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^{*)}This is an interview. It has not undergone the same review-process as the scientific papers.

Photo on the front cover: Shelley Smith. *Relief – plaster and pigment*, Shelley Smith.

TRANSFORMING SITE METHODOLOGIES – EDITORS’ NOTES

SHELLEY SMITH, LEA HOLST LAURSEN AND
ANNI VARTOLA

Where we are

This theme issue of *Nordic Journal of Architectural Research* wishes to explore the transformative character of sites in many transformative ways; exploring them through their reading and interpretation, through the analysis of them, as well as examining the editing of sites through intervention and design. The intention is to unfold a many-faceted narrative where the notion of site is seen from a number of different perspectives and through a number of different lenses which was first explored in a seminar and PhD course, *Transforming Site Methodologies* in 2013. This gathering of senior and PhD researchers, and prominent practitioners intended to elaborate on how sites are used, perceived and transformed in contemporary urban design. The content of this issue takes its point of departure from this seminar. The papers and presentations given are represented as an inscription into the current discourse regarding the site as a dynamic and time affected spatiality and as the setting for both analysis and design (Busquets, 2006; 2013; Koolhaas, Mau and Sigler, 1995; Corner, 1999; Burns and Kahn, 2005; Beauregard, 2005; Massey, 1997; Creswell, 2004). When seen as such, the ways in which we deal with sites and contend with their dynamics and complexities, comes into focus as the methodologies utilised in both analysis and design strategies. Thus, the intention for this issue is the investigation of the site in contemporary urbanity and the development of contemporary site methods and methodologies relating to analysis and design strategies. Within the title, *Transforming Site Methodologies*, lays a twofold meaning that encapsulates this intention: firstly, that of methodologies relating to the site that have the ability to transform – to influence the future of the site and be used as a generating tool, and secondly, the underlying need for transformation in the field of site methodologies regarding the ways we work with sites in contemporary urban design.

Encountering many sites

When we see sites as dynamic, complex and altering entities, we need to open our gaze, and not see sites as bounded and finite. Instead, we need to take in all of the potential influences and connections – address the multiplicity of contemporary sites. In this respect, geographer Doreen Massey pleads for a global sense of site; to have a global sense of the local site by understanding sites in relation to other sites (Massey, 1997). Also Burns and Kahn in their 2005 anthology *Site Matters* urge us to not understand sites in isolation. They wish to go beyond the traditional conception of site as an entity demarcated from its surroundings. Sites are much more than boundaries and in order to understand the site we have to see the specific site in relation to larger patterns, orders and systems. Even though Burns and Kahn (2005) challenge the perception of sites in design practice as being demarcated and bounded, they still recognize that sites constitute a physically specific place. This is in turn related to the fact that they look at site as the locality for design.

Returning to Massey (1997) and her global sense of site, there is an advocacy for a sense of site that fits the global-local perspectives characteristic for our time. However, Massey does not claim that sites have no identity, on the contrary she claims that sites may have many identities. Thereby, Massey differs from e.g. Rem Koolhaas who also has a very global understanding of site. Where Massey (2005) talks about many identities derived from different societal relations and their interactions, Koolhaas claims that due to globalisation sites look the same everywhere (Hvattum, 2010). As such, the global sense of site according to Koolhaas is a non-site; a generic site visible all over the globe, which can be coined in the expression that it is only the souvenir at the airport that tells us where we are in the world (Koolhaas, Mau and Sigler, 1995). *In this way*, Koolhaas responds to the post modernistic phenomenological idea of the boundedness of sites, found, among others, in Christian Norberg-Schulz's term *genius loci*. Norberg-Schulz's understanding of *place* was a critical response to the modernist era in which the site was subordinate the building, and thereby urged a return to place-based design (1976). Norberg-Schulz operates with a more static understanding of place as something finished, waiting to be realised through built form. Both Koolhaas and Norberg-Schulz responded to previous directions within architecture and urbanism by introducing an opposing site understanding. Historically, the notion of site in the disciplines of architecture and urbanism seem to have shifted between different responding perspectives.

Today, sites, according to professor in architectural history and theory Mari Hvattum (2010), must be understood as both an existential and aesthetic phenomenon, but never as a finished composition, unable to change.

To understand the site as a dynamic space of negotiation, and not as a static form, can be liberating and contribute to a new interpretation rather than writing off 'sitedness' (Hvattum, 2010, p.42).¹

Thus, the site becomes a factor that influences the development of the same site; implying a changeability and development potential in sites. By exploring the site, we seek to find the potentials that can be used in its transformation. Professor Robert Beauregard says in his paper "From place to site: Negotiating narrative complexity" in the 2005 anthology *Site Matters*, that places are never empty. Sites have an inherent potential that sometimes can be ignored, but that can never be fully erased (Beauregard, 2005), and it is these site characteristics that have a unique potential in the designing and planning of a site. We use the inherent potentials of sites as a decisive element incorporated as an active and acting partner in the development of the site (Stenbro and Christoffersen, 2008). Site-specific potentials are many things and there is not an exhaustive list of the potential a place holds, but among others these can be potentials in the countryside, industry, culture, the people who live there, a geographic location, infrastructure, development, history, etc. (Hausenberg ApS and Realdania, 2008). However, what characterises these site-specific potentials is that they lose value if moved to other sites. Thus, investigating a given site is about finding "...the possibilities of the site that aren't readily seeable, and about diversity, about creating other functions than the already established" (Ringgaard, 2010, p.73) and applying them in the development of the site.² This approach can in many ways be seen as a driving force for this theme issue – because if sites never are empty how can we then actively use the stories and identities that are located within them?

The theme issue content

The content of this theme issue builds upon the content of a combined research seminar and PhD-course, "Transforming Site Methodologies", that was held at the University of Aalborg 26 and 27 September 2013.³ This combined event had a very instructive, constructive and inspiring atmosphere, and hopefully the contagious energy that inspired becomes evident in this expanded written interpretation of the event. Following is an overview of the contributions – comprised of both papers and interviews – found in this theme issue.

The journal leads with a paper by Anne Tietjen, *Teaching site translation – how actor-network theory can inform design education*, which takes its point of departure in the need for new methods to address strategic planning aspects of sites and focusses on research-oriented educational methods. Taking cues from Actor-Network Theory and unfolding within a teaching experiment, this paper explores how the notion of translation can be a framework for site analysis and the subsequent design of sites becoming an integrated and creative process.

1 Own translation – original text:

"At forstå stedet som et dynamisk handlingsrum, snarere end en statisk form, kan være befriende og bidrage til nytolkning, snarere end at afskrive det stedslige."

2 Own translation – original text: "se muligheder ved steder som ikke umiddelbart er til at få øje på, og om diversitet, om at skabe andre funktioner end de fastlagte".

3 *Transforming Site Methodologies* was a seminar and PhD course held at the University of Aalborg 26 and 27 September 2013. During this 2-day event, a list of national and international urban researchers and practitioners visited the research seminar as speakers the first day, while the second day was devoted to the presentation of papers given by PhD students contributing to this field through their current research projects. The event was made possible, and realized, through funding from the Center for Strategic Urban Research and the Utzon X lecture series at Aalborg University.

The contribution from Shelley Smith and Victor Andrade, *Transformative acts through a contemporary lens – developing and exploring design methods*, investigates the challenges facing working with the re-use of post-industrial sites in contemporary urban development, i.e., such factors as temporality, materiality, obsolescence and scale. This is exemplified in the context of a master student laboratory developing methods and design proposals on the site of the Battersea Power Station in London.

An interview with architect and urbanist Joan Busquets, *Sites as such and developing methods*, digs into the role of the site, its programming and ways with which to work with it seen from the fields of history, research, teaching and practise.

Line Bruun Jespersen presents *Landscape installations: Enhancing the experience of nature through art and architecture*, a paper that views global tendencies of the re-emergence of site specificity by looking at both a theoretical framework for the discussion of site selection and artistic strategy, and the analysis of cases in Norwegian and Danish contexts. These are cases where artistic and architectural interventions on sites act as mediators between humans and nature and serve to enhance experience.

Urban “snapshots” along journey trajectories by Lea Holst Laursen and Ditte Bendix Lanng addresses the methodological and analytical discussions regarding site by introducing to an analytical method of making urban snapshots in order to capture, understand and work with the fluid and dynamic urban reality of contemporary sites.

An interview with landscape architect Jenny Osuldsen, partner at Snøhetta, is captured in *Snøhetta works – conversation on site design*. In this interview, Snøhetta’s working methods are expanded upon with the backdrop of their projects and themes such as the “uniqueness” of sites, sites and programmes and narratives as tools.

Tina Maria Roden’s paper, *Exploring the practical aspects of landscape urbanism*, is an investigation into the role of traditional and contemporary landscape thinking in the development of urban sites. Through the act of superimposing the theoretical framework of landscape urbanism onto practical urban design projects – 2 suburban residential development sites in Denmark – the paper traces the defining factors of landscape urbanistic practise in Denmark.

Ditte Bendix Lanng contributes with *A “more-than-representational” mapping study: | lived mobilities + mundane architectures |* – a paper that couples James Corner’s notion of mapping with non-representational research in order to develop “more-than-representational” tools for

practice. Mundane suburban sites of “lived mobility” are chosen as the areas of attention through which to unfold the creative and reflective nature of this type of urban design tool.

Underway: Sites as places of becoming by Tina Vestermann relates sites to time and looks at the “becoming” nature of sites seen through the lens of temporary use. In this paper a threefold argument is made for understanding sites and places dynamically in a temporality that spans “past, present and potential futures”.

The issue closes with Marie Markman’s paper *Constrasting lenses – Sites in new ways*, which takes a look at site transformations conducted by artists and takes its’ point of departure in 2 commissioned artworks – a landscape and a garden. This contribution opens for the use of new research approaches regarding site methodologies and discussions of sustainability – namely that of “site making”.

You are hereby invited into a theme issue that, in a variety of ways, explores the transformative character of sites by reading sites and exploring ways of analysing sites, as well as editing sites through the means of design interventions. It is hoped that the content of this special issue contributes to the ongoing discussion regarding the notion of site, and that it serves not only as a resource, but also as a source of inspiration.

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