02. THE SITUATION

One

Philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers advances the need to uncouple “the analytical approach” from “the scientific view of the world.” Analysis in her view is a question of asking the right questions rather than distinguishing between objective truth and arbitrary decision (Stengers 1997: 4-5). As a scientist Stengers is permitting us to tease analysis away from reductionism, and to accept the advantages of an analytical method in the light of the possibility that it may directly contradict the generalization of reductionism. For landscape architects wishing to found their analysis of a complex landscape situation on something more useful than the reductive measures of normative science or on intuition or freeform interpretation, Stengers’ work conjures up an interesting and relevant possibility.

Two

According to Webster’s Dictionary, analysis is the process of breaking a complex topic or substance into smaller parts in order to gain a better understanding of it. The word comes from the Greek analasis, “a breaking up” which brings together the root words “and” meaning “up” and “lyein” meaning “loosening.” It implies the separation of a whole into its component parts, or the “examination of a complex, its elements and their relations.” It does not imply that the behavior of the whole system can be understood by an examination of its parts. Analysis, which can be conducted conceptually, linguistically, manually, or with a device, is a crucial part of landscape design. The question what to “loosen up” may seem to come before the question how we “loosen up,” and yet these are two sides of the same coin. Of special significance are the relationships between people and the dynamic conditions that they create and inhabit. Close observation of behavior is necessary. What are the specific assemblages that comprise these human-nonhuman interactions? How do we find this out?

Three

In landscape architecture we have to take account of the immersion of humans and nonhumans in the environments that support and maintain them, and determine how these environments are continually transformed on the basis of this immersive condition. The actors in any system, say, a neighborhood, that is far-from-equilibrium, represent what Stengers calls “fluctuations.” That is to say they are responsible for the uncontrolled variability of individual behaviors and may play a role in changing what she calls “the macroscopic regime” of the situation. These fluctuations emerge from a background noise that may or may not be important. The designer needs to know with respect to the noise what is significant and what is not. The people in a community may be particularly sensitized to a political discourse that affects the potential futures of the community. Whether this discourse will have an effect is largely decided through the collective regime of activity, which ultimately decides what is insignificant noise and what must be taken into account. We do not know a priori what a neighborhood community can do, and when it is far-from-equilibrium, which is most of the time, we cannot tell once and for all the difference between what must be taken into account and what we can ignore. Furthermore, the collective learns, and changes as a result. It is a moving target. Its emergent effects continually alter the composition of the situation. Other actors in the system, such as the community organizations that provide the funding for landscape projects, and the school system that wishes to be involved, as well as the polluted creek that runs through the community park, are all players in the game.
Four

Kristina Hill draws attention to the variability of readings of nonhuman species existing within situations. She gives the example that mowing a meadow in spring, when juvenile mice are dispersing may, in the absence of tall grasses, make these young animals more visible to hawks. “On the other hand an insect that lays its eggs in the meadow may find its population maintained if the meadow is not mown until summer, after its eggs have hatched and the insects have developed wings to fly away” (Hill 2005:147). What we have is a complex system. It is not possible, or at least it is dangerous, to isolate these players in order to deal with them. Kay calls this suboptimization. “When one part of a system is optimized in isolation, another part will be moved farther from its optimum in order to accommodate the change. Generally when a system is optimal, its components are themselves run in a suboptimal way” (Kay 2008: 19). And Stengers warns: “…isolation is a dangerous game, and those who believe they can purify their objects in fact intervene actively in the significance of the object they observe” (Stengers 1997: 16).

Five

These issues have been raised in order to demonstrate that the analysis of existing conditions within an open system, a system that is continually emergent on the basis of internal and external interactions, requires a special set of tools and procedures. The study of morphogenesis shows that discernible structural and organizational patterns underlie these interactions. When we understand these underlying blueprints we can start to seed processes with catalysts for the development of new patterns and forms. Such understanding involves a letting go of understanding in general and an acceptance of the kind of framed description mentioned in Open Systems. The French philosopher Alain Badiou describes a condition - the situation - that enables us to refine the way we look at terrain. A situation, he says, is

…an ordinary multiple, a multiple that is obviously infinite because all situations in reality are infinite. It can be a historical, political, artistic, or mathematic situation; it can even be a subjective situation. I take situation in an exceptionally open sense, and to capture that openness I say it’s a multiplicity.

(Badiou, 2000: 64n6)

While anything can be a situation - a dream, a farm, a divorce, a stock prediction, a death in the family, a supermarket, a street, a bad hair day, a crime scene - it is the usefulness of the concept for landscape architectural analysis that will occupy us here. Situations come in any modality; they can be necessary, contingent, actual, possible, virtual, potential (Feltham and Clemens 2004: 10). We have seen in the exploration of open systems that a landscape situation is a set of multiples, all of which are composed of further multiples, and all of which can belong to different situations. There is no unified totality that encompasses situations. Their relations are always adaptive and dynamic.

Six

Two types of landscape situation were mentioned in the above list: farm and street. Clearly, humans are involved, but the kind of human involvement that Badiou’s notion entails differs radically from that which appears in most landscape architectural formulations of site. We can see readily how a street is a situation in Badiou’s sense. It is a multiple that participates in other systems through the obvious medium of its role in transportation networks that overlap and interact. A street participates in less obvious systems too, such as the vertical system of a high-rise building. The social meshwork of the street sometimes gives way to a stratified
diagram that structures sociability in the high-rise office tower, however: more than one urbanist has commented on the reduction in ethnic and gender diversity the higher you go in a building. The situation of the street really is, as Badiou describes it, an infinity. In terms of structure the compositional elements of the street are countless: physical, ecological, vegetational, architectural, and material. Then there is its intensive character: comings and goings, speeds and slownesses, temperature gradients, proximities, affordances, not to mention its ability to create human worlds out of the bringing together of bodies and subjectivities that the street so wonderfully makes possible.

Seven

Badiou argues that a situation is a field of murky possibilities in which the human subject may encounter something special, a critical event that disrupts the situation, or transforms it, opens it up to something Badiou calls “truth.” This event is turbulent and unpredictable, and is of crucial significance to the subject, who encounters it as a difficult condition. Think of this. The situation is now more than an externality. You are implicated in it: it is yours. Every situation belongs to, is part of, a human subject’s reality. This is perhaps the most useful aspect of the notion. Human beings are always acting in response to, or in complicity with, a chance event that disrupts their situation, which makes them belong to the situation. When we understand how embedded humans are in situations, and how multiple these situations are - how infinite - we can begin to see how important are the modes of analysis we bring to bear on them. What we need to discover within the situations that we break into smaller parts are the transformational potentials of our own involvement in those situations as designers. The decisions we make as landscape architects have transformational consequences for the situation. Our interventions make a difference to the lived experience of the situation for those whose lives are entangled in it, and in whose lives the situation is itself entangled. It may well be landscape architecture’s emphasis on lived experience that makes the urban field so real and present to its inhabitants. We create the city by discovering both the subjective and the physical material of the urban field and making these the means by which the urban is recovered from its dormancy. Physicality and subjectivity are critical to our experience of experience. This is the message of the situation.

Eight

What urban landscape design can give us is the utter complicity of the situation in the construction of the subject’s lived experience. What is gathered in analysis, how it is gathered and collated, and how it is interpreted, depends on what it is being gathered for, and how it is to be used. Since, in landscape architecture, all data that is used in the design process involves a crucial set of relationships between humans and landscapes, it is important that this relational condition is taken into account in the practice of collection and interpretation. Landscape analysis is often considered to be a combination of the following analytical methods.

Site Reconnaissance

Reconnaissance (literally: recognition) is a military term denoting exploration conducted in order to gain information. It is usually undertaken by scouts or military intelligence soldiers by means of direct observation. Reconnaissance is part of combat intelligence, and contributes to and is managed by, the government-level cycle of intelligence management. It may be compared to counter-intelligence and surveillance, which are the passive gathering of data. Sometimes reconnaissance is used by geologists to refer to “the examination or survey of the general geological characteristics of a region.” The term is also used in computer networking for the exploration or enumeration of network infrastructure.
Site Forensics

Forensics refers to the application of a broad spectrum of sciences to answer questions of interest to a legal system. It encompasses the accepted scientific methodology and norms under which the facts regarding an event, or an artifact, or some other physical item (such as a corpse) are ascertained as being the case. In this regard the concept is related to the notion of authentication, whereby an interest outside of a legal form exists in determining whether an object is what it purports to be, or is alleged as being. Forensics comes from the Latin, where it means “of or before the forum.” In Roman times accuser and accused would put their arguments before a group of public individuals in the forum. The individual with the best argument and delivery would win. This would usually be the person with the sharpest forensic skills. Some forensic techniques (i.e. “scientific methods”) have been found to be questionable. For instance, comparative bullet lead analysis, forensic dentistry (later invalidated by DNA evidence) and fingerprinting. With respect to the latter, a New York Times article recently noted that no one has proved even the basic assumption that everyone’s fingerprint is unique.

Site Surveying

This is the technique or science of accurately determining the terrestrial or three-dimensional position of points and the distances and angles between them, and delineating these on a two-dimensional surface. Often used to establish maps and boundaries, it deploys elements of geometry, trigonometry, engineering, physics and law. The theory and practice of surveying can be widened to include the determination of cultural details above, on or beneath the surface of the earth. Information is gathered through observation, measurements in the field, questionnaires, research of legal documents and data analysis. This information is examined as to its condition, situation, or value. In ordinary parlance the term is widened to include ideas of inspection, appraisal and scrutiny. Accuracy is one of the key components of a survey, as surveys are used to develop architectural and engineering projects on the one hand, and to settle land disputes on the other.

Nine

Landscape analysis, then, combines intelligence gathering (reconnaissance) with accurate measurement (surveying) to present a compelling argument (forensics). It is just this approach that the situation makes inconceivable. What is faithful to the situation cannot be observed, measured or argued for. How might an indivisible condition that reaches through the very boundaries that such analysis erects, become accountable to that analysis? This condition can be captured, to a certain extent, by imaginative drawing, writing, videography and photography, and it is these creative and constructive performativities that must be embraced and used to augment landscape architectural analysis. The Ten Point Guide to Assemblage, below, offers one such situational analysis technique.

Ten

In this way, unhooking the analytical approach from the scientific view of the world, using a wide range of interpretive modalities drawn from design, arts and scientific practices of discovery, we may enter into the situation and determine what may or may not become useful in our design. Its utility, it should be emphasized, is not only discovered but invented again and again through the adoption of different frames of interpretation. What is loosened up is not parts from a whole but events from a situation that is a condition of the framing process that enables it to be apprehended at all. The next Ten Point Guide, Meridian, advances this argument.