



Scales of Change

Conference Proceedings

*Commemorating 50 years of
Landscape Architecture study programme at
University of Ljubljana*

University of Ljubljana



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Scales of Change

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The Centre for Landscape Democracy and
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Abjuring Scales

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Abstract

The contribution provocatively contemplates substituting the term scale in landscape pedagogy for alternative concepts, like resolution. Dealing with this goal implies first thinking of the landscape as a complex system of relationships. This point is decisive concerning re-directing the articulated, dynamic, and profoundly unstable interactions between human-kind, territory, and the environment. It, therefore, becomes fundamental to clarify the complexity beyond the relationship's identification and multidimensional value. The process involves a plurality of factors beyond the correlation between subject and object or object and object, extending it to the organisations of objects to exceed the most immediate possibilities of description.

Focusing on relationships reduces scales' significance because it forces us to recognise the variety, multidimensionality, interrelation, and systematicity present in the landscape, making these aspects operable through design. Consequently, it emerges to go beyond the scales, abjure this term, and consider possible alternatives.

Living digitally, we can, for instance, speak of 'resolutions'. This concept well renders the idea of collecting data on several

levels with varying degrees of detail, allowing variable reading, from extensive considerations to samplings on otherness and smallness. The result is dissecting the characteristics of each situation, ascribing them to differentiated relational dimensions. To exemplify: the value of patterns and structures in the vast configuration can be associated with their density, quality, and aesthetic in any milieu part of a mosaic. Not less important, this perspective allows re-including some values sometimes forgotten in contemporary practice, like form-thinking and re-establishing the human presence and perception as central in design.

Keywords

Landscape design, pedagogy, cross-scale approach, relationships, resolution

Introduction

Dealing with the concept of scale concerning the complex universe of landscape architecture is challenging. This difficulty is compounded by the polysemy of the term landscape, its universality and its interdisciplinary nature. For this reason, even when approaching the landscape from the architect's point of view, the influences of other disciplines, such as geography, ecology or geology, and the internal differences between design or planning outline a vast

field of choices and possibilities. Consequently, this world has become so wide that one quickly misunderstands the sense and meaning of certain choices concerning the design and its cultural more than practical significance, especially regarding scale questions.

This problem is familiar and has taken on greater weight as landscape architecture has ceased to be a discipline linked to the design of limited objects - open spaces, parks and gardens - in favour of the 'transition towards public services' (Newton, 1971). Over the decades, this process has led to an ever-increasing problematic extension towards the questions of the environment, deepening the interaction and confrontation with 'other' disciplines. The result is a growing habit of dealing with other forms of knowledge traditionally accustomed to working on different themes and scales. Consequently, landscape architecture progressively assimilated new points of view and ways of thinking, not always in a clear and codified manner, including new scale paradigms.

However, these reciprocal contaminations and influences are numerous and very difficult to portray in a unitary framework. Their variety is deeply linked to the developments that, in different ways, have accompanied the birth and development of landscape architecture in European nations and world countries (Wolschke-Bulmahn and Clark, 2021; Treib, 2002). To be more transparent and objective is helpful providing some examples related to intending the concept of scale, allowing us to compare the Italian case to another European situation, like that of France. Here, for example, the tradition

of dealing with the relationship between infrastructure, territory and architecture is well established, and thinking relationally and systemically is a shared attitude. This ability is the consequence of a pioneering approach in dealing with expertise and disciplines that contribute to breaking the boundaries within scales. For this reason, it is well recognised how this country has extraordinarily anticipated some direction comparable to the landscape urbanism approach, as recently described in the special issue of the magazine A+U titled "landscape urbanism in France" (2022). As illustrated, this analogy happened in a completely autonomous and unconditional manner representing the logical consequence of a consolidated ability to deal with issues of scale that date back to the foundation of polytechnic culture and the birth of modern engineering.

In contrast, in Italy, the lack of an authentic tradition in landscape architecture has emphasised the differences and made the genesis of the cross-scalar approach more difficult. Thus, paradoxically, a very articulated field of debate emerges in which the question of scale plays an essential role, especially in relationship with the more traditional competencies of architects and planners (Durbiano et Robiglio, 2003; Sampietri, 2008). Therefore, the question of scale became a conflict between disciplines and a problem in education. Moreover, it introduced dangerous simplifications regarding the importance of relationships for the landscape and their cross-scalar implications.

From these considerations, the following contribution is organised into four main parts. The first refocuses on the theme of

the relationship concerning the theoretical definition and the design of the landscape. Reframing the relationship issue leads to an insight into its implications concerning scale. The exposition clarifies how the multiplicity of interrelations identifying the landscape phenomenon finds an obstacle implicit in any attempt to limit its scope. The constraints associated with the notion of scale are thus highlighted and explored in landscape architecture education. Through this process, the possibility of identifying an alternative term to the concept of scale emerges.

Then, a second part leads to the provocative hypothesis that abjuring the term scale in favour of an alternative concept, like resolution, provides a more effective metaphor in contemporary landscape education. This section culminates in formulating an operating methodology based on the use of the concept of resolution.

It follows a third section explaining the practical experimentation of the theoretical assumptions practised in the author's teaching activity at the Architecture School of Politecnico di Milano.

Lastly, a series of provisional conclusions draw a summary picture and propose a developing interpretation of this content.

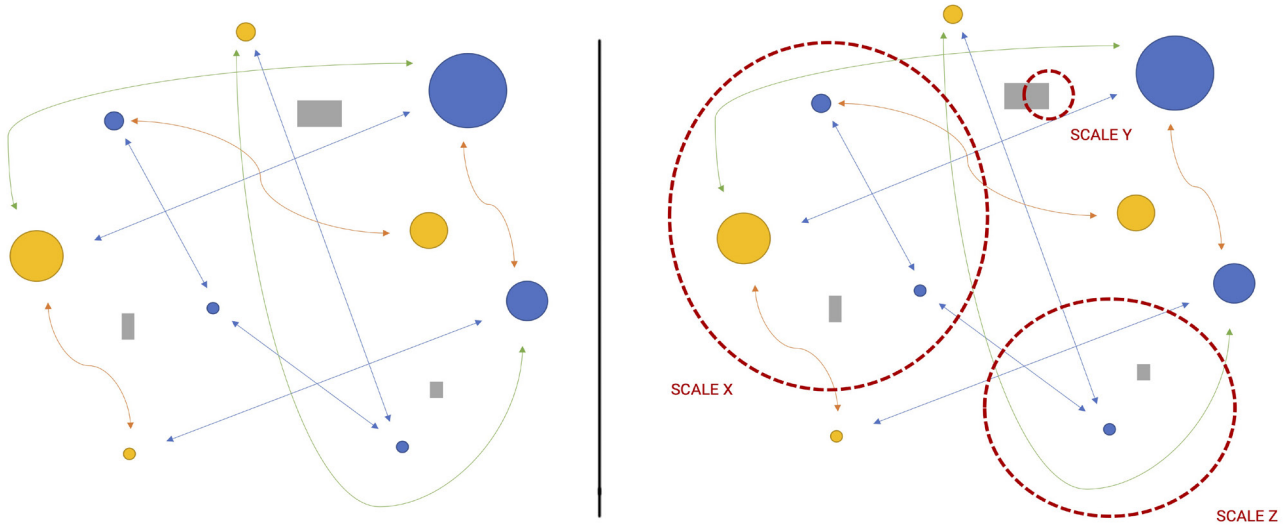
Landscape as interlacing of relationships

To trace the value of the concept of relationship about landscape requires a return to a definition. Indeed, it is necessary to emphasise what guarantees a real possibility of distancing the landscape from relative terms, such as territory or environment, and determine what produces this distance.

It is helpful to situate the landscape in a dialectical space oscillating between aesthetics and science, understanding this concept more as the expression of a way of thinking of space as a set of relationships rather than as a physical site or a territorial or geographical area. This operation makes the landscape more than a modification support, an ideal thematic horizon and a field of confrontation for contemporary design (Gambi et Gregory, 2000).

Therefore, the relationship issue represents a decisive aspect regarding implementing a theoretical and pedagogical theory that contemplates a notion of landscape comprehensive of the dynamic, interrelated, evolving and profoundly unstable interactions between man, territory and environment.

Deepening this concept leads to the *Tractatus* by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1954), where he provides a significant hypothesis on how to intend this system of interactions, i.e. relationships. He observes that "an atomic fact is a combination of objects - entities, things" (prop. 2.01). For this reason, "just as we cannot think of spatial objects at all apart from space, or temporal objects apart from time, so we cannot think of any object apart from the possibility of its connexion with other things". Therefore "if I can think of an object in the context of an atomic fact, I cannot think of it apart from the possibility of this context" (Wittgenstein, 1954: 2.01, 2.0121). These assumptions return consequentiality and logical structure capable of clarifying the density and plurality characterising the notion of landscape. It also emerges the dynamics that support it, with obvious re-



percussions in the relationship between entities belonging to different spaces, i.e. scales.

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The Italian epistemologist Silvano Tagliagambe (2018) has explained the same assumptions less hermetically speaking directly on the landscape. He focused on the importance of an 'ontology of relations' regarding landscape design. With this definition, he refers to investigating how entities are grouped into categories to understand how the 'places in the space' assume an 'objective positions' concerning an equally relevant position of ourselves in relationship to our surroundings. This attention is necessary because nothing can be understood as an independent position in the landscape, having an autonomous meaning in its own right. Consequently, reflecting on the relationships guarantees the possibility of 'inscribing around us the variable scope of our intentions or gestures'. In this way, the activity of discovering the existing relationships assumes the

meaning 'to read the world' and to 'prefigure' all the 'plans of action that we could undertake on it, combining constraints and opportunities, a sense of reality and possibility, achieving a harmonious balance between these two opposite poles' - in short: design.

Many scholars return to this topic, explaining how 'landscape design' is the 'design of relationships' (Bocchi, 2009; 2012); indeed, this assumption cannot be overturned. A distinction between design and planning is also recurrent in the literature, with different repercussions on the 'definition' of the scales employed. This fact has little importance in our discussion because, as has been observed, "planning and design are reciprocal processes; the lack of understanding of the big picture would lead to weak design. Such reciprocal processes have led to interdisciplinarity approaches with interconnection scales, from urban to regional and global dimensions-thinking globally and acting locally"

Figure 1

The diagram on the left provides an abstract representation of the landscape as a system of relationships between different entities. On the right, it is provided with a visual demonstration of how selecting particular scales implies missing some relationships from big to small objects or their organisations

3. TEACHING ACROSS SCALES

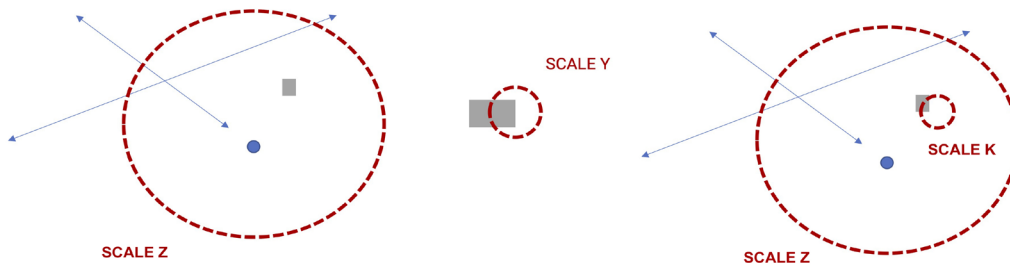


Figure 2

The diagram represents from left to right: scale 'Z' - Selection missing the relationships object/object/context. Scale 'Y' - Selection missing the intrinsic qualities inherent to one object. Scale 'Z' - Choice limiting the recognizability of relationships.

(Samaneh Sadat, 2022). It can therefore be reasonably argued that there is no ideal scale of design or planning. What is required is a path that combines different scales, chosen according to the particular observatory from which the transformation is framed.

However, transcribing these concepts from theory to practice is not easy and requires considerable effort. This fact represents a significant obstacle in the education of landscape architects, and the rigidity in the question of scale furthermore limits it. A sophisticated synthesis is required to clarify the necessity of relationships, overcome the complexity that transcends their identification and explains their multidimensional value. This process involves a plurality of views and critical interpretations which are not necessarily related to the size or location of the site, the nature of the theme or the project programme but depend on the multiple relationships the site entertains with the context. Those are not limited to the relationship between subject and object, nor between object and object, but extend to the organisations of objects and the complex interconnections that transcend the most immediate possibilities of description.

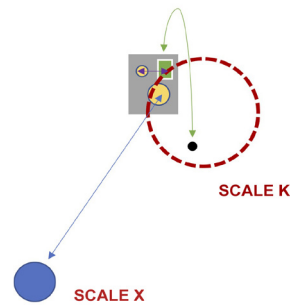


Figure 3

Scale 'K' - Example where a more detailed observation allows to recognise new forms of the relationship somehow related to the scale 'Z' previously explored without enough critical attention

When confronted with the proposal of a cross-scalar process, the recurring question from students is which is the project site or that is necessary, clarifying on which scale the problem is being addressed - global, regional, or local scale. This frequent experience gives the impression that it is easier to conform to an established way of looking rather than to challenge oneself by defining a personal and original way of looking that breaks the traditional conventions within which the problem of landscape architecture is assumed.

In short, the experience of teaching landscape design and the attempt to introduce students to reflect articulately concerning these themes is challenging. Significant difficulties lie in understanding the less apparent forms of relationships and, in doing so, transcending the limitations imposed by site, theme and programme. Conse-

quently, it is not easy breaking boundaries and switching between different scales, not to contextualise or frame, but to comprehend how acting on one part involves altering the entire system. These brief considerations illustrate how the landscape's multidimensionality struggles to emerge due to the difficulty of predicting how an operation concerning small and limited territorial portions may have effects that reverberate throughout broad and sophisticated geographical assets, nevertheless the opposite.

The question, therefore, is whether it is possible to abandon the term scale in favour of an innovative terminology that can make more explicit the nature of a multidimensional project in which the effect/action chain has consequences and potential repercussions at all scales concerning the problem involved.

From scale to the resolution

Reading a text by Michel Desvigne (2012: 25) helped to find a metaphor capable of explaining the need for a multi-scalar approach to landscape design and of considering a terminology analogous to the concept of scale but free of a tradition that limits its scope of application. He states: "perceiving the scale and making the right response of the right dimension is, in my view, the key to the success of a project for the recomposition of a territory. In methodological terms, a permanent gauging is needed, [this] obliges us to tackle all scales at once: implementing a strategy of organisation over the long term, looking at things on smaller scales [...] for places in which pieces of city are actually going to be built, and carrying out concrete experiments on even smaller scales [...]. This

simultaneity of the work on a varying scale forces us to keep adjusting our gaze, so that each new point of view explains or questions the previous and permits the evaluation of hypotheses formulated for future development. So, adjusting the gaze and evaluating the interventions are indispensable in order to avoid the rock on which the development of territories comes to grief today".

The citation, despite a classic recall of the concept of scale, also considers the hypothesis of the need for constant adjustment, offering a more inspiring metaphor that introduces an optical process, which allows us to zoom in and out, focusing on the general and, at the same time, being able to concentrate on the particular.

Thus, in a world dominated by the digital experience, it is possible to think using the term 'resolution'. The concept is well suited to describe the sense of an investigation that collects data at several scales and returns them in concise images, capable of fully orienting the project path. In this way, it is possible to perceive something tangible, which allows moving within an accumulation of data with a high density. Consequently, it is possible to make all the considerations required by exceptionally vast territories without sacrificing the opportunity to conduct specific research to explore the small dimension. This potentiality is enabled by the superabundance of data collected and their effective systematisation.

The metaphor of the resolution also becomes significant concerning the theoretical definition of design, offering a metaphor that describes the possibility

of dissecting the specific features of each situation by ascribing them to differentiated relational dimensions. This potentiality assumes great importance in a scenario where it is more challenging, especially for those involved in landscape design than planning, to identify a correct way to assess the infrastructure endowments, ecological features, and ecosystem services. In fact, a high-resolution model would allow better integration between what is possible to identify on a vast territorial asset and what takes place in a local situation. Consequently, the merits of the individual facts can be associated with the whole, highlighting continuities/discontinuities, resources/criticalities, and emergencies/liabilities that are only understandable approaching the study of limited portions of space.

The term 'resolution' finds another reason reflecting the transition from digital to material form. In digital photography, there is, in fact, a substantial difference between the data we accumulate from the potential of a sensor and the possibilities of restitution on the screen or in print with a discard of information that, in most cases, will be imperceptible.

A mapping operation will therefore have to work at high resolution in collecting data, qualitative elements, references and observation and then produce some synthetic materials at differentiated resolutions. This process results from selecting valuable data to circumscribe a given theme and provide comprehensible restitution. This operation entails abundance, selection and discarding, and in this sequence lies the critical dimension underlying a mapping operation and a good design process.

From theory to landscape studio practice

This methodology describes how a teaching and design path was born and experimented with in the last academical years by the author within the Bachelor's and Master's degree courses of the AUIC School of the Politecnico di Milano. This formulation is not a definitive point in the process of experimentation but an intermediate point in the course of trials that continues to be refined and adapted based on student feedback and the results of design experiments.

The studio experiences are ordinarily opened with a relatively free and experimental investigation of the problem, which includes collecting information and formulating a personal critical position and point of view. Of course, the studio provides a critical contextualisation, poses a central issue and provides a focal location for the design experiment, but without imposing field limitations, defining selected sites or imposing constraints of any kind. According to this path, the first part of the studio consists of collecting the elements that enable highly subjective interpretations. The result is a set of maps, cross sections, diagrams, infographics, and a collection of graphic, iconographic, photographic and physical evidence supporting a critical position and allowing the formulation of a pre-visual hypothesis. These composite materials provide descriptions at different resolutions, allowing cross-scalar readings bridging to a strategic hypothesis capable of multidimensional effects on the landscape. Specific, more canonical design experiments typically follow this first comprehensive and rich exploration.

Similar paths are applied to the master's final projects, with greater complexity and detail.

Some provisional conclusions

Judging the goodness of this design and teaching process is complex. The validity of the term 'resolution' is also uncertain. Students always ask what project site or the working scale, demonstrating a recrudescence into a methodology that requires working on a specific vision rather than enthusiastically accepting a path that involves becoming aware of the situation and identifying a plausible direction to approach.

Despite this, what is excellent and noticeable is an increasing curiosity induced by the perception of a less constrained and less dogmatic procedure, which undoubtedly produces more engagement.

This feeling creates a compelling perspective for investigating a phenomenon such as the landscape, which must be unrestricted within too precise limits without risking renouncing its true nature.

The hope is that this approach, less conventional and more experimental, can also accompany students outside the academy's walls, reinforcing the conviction that landscape design is first and foremost a cognitive process and only afterwards the formulation and implementation of a modifying proposal. It is, therefore, possible to recover the meaning of many forgotten, exploited and marginalised landscapes, allowing us to link every single realisation to the system of meanings it assumes with the complexity of the territory in which it is

inserted. Moreover, this multi-resolution, hence multi-dynamic and multi-spatial exploration, allows us to re-establish a link between ecological themes associated with territorial structures to the places where human presence and perception become central.

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The question of scale is not new to landscape architects but is one that does not have a definite answer; it needs to be asked again and again. The issue addresses the very identity of the profession and the nature of the context in which landscape architects operate and teach. The theme of the 2022 conference in Ljubljana was inspired by the 50th anniversary of the landscape architecture program at the University of Ljubljana as well as the fact that 50 years have passed from the pioneering conference on landscape planning held in Ljubljana which was organized by professor emeritus Dušan Ogrin, one of the founders of landscape architecture and the first recipient of the ECLAS Lifetime achievement award.

Prof. dr. Mojca Golobič
Conference committee chair