colourfully changing patchworks are transformed into a landscape of trees and bushes that protrude as naked, sculptural elements. With the seasonal change 'there is always something to look at'. A sensory experience of succession that a male couple remarked: 'even though it is designed you kind of get the feeling that you are seeing the hand of God, the hand of nature'.

The conscious illusion of an unnatural naturalness, is highlighted by 40cm high evergreen stick-and-thread-fencing, guarding off beds from visitors, protecting the cracks between the concrete slabs where the different grasses are supposed to grow wildly. Signage alerts visitors to 'Protect the plants: Stay on the path': performatively instructing a certain social order. What the signage invokes is—amongst other things—the sense that everything is to be looked at and smelled *at a distance*[88]. When considered against the staged vistas it becomes evident how the sensory experience of the space is controlled and maintained in a distanciated and purified manner. Such sensory purification resonates with John Urry and Jonas Larsen's point that, in much theming of designed (tourist) spaces, vision is 'reduced to a limited array of features … then exaggerated, and finally come[s] to dominate other senses. Offensive smells are eliminated and reduced to a light deodorized breeze.'[89] The framing of the gaze can be argued to diminish the sonority, smell and tactility of the city, while inducing a distanciated sensation of views and smells of the park and surrounding city.

Amidst such affective orchestration of sensations and performances, people carry out everyday practices. A distinction must be made between tourists and local residents as the latter seem to use the space as part of everyday life; as a shortcut or a desired diversion for walking to and from work; as they go for a coffee break or lunch; as they come to spend time with kids, friends or partners; or as they come alone to read books or write their diaries. When asked about their routinized use of the park the visitors highlighted the restorative potential of the space as their reason for coming there. As a female New Yorker in her 30s explained while she was on her way home from work, 'It's such a nice way to decompress after work. I find it very soothing to be around the plants'. The soothing experience stands in contrast to the overcrowdedness, and she continues that 'every time I come up here, I don't forget about the crowds' because they 'stop up' or 'move at such slow pace' that she 'can't get by'. While she is annoyed by the 'crowds' of people, she contends that 'I just tell myself to deal with it'; the lowered pace counter—yet do not cancel out—the stress of visiting hordes. The 'restorative' and 'soothing' experience is dependent on her developing a Simmelian blasé attitude; she distances herself from the disturbing elements, and instead finds inner peace. Such emotional performance sits well with what Slavoj □ i□ ek labels the 'Western Buddhist'—

instead of coping with the accelerated everyday, one should "'let oneself go", drift along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference towards the mad dance of accelerated progress'.[90] The co-existence of tourists that crowd the 'pathless' stretch and locals that 'escape' the urban chaos embodies the tension between frenetic capitalist dynamics and inner peace. This point resonates with the ambivalence that Lindner argues characterises the High Line: while the slowness of the landscape aims at repudiating the accelerated urbanism of globalization, the landscape design simultaneously sustains such acceleration by immersing visitors in the city.[91]

Visitors are made to behave like they were visiting a sensorily engaging museum, where plants and surroundings are only to be looked at and enjoyed as aesthetically pleasing pieces of art. Such a way of orchestrating subjects through landscape design resonates with Ulf Strohmayer's point about 19th-century park construction in Paris, as it reflected 'the rise of an increasingly leisure-conscious bourgeoisie in the move away from the use of parks for representational purposes to a more inclusive and (crucially) edifying purpose'.[92] In very much the same way, the modern urban dweller's hunger for respite from a hectic lifestyle, for sensory stimuli and places of consumption, can be understood as a shift towards landscapes serving a performative and sensory structuring purpose.

## Under the Crystal

In a far less crowded city, Under the Crystal appears to have almost no resemblance to a 'natural landscape'. The aesthetic and programmatic expression is not comparable to the 'unnatural naturalness' of the High Line, crafted 'like the hand of God'. Under the Crystal does not look like nature, it is only sensed as such; its program is sensation.

The harbour front in Copenhagen has experienced waves of redevelopment since the 1990s, with banks such as SEB and Nykredit recently building local headquarters. In order to obtain planning permission the developers had to include public realm spaces, and for the SEB and Nykredit's domiciles, SLA provided the landscaping. The local planning authority specified that for Under The Crystal, 'lighting fixtures and other equipment as well as vegetation must be placed as to sustain the views towards the harbour entrance.'[93] Therefore, SLA developed a program sparse with equipment, presenting a plain surface of Norwegian slate perforated by water-jets that create a transparent landscape of inter-changing shapes. That is, when they are turned on from April to November. According to SLA the water jets provide a 'sensory supplement'[94] to the city where the 'trickling walls of vertical water…create areas for resting and letting out energy.'[95] Through an 'interplay with the wind',[96] the landscape choreographs ever-changing shapes and soundscapes, varying from trickling sounds to shattering noise, cancelling out the traffic noise from the adjacent throughway. The Project Director of SLA, Rasmus Astrup argues, the outcome of the sensory experience is not predefined: 'it doesn't even have to be healing…It has to speak to you.' This approach bears similarities to DSR's vision of providing a pathless and open-ended landscape situation, yet in what appears to be a looser knit design programme.

### *The landscape as void*

A remarkable feature of the plaza is the vast openness and emptiness during winter when the water jets are turned off. The space seems barren and cold as the heavy, grey slate

surface lets wind gusts pick up speed and leaves passers' by exposed to showers. The weather conditions are allowed to affect visitors, as the design itself blends into the background of the urban scene, almost hiding itself.

During the 'off-period' people mostly pass through, with peaks in the morning, during lunch breaks and in the afternoons. It is mainly people wearing suits or dresses, and shiny shoes, with briefcases, lunch boxes or stacks of papers in hand, rushing along the outer perimeter of the plaza. This pattern is only broken once 'other' visitors pass through, such as kindergartens on excursions, dog walkers and families, skate boarders or BMX riders, or tourists. In conversation with the visitors during 'off-periods' the plaza is described as 'sterile', 'empty', 'boring' and 'clean' and lacking life. It is almost defined by the *lack* of qualities, rather than existing qualities.

However, the ways in which people who rush past in the windy rain, holding their blazers tight across the chest, shielding their face with whatever they have in hand, indicate that such a lack allows the changing weather to take centre-stage. People highlighted this in conversation. For instance a woman in her late 40s, who had never seen the place before, and passed by, explained that the open space 'just made me look up, and see the building and this vast space…its openness'. She further commented that the building 'reflects the sky', and that she 'can feel or sense the sky more intensely in the glass'. At Under the Crystal the openness is sensed because 'the sky and the water from the harbour are pulled in'. These sensory qualities of the surrounding elements are 'pulled in' due to the lack of actual stimulants in the landscape, due to the void-like character. As Gandy argues, the concept of the void has 'created ripples through architectural thought'.[97] Malene Hauxner argues it threads back to the 1990s when landscape design embraced the emptiness of spaces, letting it stand out in order to allow for a more intense experience of the landscape: 'we are dealing with realisation of the landscape situation that becomes even more comprehensible.'[98] The design thus conceived not only aims at making natural phenomena sensible, but also comprehensible.

The space altogether changes as the water jets are turned on during summer months as the central area of the plaza is constantly wet. Greatly helped by the milder weather conditions, the amount of visitors increases, yet people still move along the edges of the plaza, avoiding the chance encounter with the water jets. Visitors highlighted the qualities of the water and the transformation it provides to the space, emphasising the 'synchronised difference', the 'changing patterns of water' and the 'uncertainty of what might happen' as 'beautiful' and 'stimulating'.

However, some visitors remarked how it didn't matter whether the water jets are on or not. The memories of past experiences and the knowledge that the jets come on, at some point, rests with the visitors, as a conscious awareness of its (absent) presence even during winter. Recall how people avoid the central area, which is wet in the summer, during winter, although it would be quicker to cut across the plaza. The absent presence became clearer as some visitors remarked how the memory of water haunted their experience of the plaza during the winter. As a woman in her late 50s who works close by noted, while routinely eating her lunch on a February afternoon (when the jets were off and snow was falling): 'I just came by and chose to sit here and read.' She explains further that she returns to this place because of its sensory qualities:

> when I think about it I like the sound of falling water, it's calming. But that is only during the summer months that the water and lights are on, but you know, you sort of get used to going certain places, and then you return and use it.

As a sensory ghost sweeping through the space, haunting her sensory registers during the winter months, the sound of falling water makes her sense the space in ways that it presently is not. The sensory attunement to the sounds of trickling and shattering water brings a presence to qualities that are absent.

Furthermore, visitors remarked how the sounds of falling water cancels out 'disturbing' noise and smell from traffic, similar to the deodorized sensations on the High Line. Several people noted how they would take a break there before turning in for a night shift, or before going home. One man in his 50s, working for Nykredit inside the Crystal, described how his daily smoking breaks allows him to 'watch life' as people come to play in and enliven the fountain and jets. These views, he continues, are 'relaxing for me, and it's part of my daily routine'. But this routine is not simply a pastime amusement: 'if I sit and juggle with problems, I can go down, take a break and get inspired. Inspired to deal with the problem, or just carry on.'

Akin to the 'soothing' experience of visiting the High Line as part of a daily routine, Under the Crystal induces sensations that provide a momentary break for its visitors. People are not required to 'deal with the crowds' in the same way as visitors do on the High Line, but the routinized use of the space to take a break before or during shifts invokes a different version of the 'Western Buddhist'. The visitors do not develop a Simmelian blasé attitude, distanciating themselves from the everyday, but break up the everyday in order to carry on with the demands of work.

## On design and mediation

The two vignettes have shown how the respective landscape designs produce sensory experiences and performative practices; they are the media that instruct, choreograph and stage natural processes such as seasonal change and the agentic capacities of weather, water, sky and plants. The point I want to raise is that when paying attention not to what people see, but how the landscape instructs performances and experiences, becoming that with which they see, feel and act, geographers are able to gain an understanding of how 'nature' functions 'as it really is'. The post-phenomenological approach directs the researcher towards a critical study of the agentic qualities of natural processes *and* the ways in which such processes are instructed through design.

One could argue, that geographers should take Hinchliffe et al.'s call for acknowledging the agency of nature seriously,[99] and follow Bruno Latour's slogan-like call for scientists to 'multiply…agencies to account for the complexity, diversity, and heterogeneity of action.'[100] It is not simply designed objects like benches and stairs that 'act' on behalf of the designer; we should include weather conditions, seasonal change, and so on. So when accounting for how designs come to produce their affects, the distributed agency must be taken as seriously as design intentions. This does however not mean that design intentions are rendered obsolete, but rather, that critics should acknowledge the role of different actors. As Latour further argues '[f]or a haute couture seamstress, it is not the same to cut through thick and shiny velvet or to be said to make "social distinction" visible'.[101] In a slight alteration we could state: for the landscape

urbanist, choreographing landscapes is not the same as instructing bodies into self-coping individuals who instead of dealing with a problem distanciate themselves from it and simply 'deal with it'. Similarly, designing landscapes is not the same as promoting gentrification of areas or displacing marginalised social groups.[102]

However, the sensory experiences in both cases do have very particular affective and performative effects. In the two vignettes, I have shown how the seemingly loose instruction of contingency scripts very specific sensations, practices and experiences, eliciting a form of open-ended stability. And this open-ended stability is exactly what beckons geographers to critically unfold how ephemeral media are instated as the medium with which and according to which we see, feel and act, if their research is to account for how landscape designs 'really' work—in this paper, I have shown how the post-phenomenological approach offers a pathway for doing so.

## Conclusion

As landscape architecture historically has figured as a corrective force to the accelerated reality of industrialising cities, this article has paid attention to how contemporary landscape architects respond to the post-industrial condition. Identifying the challenges posed by the emergence of derelict and degenerating urban wastelands, such a response targets, on the one hand, the ecological pressures such as heat island effect, soil contamination, and decreasing air and water quality, and on the other hand the increasingly accelerated everyday for urban dwellers. Proposing the landscape as a model for building sustainable future cities—for the environment *and* its citizens—contemporary landscape architecture foregrounds a turn to natural processes as guiding principles for design, and sensory experiences of such very same processes as the aesthetic apogee.

By focussing on the *sensation of nature*, the two landscape designs that have been put under scrutiny in this article were examined through a lens of post-phenomenological geography. I argued that bodies are choreographed into more intimate relations with the landscape, invoking variations of the Žižek's 'Western Buddhist': people are invited to maintain an inner distance to the accelerated demands of their everyday, dealing with problems by enjoying the soothing and calming effects of sensory immersion. On the High Line visitors discovered new *views* of the city, new ways of *performing* it in conjunction with seasonal change, offering soothing and restoring breaks. The immersion in the weather conditions at Under the Crystal, enables visitors to see the sky, feel the wind, rain and water, even when it is not there, providing calming breaks that allow some to cope with problems. With reference to the choreography of a self-coping individual, I argue that despite claims for suggesting open-ended, indeterminate and unforeseeable experiences, the landscape design stabilises affects and guides people towards very particular sensations. By paying attention not to what visitors see, but to how the landscape situation instructs that with which they see, feel and do things I argue that geographers can develop sensitivity towards how the affective domain of landscape design is shaped through design but also through the agency of weather and natural processes.

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