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Commentary

From Desk to Field: Countering Agrourbanism's "Paper Landscapes" Through Phenomenology, Thick Description, and Immersive Walking

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Abstract
The primary focus of the urban agriculture literature has been on landscapes as biophysical spaces in which to grow food rather than on them as humanized places in which to grow experience. There is a need to leave the desk behind and enter the field to invigorate case study descriptions through the reflexive tool of narrative scholarship.

Keywords
landscape phenomenology; thick description; walking methodology

Issue
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1. Problematic Paper Landscapes

> In virtually all the academic literature it is quite striking how disembodied written landscapes become. This is because virtually everything written about landscape is not only written on paper; it is principally derived from paper. Landscape is not bodily experienced….Bodies remain at the desk rather than in the field….What we are left with is paper landscapes, paper perspectives. (Tilley, 2004, p. 27)

Although the literature on urban agriculture has expanded voluminously (Bohn & Viljoen, 2014; France & Mougeot, 2016), emphasis continues to be placed on urban gardens, food markets, educational farms, commercial enterprises, and agrarian heritage locations as conceptual spaces to be studied from afar rather than as experiential *places* to be engaged in situ. With rare exception (Coles, 2014; France, 2022), the lack of an embodied perspective in much of the urban agriculture literature means that, as Tilley (2004, p. 28) found for archeology publications, "they can only provide us with abstract models for thinking landscapes rather than models *of* landscapes that are sensuously lived." The result is a literature in which urban agriculture projects are presented as sensorially impoverished "paper landscapes." Given that the emerging field of agrourbanism (de la Salle & Holland, 2010; France, 2022; Gottero, 2021) concerns placemaking, this focus on inert spaces rather than inhabited places remains problematic. "Space" and "place" are *not* the same thing (Creswell, 2004). Abstract space, when humanized, becomes value-laden, and is transformed through the process into place (Tuan, 2001). A solution to the problem with respect to urban agriculture is adopting the research tool of narrative scholarship though employing its constituent modes of phenomenology, thick description, and walking.

2. Sensorial Embodied Experience

Rooted in the relational philosophical method of Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, phenomenology concerns the lived and immediate—not pre-meditated—utilization of the senses to interact with, and acquire knowledge about, the world (Brown & Toadvine, 2003; Wylie, 2012). It is about experiencing with deliberate intention rather than through casual impression, and is based on the meaning and value inherent in the body's relation to its surroundings (Bannon, 2016).

The idea of using the embodied experience of landscape (Tilley, 2004) is to create sensuous maps of socially embedded aesthetics or "sensecapes" (Degen, 2008).

These sensory dimensions of atmosphere are useful for describing the relational dynamics of people and place (Degen & Lewis, 2020; Thibaud, 2015). Phenomenology addresses that which resonates when we get a "feel" or a "sense" of a place, and uses writing and photography to craft sensuous stories regarding the perceptions and emotions of bodily engaging with nature. As Tilley (2004, p. 26) describes, "from a phenomenological perspective, language flows from the body rather than the mind, or rather, from a mind that is embodied, bound up with the sensorial world." And the way to capture this flow of bodies, words, and images is through use of "thick description.''

3. Thick Description

There is need to exploit alternative forms of writing and representing the intertwined geographies of people and place. For many geographers, landscapes have become disembodied entities that are studied from afar rather than through direct immersion (Wylie, 2012). In contrast to richly textured, carnal descriptions of experiencing landscape, the standard fare in virtually all academic journals are sensorially sterile, analytical accounts (Tilley, 2004). A counter to this approach is thick description, whereby clear pictures of the environment are conveyed through self-reflective essays whose goal is to make one's experiences concrete for readers through use of evocative language that shows rather than merely tells (Geertz, 1973).

Thick description provides detailed narratives and interpretations of situations observed and experienced by researchers, and can be supplemented with background information (Ponterotto, 2006). The approach, which has become a standard tool in autoethnography (Adams et al., 2015; Humphries, 2005), moves beyond presenting facts and overt appearances, and instead provides details, context, emotions, and underlying meanings and intentions in its attempt to describe the interactions of people and place, making the experiences of the former visible to a reader so that s/he can better appreciate the latter.

At its core, thick description is "sensemaking" or topographic "site-writing," the process of giving meaning to experience (Coles, 2014; Ponterotto, 2006). It can take a variety of forms, such as switching between first-person and second-person narration through "layered accounts" in which the researcher writes from the perspective of more than a single voice (Hermann, 2012). This expanded form of phenomenology (Wylie, 2012), which combines immediate embodied experience with other forms of analysis, such as archival research and critical evaluation of the pertinent literature, represents an alternative mode of landscape scholarship (Tilley, 1994, 2004).

Because thick description endeavours to paint a clear picture of an environment or situation, it often relies upon the visual ethnography research method of linking words and photos (Harper, 1987; Johnsen et al., 2008; Kharel, 2015). The subjective understanding provided by participant observation research of visually-augmented thick description conveys commentary and interpretation. Unlike documentary films, however, photos need voice, the challenge being to organize words and images in such a way to recount the *story* of the experience (Geertz, 1973). These approaches have newfound purpose in visual narratives of urban walks (Degen & Rose, 2012; Mason & Davies, 2009; Middleton, 2010). As Coles (2014, p. 519) describes, "the sequenced images provoke phenomenological and narrative modes that go beyond individual images to frame a collection of narratives…[that encapsulate] the inherent complexity of place." And for many, the implicit reflexivity of visual/textual vignettes for examining the feelings, reactions, and motives that influence an impression of a place is best undertaken through the simple act of pedestrianism.

4. Walking Methodology

The conjoined act and art of walking and wordsmithing has a long-established tradition (Coverley, 2012; France, 2020) and is regarded as the key means by which to feel, describe, and understand landscape (Ingold, 2004, 2011). As a modern social science methodology (Bates & Rhys-Taylor, 2017), walking makes urban places both commendable and comprehendible (Aoki & Yashimizu, 2015; Kusenbach, 2003; Middleton, 2010, 2011; Svensson, 2020; Vergunst, 2010). Urban walking as aesthetic practice (Careri, 2017) has its roots in the concept of the *flâneur* (Jenks & Neves, 2000), something which has been reborn in the experiential discipline of psychogeography (Bassett, 2004; Richardson, 2015). The "walk-with-me" or "go-along" method is a qualitative ethnographic research tool based in phenomenology that uses walks buttressed by opinions of others garnered through interviews or readings to explore everyday experience related to environmental perception, spatial practices, and social expressions of landscape form and function (Doring & Ratter, 2021; France & Campbell, 2015; Kusenbach, 2003).

By engaging the senses, walking is integral to perceiving surroundings (Degen, 2008; O'Neill & Roberts, 2020), thereby enabling "place-learning" (Springgay & Truman, 2018). This is a flourishing field of scholarship. For example, a conference held in the United Kingdom on "walking stories" and "walking ethnography" was based on idea that the land evokes conversations, reflections, and narrations that take place only through movement. As well, the 2021 "The Nature of Cities" conference hosted online field trips in which attendees watched live-narrated, formerly-filmed recordings of walks in urban riverscapes in London, Beirut, and Melbourne, city forests in India, British Columbia, and Oregon, and neighbourhoods, parks, playgrounds, canals, and landfills in England, Scotland, New York, California, Hawaii, and

Argentina. Walking offers possibilities for more evocative and creative forms of academic writing wherein personal experiences provide opportunity to comment upon wider questions (Wylie, 2012). Place-learning this way involves sensory inquiry and embodiment of experience that connects mind, body, and environment (Springgay & Truman, 2018), and is becoming increasingly utilized in descriptive landscape studies (Clarke & Jones, 2001; Edenson, 2000; Sidaway, 2009; Wylie, 2002, 2005).

More than providing transportation, walking is therefore an elemental way of perceiving place (Wunderlich, 2008), and is part of the relational study of landscape (Doring & Ratter, 2021). As Tilley (2004, p. 26) states, "places and landscapes are created and experienced through mobility." In this regard, landscape is not a physical constant but is something that is *created* through relationships to its inhabitants via their perceptions and embodied experiences (Ingold, 2011). In short, through walking, landscapes are woven into life while in turn lives are woven into landscapes (Tilley, 1994). Walking represents the process of appropriating topography, whereby the sensate and kinaesthetic attributes of the physical process allow it to be a placemaking practice that showcases how we interpret our surroundings and our position therein (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020). Urban walking is an aesthetic process that creates place from space, with the ensuing "walkscapes" being likened to architectural creations based on perceiving and conceiving part of the world (Careri, 2017). Such walkscapes are art projects traced upon the topography of a landscape through use of the body in much the same way a painter uses a brush upon a canvas.

"Mind–walking" (Ingold, 2011) creates "paths of observation" in which perception is a function of movement (Wunderlich, 2008). As Gibson (1979, p. 46) states, "cognition should *not* be *set off* from locomotion along the lines of a division between head and heels, since walking is itself a form of circumambulatory knowing." Once this is recognized, he continues, "a whole new field of inquiry is opened up in which our knowledge of the environment is altered by techniques of footwork." More than cognition, it is locomotion that underscores and facilitates perception and is a "form of circumambulatory knowing" (Ingold, 2002, 2004). Although walking has developed into the visual activity of scanning, it is really much more. And so, while the feet serve to ground us in space, we perceive through our *entire* bodies, not just the eyes, all contributing to the haptic perception of place. Walking, therefore, integrates the senses of sight, sound, smell, and touch (Lund, 2006). Both Ingold (2002) and Tilley (2004) refer to the synaesthesia of the experience and acknowledge the bias of the Western tradition that privileges sight over other senses as sources of human knowledge.

Not only is the walking experience multi-sensorial (Ingold, 2002, 2011; Wunderlich, 2008), it is also multi–conceptual in that it fosters peripatetic ponderings (Middleton, 2010). For as O'Neill and Roberts (2020, p. 216) describe:

> A walk in a garden is a phenomenological sensual experience and a physical activity, but one also set within memory experience—with invocations and resonance that draw us towards, or that we search out through, our senses and our emotions. A garden walk is also a joint, relational experience—a 'conversation' not merely with oneself, but also a 'dialogue' with oneself and the environment.

Landscapes exist in the mind as much as they do on the ground; in other words, they are cultural constructs just as they are natural objects (Creswell, 2004), thereby being places of memory (Schama, 1996). As cultural phenomena, landscapes are built from subjective experience, à la Heidegger's *Dasein* or "being there," facilitated by the concordant flows of bodies, perceptions, and conceptions along "emotional pathways" (Viik, 2011). And it is for this reason that the sensory experiencing and perceptual memory of urban design is best facilitated through the act of walking (Degen & Rose, 2012).

5. Conclusion

It is only by being attentive to sensescapes as revealed by walking and as relayed through a raconteur that the value of agrourbanism placemaking can be truly appreciated and comprehensively assessed (France, 2022). In order to avoid succumbing to a form of collective "nature-deficit disorder" (Louv, 2008), urban agriculture scholars need to limit their "screen time" and to immerse themselves in real, not paper, landscapes. For it is outside where the experiential "magic" of everyday life lies (Stilgoe, 2005).

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Conflict of Interests

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