

Understanding Green Urban Landscape

– A Phenomenological Approach

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Background and starting points lie in the search for livable environments

A good place for people to be in has aesthetic qualities as well as functional and experiential ones. The prerequisite for our very existence, however, lies in the harmonious co-existence with nature, and the potential to experience nature is a particular quality in the living environment. The benefits of all green and living for human well-being have been discovered in research¹. It is important to provide people with places where this experience is possible, also in the urban setting, by planning and designing urban environments where the green landscape is integrated in a balanced manner.

Often, however, there is a gap between the professional perception of conceptual entities and their experiences on site. The visions, systems and ideas that we draw on maps, do not necessarily embody in the everyday experience of people. For instance, a park system that is intended to be continuous and connected to provide a safe and amiable passage between its parts may be hard to find, to follow, to access. In order to bridge some existing gaps – those between planners' visions and the everyday experience, as well as the ones between praxis, research and art, an approach is needed that aims for a *holistic* understanding. An interest in experience and a search for the core of things lead in the direction of phenomenology. Green urban landscape as a subject matter emerged from my three decades in praxis. The question is: *how can phenomenology be utilized in analyzing and understanding green urban landscape?*

¹ see, for instance, Tyrväinen & Korpela 2009; Grahn & Stigsdotter 2010; Hanski et al. 2012; Dzhambov et al. 2018

Along the process, it was discovered that phenomenology can be used

1. as a theoretical frame of reference, through concepts and ideas of which landscapes and green-blue places can be analysed
2. as inspiration for a descriptive and interpretive research approach and
3. as a methodology, benefiting from various phenomenological methods.

Phenomenology meets landscape analysis

Green Urban Landscape is studied through phenomenological concepts and methods², complementing and integrating them with various other, mainly qualitative methods, such as arts based research. As a result, an idea of the essential aspects in landscapes emerges. Case examples that represent green urban landscapes are shed light on from different angles with different narratives, and each narrative brings out different emphases that enrich the analysis. From an experiential point of view, a series of green urban landscape space, such as a park system, is interesting for the study, as its essential character is to be enjoyed as a pattern of movement and pause. Parks systems or *green areas systems* have *green places* in them, as part of a city's *green infrastructure*.

The *landscape* studied consists of everything that can be sensed, and everything that it consists of, including the underlying mental and physical structures. All kinds of landscapes contain blue, green and grey elements, – water, growing and built things, – to varying extents. All landscapes have natural and human-made elements to them; even a wilderness may have been mapped and preserved by humans. *Green urban landscape* can be what I see from my window in the backyard, defined by the walls of neighboring buildings, or the ‘urban landscape of Helsinki’, for instance. Landscape’s boundaries depend on the context in which we are talking about it.

The purpose is to add to the understanding of green urban landscapes by discussing them in the light of some pivotal phenomenological concepts. In the process of being transferred into the physical world, the concepts are applied to landscape as an object of perception and may transform into phenomenology-informed or –inspired rather than strictly phenomenological.

Essence is a concept introduced by Edmund Husserl³. As opposed to an object (say, a ball, in Sartre’s example⁴), there is no defining character for landscape

² e.g. first-person phenomenological inquiry

³ see Husserl, E., (1901). *Untersuchungen zur Phänomenologie und Theorie der Erkenntnis*. Vol II. In: E. Husserl (1900–1901). *Logische Untersuchungen* and Husserl, E. (1995). *Fenomenologian idea: viisi luentoja*. [Die Idee der Phänomenologie, 1907].

⁴ Sartre, J-P., (2004). *Minän ulkoisuus: fenomenologisen kuvauksen hahmotelma*. [Orig. *La transcendance de l’Ego* 1937], p. 24

in general, other than being a multilayered and dynamic phenomenon, but a *landscape* can have essential characteristics. Landscape is essentially a phenomenon manifesting natural and human-inflicted *processes of becoming* that can be *made visible* by visual and verbal representation.

There are components to landscape that are perceptible by senses, and those only perceived and perceivable by other means – i.e. *visible and invisible* elements. These dimensions are intertwined and interrelated. In this sense the idea is comparable to the phenomenological concepts of visible and invisible as introduced by Merleau-Ponty in 1968, albeit using these reflections of ‘how I am with the world’ as allegories or pathways into ‘how a landscape is’ and how something essential can be seized of it. The representation of ideas in a tangible form and the verbalization of experiences make the invisible visible.

Like landscapes themselves, also *experience* is *temporal* as is our existence. Both the experiences that are instant or immediate and experiences that are shaped by knowledge and require reflection, are considered in the phenomenological approach. Landscape is experienced with all the senses that work together holistically. The physical perception of space is defined by the movement of the body and the sense of gravity. The experience of the environment is defined by interaction – what the surroundings have to offer.

Place as a concept entails a place to be, instead of spaces to go somewhere. The idea of an *existential foothold* entails human intervention in a landscape, and humans turn nature into places by inhabiting it. Heidegger⁵ in fact states that the “fundamental character of dwelling” is “sparing and preserving”. Thus the understanding of *what is and has been* is a basis for imagining what *could and should be*.

Case examples test and develop theory

These concepts are examined further with the help of case examples, mainly the *Boston Emerald Necklace* park system and the Helsinki *Central Park* as part of Helsinki Green Fingers system, which are explored as specimens of green urban landscape to develop the analysis. The narratives include personal experiences, an artistic intervention, historical analysis, a view of a city official containing inevitable self-reflection, and narratives of citizens, academics – and a journalist reflecting on my experience. Documenting others’ experiences always requires interpretation, and historical analysis is similarly an art of inclusion and exclusion.

⁵ in his *Building, dwelling, thinking*. In: M. Heidegger. Poetry, language, thought. 3rd ed. 2013, [orig. 1971], pp. 146–147.

Boston and Helsinki are both on the edge of the sea, veiled by islands on a peninsula, and have their oldest green wedge designed more than a hundred years ago. The researcher's relationship to Helsinki differs from that to Boston, as one of a long time Helsinki resident and insider in the city's landscape planning apparatus, and consequently the main methods of exploration differ as well.

The Boston park system by Frederick Law Olmsted's firm designated in 1894 an interconnected totality of green areas, the heart of which is the Emerald necklace. It makes a series of *places* out of the Muddy river's banks. The plan for the Riverway and Back Bay was ahead of its time in ecological restoration and flood control, as well as in the use of native species, – highly constructed but aimed for a natural look.

In Helsinki, as well as Boston, along with a rapid urbanization and industrialization, philanthropic ideals emerged and a green system was envisioned for the citizens – sustaining all the way into the recent densification. As opposed to one specific plan and designs like the Emerald necklace, the Keskuspuisto Central Park is a result of complex urban planning development, including a number of unrealized plans. Bertel Jung, as a city planning architect, proposed in 1911 a plan for a green wedge, or rather a circular recreational zone for a Central Park, part of which later became the existing Central Park. In the consequent plan by Jung and Saarinen in 1918, this area was diminished and the Töölönlahti bay filled in to create a monumental core. In the following decades, the Green Fingers were conceptualized and strengthened, and Central Park remains the oldest and most defined of them.

In fact, we were probably lucky that there never was enough budget to realize some plans, such as the parking deck included in Alvar Aalto's 1961 visions for the area, – or the monumental avenue proposed in the place of the beautiful and highly popular Töölönlahti bay⁶. The current visions⁷ include the green fingers and blue palm as the backbone of the green areas system, in which each green finger has its own distinct character and Central Park is essentially a Forested Spine from the Outskirts to the City Core.

Narratives of essence and experience – the visible and the invisible in landscapes

To gain insight into other people's experience and preferences about Helsinki green areas, to embody what is essential for citizens, I read the responses of a

⁶ Jung 1911; Smith & Polvinen 1968

⁷ City of Helsinki 2016; Jaakkola et al 2013, 2016

recent public survey⁸ with landscape experiences in mind. The findings suggested the importance of nature as a source of relaxation and beauty, and the significance of the presence of history. Yet, they also pointed out that besides forest, open views are appreciated, and that open and enclosed mixed, and nature and built balanced, are highly regarded qualities. In terms of an idea of essence, the image of a forest that the Central park represents, together with the social and societal characteristics are important for identity. These include democratic ideals, where parks are free and open to everyone.

The only experience we can (mostly) be sure of, however, is our own, and I am also using my own experience as a research medium, besides other methods. One of the ways to study these green places was the performance character *Dis*, my alter ego, dressed in a chartreuse spandex bag and rummaging around. *Dis* is a disruption in space that invites us to notice, to connect. *Dis* and making the film *(Dis)connected*⁹ of her adventures on the Back Bay Fens, became a social experiment, where she tried to contact people to understand them and their experiences of the landscape. She found that Olmsted's original ideals of a place for people, expressed in his writings and designs have not been entirely realized.¹⁰

Based on the findings in the different narratives, an analysis framework was developed. Because the process of becoming is an essential element of the invisible of landscapes, also the process of becoming of the analysis framework itself has been presented as part of the research.

The elements of the essential may reside in things like basic structure (geomorphology, ecology); spatial character (open, enclosed etc.) with skyline, views, orientation; meaning to individuals and recognized values (part of what totality/continuum, association, knowledge, experience, traces of the passing of time – cultural and historic value); functional character – what is the landscape for, including its potential for use, and aesthetic quality/judgment (sublime, beautiful, ugly, striking, insignificant, ordinary etc.).

The iteration of these ideas arrived at a matrix that features the contextual, spatial, material, functional and experiential aspects or elements of the perceptible and imperceptible dimension of landscapes and an interface between

⁸ City of Helsinki, commissioned from Mapita Ltd, (2017). PPGIS Data from Kansallinen kaupunkipuisto Helsinkiin [National Urban Park for Helsinki] -online questionnaire. Survey results from a map based public survey, excel tables.

⁹ Directed by Maria Jaakkola. Filmed and edited by Maggie Janik, on location in Boston and Cambridge, MA, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NP_BuMw9eM

¹⁰ See e.g. Olmsted, F. L., (1852). Walks and talks of an American farmer in England. There are no services to speak of, the northernmost part of the Muddy river is obscured under a highway junction, and the waterscape is hardly accessible. The historic structures are abandoned, but abundant with potential.

them, a conveyor. They together constitute an array of essential dimensions to consider when planning cities and landscapes.

One needs knowledge, expertise and experience to know what to look for and how to read the landscape. For instance, certain spatial and material features in a landscape may tell us about the design ideals or ecosystems. The visible layers of history, such as ancient trees or structures, are perceived and, through knowledge, interpreted to be a part of a certain era and context, while the form of a ridge can describe geomorphology. This is how visible features translate into invisible ones, and vice versa; for instance, when economic and political decisions transform in the planning process into material and functional elements in the landscape.

Why is it important to try to understand landscapes in a holistic way?

Analyzing and trying to understand the invisible realm of stories and experience as well as systems and processes behind a perceptible landscape, making it visible, makes a feedback loop to better planning, design and implementation practices and eventually, the physical reality. By trying to track an essence, something is captured that is essential for the understanding of urban landscapes, instead of settling for their appearance or an illusion of objectivity. In the end, values guide our perception of reality, and they are generated largely through personal experiences. Visions and plans based on values are further interpreted into design actions that for their part shape the reality in which experiences happen.

Because we as humans cannot know of other species' experience, the human perspective is the only one we have available. However, it does not entail a notion that the human is the center of the universe, – quite the contrary. It means that humans are part of the biosphere, of the living world. Our relation to nature should be *living-with*, amongst it, actively living the landscape we inhabit – and relating to it with responsibility and respect. Only then could we reach an involved understanding of its deeper meanings. From knowing, understanding could be derived, and a disconnect might change into a real connection to nature and to other humans, – into a sensitivity for imagining oneself in others' shoes and for understanding the significance of what was before and what may follow, our own history and the processes of nature.