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Woods Go Urban: Landscape Laboratories in **Scandinavia**

Anders Busse Nielsen, Lisa Diedrich, Harry Harsema and Catherine Szanto (eds.), ISBN: 978 94 92474 650, Ede: Blauwdruk publishers in collaboration with SLU, 2022, 384 pages, 500 colour and 50 b/w illustrations, € 39.50 (cloth)

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Anders Busse Nielsen, Lisa Diedrich, Harry Harsema and Catherine Szanto (eds.) Woods Go Urban: Landscape Laboratories in Scandinavia

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Review by Kamni Gill, University of Manitoba

In the spring of 2009, JoLA published the forest profile drawings of Roland Gustavson.¹ The drawings and their accompanying text outlined an ethos about working with trees that stressed 'outdoor lived experience, the concrete and the touch of the world'. His original drawings demonstrated three basic precepts: slow observation of forest structures in profile diagrams, a firm interest in the spatial experience woodlands offered people and an engagement with the dynamics of tree growth over time. These precepts continue to underpin the work of the Swedish laboratories and form the basis of a new publication: Woods Go Urban: Landscape Laboratories in Sweden. The landscape laboratories seem to encapsulate an ideal: they are places of living experimentation, with one of the most potent media available to a landscape architect: trees. In the opening section of the book, landscape architect Michel Desvigne notes that the laboratory at Alnarp is 'a magnificent didactic mosaic of tree types' (p. 30). The tension between the material experiments in the forest and the compelling documentation of the forest profiles synthesizes three quintessentially landscape architectural considerations temporality, spatiality and human community—through a milieu of trees.

Woods Go Urban then makes a welcome contribution to a burgeoning literature on urban trees. It is both a reflection on over forty years of inventive arboreal engagement at the landscape laboratories and a manual of innovative management practices. It is neither focused on species selection like the Essential Tree Selection Guide (2023), nor on the historical dimensions of different tree forms as in Jan Woudstra's Politics of Street Trees (2022) or History of the Grove (2018). It does not call for an ethical reconsideration of what the relationships between people and plants are as Rosetta Elkins does in Plant Life: The Entangled Politics of Afforestation (2022). Nor is it a technical manual of horticultural techniques. It is unique in its focus on the detailed spatio-temporal dynamics of forest types and its use of carefully considered management techniques to shape wooded spaces that engage people. It usefully consolidates design and management practices, looking at the landscape laboratories through three main sections. Each is copiously illustrated with photographs, profile drawings and plans of each laboratory, and diagrams. Those involved in the work of the forest laboratories since their inception took responsibility for different sections. The book, like the laboratories themselves, is a collective, collaborative effort over time, with twelve authors and four editors.

The first part of the book, 'Making and Methodology', outlines the origins of the landscape laboratories from the first landscape laboratory at Alnarp to subsequent wood laboratories at Snogeholm, which focused on the potential of afforestation for agricultural lands, and Sletten, which was more directly associated with a local neighbourhood and its residents. The section further situates the visual work that supports the 1:1 woodland experimentation in the laboratories by providing reproductions of the forest profile drawings. Authors refer to the tension between what we think trees look like and how trees specifically take shape as part of a collective woodland structure. Slow observation results in nuanced reading of existing woodland forest types and supports the argument that woodlands, like buildings, have a spatial composition, 'an overall form and size, a rhythm of exposure and enclosure, points, places and walks and passages and individual trees and shrubs' (p. 106). Sometimes, we can't see the forest for the trees; but the making and methodology section of Woods Go Urban provides a means of making complex forest systems legible; enabling us to see different forest types through the meticulous documentation of site-specific tree structures and forms.

I Roland Gustavsson, 'The Touch of the World: Dynamic Vegetation Studies and Embodied Knowledge', Journal of Landscape Architecture 2009/1 (2009), 42–55.







The second section of the book, 'Dynamic Vegetation Design', focuses on management as a form of working with sylvan time. Clear design principles, creative management as opposed to simply maintenance, and horticulturally focused knowledge meant that the young and teenage stages of urban woods are recognized as 'phases of opportunity' that have spatial quality over decades of growth through adaptive management. The work of the landscape laboratories is not simply in the typical design endgame of mature trees. Rather, the work undertaken is the long-term, consistent research of woodlands over time governed by a series of design principles and planting techniques. The scale of the laboratories and the precision of the research questions about species complexity, time and planting distances allowed for fine-grained observations to be made about the effect of different interventions. Such site-specific knowledge is not always systematically documented, but here it attunes the reader to the dynamics that can shape species composition and woodland structures.



The alliance of horticulturally based questions with particular spatial goals such as woodland glades, edges and walks make the book an effective resource for creating particular woodland atmospheres, an understudied dimension in urban tree planting. Part of the value of the book rests in its thorough provision of complete species lists, extents of experimental tracts, and spacing. Primary research questions, design research intents are judiciously summarized, and longer studies are referenced throughout, giving a reader access to a body of written research that supports onsite site experimentation.





Woods Go Urban: Landscape Laboratories in Scandinavia serves as a

In the final, shortest section of the book, 'Labs for Learning and Engagement', attention shifts to how people use the woodland laboratories. The laboratories become a contemporary interpretation of the wooded commons. They bring students, academics from a range of disciplines and neighbourhood residents together in planting, tending, building and playing under the canopy. The laboratory at Sletten, with its proximity to housing, is described as a co-management zone: a new kind of collaborative public space rooted in a woodland experiment. More parallels could have been made here to traditions of community forestry in North America and Europe, and to a rising tendency in landscape architecture to provide engaging environments to a wider public through landscape management and public stewardship. In Girona, for example, Estudi Martí Franch uses modest acts of management to valorise the wooded wilderness and meadows on the outskirts of the city, increasing public use of these areas.² And in France, an experimental pinewood plantation became the primary emblem of a public park as local inhabitants monitored the pines as seeds became woods. The designer of the park, like the designers of the woodland laboratories, made the slow observation of the growth of trees a rich source of wonder.³

2 Martí Franch, 'Drawing on Site: Girona's Shores', Journal of Landscape Architecture 2018/2 (2018), 56–73.

3 Sonia Keravel, 'Waiting for the Pinewood: The Parc Du Grand Pré and Managing the Extended Time Frames of a Landscape Project', Journal of Landscape Architecture 2017/1 (2017), 30–43. learning and teaching model for landscape architecture education. It demonstrates how site-specific approaches to woodlands can construct knowledge in the discipline and enable public participation in the life of urban woods. At the same time, a critical synthesizing conclusion might have helped round out the volume. Such a conclusion might have related the work of the laboratories more completely to broader efforts in urban forestry, to the making of community woodlands and to how the spatial experience of urban woodlands is tied to sustainable urban futures, both historically and in contemporary practice. One author notes that it was often the most heavily managed, spatially compelling spaces of the landscape laboratory that left the biggest impression on the memories of students and visitors (p. 224); a statement that deserves more scrutiny in a time where the basic provision of trees and woodlands is often deemed sufficient to meet landscape architecture and urban design goals. Other claims such as 'woods go urban to increase vegetation cover and green spaces in highly populated areas as an urgent adaptation and mitigation measure in response to climate change' (p. 21) or that 'we have developed a detailed evaluation of future plant material concerning their capacity for inner-city environments, future climate conditions and ecosystem services' (p. 282), remain only clues to what future research at the laboratories might be, where they might be located and how the ethos of the landscape laboratories might evolve in response to climate change imperatives, limited budgets for tree maintenance and diverse communities of people. Nevertheless, Woods Go Urban Landscape Laboratories in Scandinavia offers a fertile substrate for the new questions about how to design with trees, time and people in urban, peri-urban and rural communities.