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Jaakkola, Maria (2021). *Understanding Green Urban Landscape – A Phenomenological Approach*. Aalto University publication series 92. Espoo: Aalto ARTS Books.

I will begin my statement by commending and congratulating Maria Jaakkola on this work, which as she has already described is the fruit of over fifteen years of work, thought, research and reflection. It stands today as a significant contribution to contemporary thinking on landscape, and of course in particular green urban landscape. But while the thesis offers a sustained exploration of two such urban green landscapes, it has ambitions for research on landscape that extend beyond this. The thesis wishes to approach the question of what is essential in landscape, and it does so through a combination of approaches and research processes, including phenomenological, visual and creative methodologies.

Landscape is a term and concept that cuts across many domains and disciplines, of course. In the English language it has clear associations with scenery, with the look of the land, and especially with rural and natural scenery perceived as visually attractive. In my own discipline of cultural geography it was once used to indicate the interplay of natural and cultural forces in a given location – so, the landscape as an outcome of human action. This understanding – which clearly differentiates landscape from ‘nature’, while still arguing that natural forces and features are integral to landscape and landscape experience – is also evident, we could argue, in the domains of landscape architecture and urban design – where landscape further designates a specific area of professional expertise. Landscapes are also about power, I would suggest – the power to maintain particular ideas about natural beauty for example, and about who belongs.

At the same time, as the thesis richly examines, landscape has more personal and subjective connotations. The experience of landscape is one of the key things that make us who we are, that keeps us who we are and that enables us to grow and change, as landscapes are woven into the rhythms and habits of our everyday lives. It is difficult to imagine landscape without people, almost a contradiction in terms – as the thesis argues consistently, landscape is a matter of human experience and perception. It is anthropocentric, the thesis states. And precisely because this experience is often ‘invisible’ and

'intangible' in the sense of not being an simple object we can point at and touch, understanding landscape must involve thinking about the interplay between the visible and the invisible.

The articulation of a framework for approaching this visible/invisible structure of landscape is a signature achievement of this thesis. I would predict and hope that this will be taken forward in future work, and also by other researchers and landscape architects in applied domains. The question of how expert opinion and analysis could incorporate modes of knowing landscape that are phenomenological, multi-sensory and creative is a key issue emerging from the thesis.

A significant portion of the thesis is then devoted to considering and discussing phenomenological modes of analysis and understanding. Discussion and elaboration of phenomenological arguments here extends well beyond the second main chapter in which the histories and key branchings of phenomenology are more explicitly introduced, through detailed discussion of concepts including temporality, essence, being and becoming, and dwelling. These discussions are detailed and convincing – and they repeatedly stress the value of phenomenology's insistence upon the importance of the individual's experience of landscape, their involvements with landscape, their embeddedness within landscape. Equally the thesis is well-aware of how phenomenological modes of analysis bump up against limits. This is especially the case in the nuanced discussion in the thesis of essence – or of what is essential to a given landscape. I must agree with Maria Jaakkola that there can be no 'essence of landscape' in general. I am almost convinced that we could identify the essence of 'a' landscape. I am convinced by the thesis, however, that our studies of landscape should aspire to understand what is essential for a given landscape.

But perhaps I am making it sound as though this is a thesis exclusively concerned with philosophical questions. Clearly that is not the case – and at the heart of the thesis we encounter detailed investigations of the two main study sites, Boston and Helsinki. The thesis offers detailed historical reconstructions and analyses of these two sites; alongside in-depth phenomenological encounters with the sites, discussions of public opinion surveys, and of course the creative explorations emergent from the invention of the character of Dis-. At this point I will also note the extensive use, in this thesis, of a variety of visual materials – photographs, maps, diagrams, sketches. These substantially enrich and deepen the reader's experience and sense of connection with both the landscapes themselves and the discussion of them. Perhaps my home discipline of cultural geography tends to be quite

text-focused – but out of the 20+ PhDs that I have examined, this is by some way the most accomplished in its use and incorporation of visual materials, which go way beyond being mere illustrations, being instead active contributions to the arguments of the thesis.

As a side-note, I was struck afresh when reading through the finalised thesis for the second time, by the nature of both the Emerald Necklace and the Helsinki Central Park. These are both greenspaces, clearly, but they are much pathways and networks as they are urban parks. The phrase ‘urban park’ might conjure an image of a delimited area of space surrounded by a built environment. But both of the key examples in the thesis thread their way through the urban environment, changing its qualities as they do so. In this way perhaps their function or even essence is less that of an ‘oasis’ in the city and more an ambition to design and plan a city into which more ‘natural’ elements are integrated. And in this context, the thesis is secure in its analysis and discussion of these landscapes as constellations of activities, rhythms and temporalities.

The discussion chapter and the conclusion which follows are notable for their sustained determination to engage in a process of reflection upon the work, and the elaboration of a finalised visible-invisible framework. The conclusion to the thesis also provides a refreshing and open discussion of issues of practicality and applicability, as we move across academic and professional domains. In another sense, we also end where we began, as the thesis reaffirms its messages concerning the essential need for, and benefits of, green urban landscape experiences.

Key Thesis Topics and Questions Arising:

- How can we understand and explore what is essential for a landscape?
- What is it about modern urban life that makes green spaces in particular essential?
- How can a phenomenological approach inform understanding of landscape, experience and belonging? And how can we ensure that different voices and experiences are heard in landscapes?
- How do inherited cultural values and aesthetic definitions of landscape beauty influence perceptions and plans today?
- How can creative and visual methodologies enhance understanding of landscape? And can they also feed into more official discourses of landscape planning?
- How do concepts of landscape and nature relate to each other?
- Who has the ‘right’ to access landscapes, and how is access and exclusion linked to different cultural and political ideologies?