

SLA

Founded 1994, Copenhagen, Denmark
Interview with Stig L. Andersson

Scale and Scope

What we are doing is urban design and planning and environmental design, but from the landscape architectural view. It is not landscape in the traditional sense, because most of our projects are urban planning and transformation of urban areas, but we always start with landscape architecture.

Approach

We don't see the city as a certain number of structures. This is an architectural view or a planning view that the city is a connection of structure, infrastructure, technical structure, and social structure all on their own. We don't see it like that. We see the city as a system, and when you see things as a system, then you have to learn from nature and from landscape, how the system's individual components—although they are heterogeneous—depend and react to each other. So it becomes something different. It's not a question of integrating nature and the city; it's a question of making something completely different. The city becomes a system of processes instead of fixed structures solving different things. We call that process urbanism.

Structural thinking always has to do with abiotic matters. But when you think of a system you have to deal with both biotic and abiotic components. And so we don't distinguish between dead and living material, we combine them. This is a different way to look at a city. We think it's much more important that a city is able to adapt to change, whatever it is—climatically, economically, socially, population, pollution, and so on. So how does the city develop, and what does it look like when it's adaptable instead of preventing change from happening?

Tools

The interesting thing in landscape architecture is the ability to think in sequence, in processes, and in shift of states. It can be difficult to explain what the changes of a space will be or to explain how it might evolve. How will the space develop? How will the space change due to the environment, due to your mood, due to your movement?

And how will the landscape grow? Are you going to show the tree when it's one year old or when it's fifty years old or somewhere in-between? So we make many drawings and many different layers of each drawing. One is about the change of space. One is about the change of vegetation. Another will show how climate affects the appearance of the space, or how artificial light changes the space. And when we're finished, there are a lot of drawings to explain how you could experience it.

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Future Challenges and Opportunities

The ideological thinking of the last 200 years—the belief of the industrial era that we could solve all our problems technologically and without regard to nature—is coming to an end. Today, we are seeing the consequences of this kind of thinking as more and more urban structures break down because they aren't able to adapt to climate change.

We are now realizing that we have to learn from nature and incorporate its principles in urban development if we want to create living and adaptable cities.

A lot of expertise from landscape architecture will be needed in this new approach to the design of our cities. This has very much to do with the knowledge of landscape architects, whose expertise is in understanding space and processes of nature, as well as in dealing with complex systems that will be useful for urban development. There will be a lot more work for landscape architects in this sense, but not for beautification. It's not a question of what should it look like, it's now a question of how these complex systems will work so the city becomes a nice and healthful place to live. That's the knowledge landscape architects have.



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