

Transformative Landscape Architecture

Udo Weilacher interviews landscape architect and honorary doctor at the Technical University of Munich James Corner from New York, May 2018

Udo Weilacher is professor for Landscape Architecture and Industrial Landscape at the TU Munich.

James Corner is a British landscape architect and theorist. He is the principal of James Corner Field Operations, New York City.

Udo Weilacher: *Dear James, we are very pleased to decorate you 2018 with the honorary doctorate at the Technical University of Munich, because you are one of the most outstanding representatives of our profession today. How did you get into landscape architecture?*

James Corner: Well first, let me say thank you for this great honor. It means a great deal to me. I first got into landscape architecture when I was about 18 or 19 years old. I was interested in geography, biology and arts, in particular drawing, painting and ceramics. The combination of these subjects was leading either to studies in land surveying, cartography, land management, environmental studies, forestry or something called landscape architecture. I had no idea what landscape architecture was, but it seemed that it would summarize all my interests very nicely and so I enrolled in the program at Manchester Metropolitan University, which offered a collaborative program in both landscape and architecture.

I loved the city and Manchester was a very tough urban environment with a great street-life, canals, nightclubs, museums and libraries. Nearby was the Peak District and the Lake District National Parks, and I was outdoors a lot, rock climbing or hiking in these very dramatic and atmospheric landscapes, where the weather changes all the time and you're often alone. I didn't know it when I was 18, but to me landscape became an interesting subject to study and to practice because it merges these two worlds: big nature and big urbanism.

I did my practical training 1989 in Manchester with Derrick Lovejoy & Partners, so I understand the fascination you're describing. This former industrial city, which at the time was in a state of decline, must have been a difficult environment.

It was just a big adventure and there was a very interesting youth culture. Rock bands like U2 or The Police were just emerging and they were playing on the University campus. Next door were the fashion school and the school for industrial design. So when I was getting into landscape architecture, I was continuously influenced by design, fashion design, music, culture and arts.

Today, you're very successful in the USA. What are the most important differences between the British and the American approach to landscape? Was it difficult for you to manage the transition in the 1980s?

It was a good five years before I felt comfortable in America, and to tell you the truth, I was at first very disappointed with that country, because it just didn't seem as vital or as deep. In Manchester in the early 80s, there was an incredible amount of energy, inventiveness and aspiration. Over time, I really began to enjoy the American optimism in contrast to the British pessimism, and that's when I started the project "Taking Measures Across the American Landscape". I was flying across the USA, trying to learn about the American landscape, more like a geographer. Compared to the vastness of the American landscape you find rather cloistered spaces in Europe. Over so many centuries the European landscape became a layered palimpsest which you don't find in the USA. I learned that the American landscape is brutally pragmatic with very little cultural baggage. There's an immediacy to it – what you see is what you get. It is often very difficult to modify a European landscape because there is so much history, tradition, culture and gravitas. The way Americans value almost everything is based on practicality and profitability. The American grid is a significant invention, not created for aesthetic reasons but in order to democratize the land, to rationalize how land-ownership could transpire.



Have you blended in with the American way of landscape perception or do you still prefer the European approach in your work?

I think it's a bit of both. I was presiding the Rosa Barba International Landscape Prize 2016 and the European projects amongst the ten finalists were beautiful, poetic, but in my view largely irrelevant. They were mostly outside of the city, in already beautiful settings, with a beautiful cultural narrative. But at the end of the day they didn't seem to be significantly transformative, they weren't actually changing anything. The awarded project was the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in London, by Hargreaves Associates, simply because it was the most transformative project, literally revitalizing a massive piece of derelict London. Landscape architecture is doing its best work when it's really transforming a culture, a place, a people, an ecology, an economy.

The experience in America has led me to value pragmatism and instrumentality – the power to really effect change. On the other hand, one is always looking to ensure that the work is poetically resonant at the same time, and so the European tradition remains instructive and important in this regard.

So poetry in landscape architecture is not irrelevant?

No, but poetry cannot be an end in itself; it needs to arise from practicality, use and everyday experience. The High Line is a really good example. The approach to the design of the High Line was super pragmatic. We had to find cost-effective solutions for a safe pavement, allowing people to use it, or garden cultivation on a very thin layer of soil and so on. On the other hand, it's super poetic. It's inspired and informed by the found object, the poetry of nature

beginning to take over an industrial artefact. We were trying to amplify those poetic aspects while solving a lot of very practical challenges. For me, landscape architecture is at its best when it really does have transformative dimensions but there is also a lasting poetic experience. It's not simply a self-indulgent art experiment.

The High Line is so incredibly popular today. Do you still like it?

Oh, I love it. When the High Line project started, nobody had access to the old railway tracks up there. When I first stepped on it, the silence, the strange surreal magic of finding this ribbon of green was a pure surprise and a pure delight. In a sense, that's how I always thought it would be. So when we were designing it as a simple path in a garden with great views and places to sit, I always thought it would be a quiet secret garden that people would experience, impressed by a strange serenity in the context of a very busy Manhattan. Now it's one of the top two tourist destinations in New York and nobody ever anticipated the sheer number of visitors every day. In the early stages of design development, the client group would say: "You're not doing enough. Nobody will ever come. It's just a path and a garden." They thought that we should maybe install children's playgrounds, big artworks or other exciting features, but we kept saying: "It's an extraordinary path in an extraordinary garden with extraordinary views. The surrealism of all that

extraordinariness is what will make this place attractive to people. It will be a draw." All we needed to do was to amplify and transform the found conditions.

You are receiving the honorary doctorate degree from the Technical University of Munich not only because of your outstanding practical work but because you're also doing a lot of important theoretical work. How did you gain access to the theory of landscape architecture?

In the late 80s, professional practice in the US was not that interesting, and so I started teaching at the University of Pennsylvania in 1988 – temporarily I thought. But I also saw the opportunity to use the University as a laboratory. We were in a school with a very strong architecture department and it irritated me that there seemed to be a higher level of discourse and criticism in the architectural works. I wanted to bring our work to that level, trying to raise the bar in terms of how we described, criticized and advanced our own work. I was examining a lot of books and ideas, trying to provoke different ways of thinking, and we also improved the representational techniques. And all of a sudden the students' work had an alluring look and an unusual set of inventive design ideas. The architects became interested in landscape and wanted to get involved. So we started a dual degree program with architecture and landscape which proved to be a very successful synergy.

In the early 90s, I wanted to know how we could produce work that had a greater meaning. So I wrote essays about representation, expression and about what form really is. Then I began to focus more on instrumental and pragmatic aspects – what landscapes do and how they work, rather than what they might mean. In the mid-90s for example, I took the students out to the West to study hydrological landscapes, like the Colorado River, the various dams and irrigation systems. What can landscape architects learn from these massive infrastructural landscapes and what can they contribute? The study of large engineered landscapes eventually led to thinking more about urbanism, and I realized that if landscape architects simply drew infrastructure and buildings, they were very capable of shaping urban form. Here, urban open space systems become the shaping force, not just the figuration of objects. When I started my practice Field Operations in 1999 it became very obvious to me that architects tend to think about urban design in terms of "objects first". Instead, I like to think about it in terms of "the space in-between first", or as I call it "moving the elbows around" to try and shape a larger "field." The space in between actually shapes what is built and you are probably going to create a better kind of city, because you are now creating public spaces such as passageways and streets, larger squares, piazzas, parks, corridors and so on, all as a continuous fabric, or tissue.

It was an interesting evolution for me from early interests in art, theory, philosophy and representation, searching for meaning, to an interest in instrumentality and urbanism, trying to get big things actually done. There's no shortage of utopias or ideas, of books and reports, master plans and documents but there is a shortage of how to actually get large projects effectively built.

What personalities inspired you most during your evolution?

John Brinckerhoff Jackson was very interesting for me, especially with regard to geography and landscape. I appreciated the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who speaks beautifully about soil and earth, atmosphere and weather in a very powerful poetic imagery. The atmospheric paintings of William Turner and John Constable inspired me. When I started teaching the course "drawing", I put a painting by Constable on the screen and asked the students to draw the image. It wasn't only for teaching drawing techniques, but I was trying to get them to imbibe the atmosphere, the emotion of the painting. In terms of philosophy, everyone reads Martin Heidegger as a starting point, but I think the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenological philosopher, were very important for thinking about how people experience space. The idea of distraction I found particularly interesting in phenomenology: we appreciate paintings, sculptures and books by paying



attention to them. But we're not really paying attention to architecture and landscape. We simply use them and our experience comes indirectly, cumulatively, which means that most of us appreciate buildings and landscapes because of the experiences we have over a period of time. When you realize, that the deeper part of experience is a very slow process, often unconscious and subliminal, you will shape spaces differently – less obviously graphic and more subtly experiential.

We are currently witnessing a focus of landscape architecture on functionalistic and rather economically coined concepts like "green infrastructure" and "ecosystem services". Is this focus corresponding with your emphasis on instrumentality?

Generally the concept of green infrastructure is important and timely because politicians can understand the value of improving our environment. But to tell you the truth: green infrastructure on its own is not that interesting to me. It's a little bit like talking to an architect about engineering. Architects will, of course, respect engineering because engineering is fundamental to building but they're not necessarily going to say that this is it. There's so much more. Whenever I speak about instrumentality, I need to clarify that for me it's the full spectrum of issues – the poetic issue, the aesthetic issue, the cultural issue and so on. It is not just function alone. Instrumentality in its broader sense does have a particular virtue. For example, the iPhone is a fascinating invention and exquisitely designed but its prime motivation is how it works. It's the performance of it that is optimized through a very beautiful design. So let's be artists, let's be poets and let's produce beautiful things, but let's drive them from a prioritizing of how they actually work. Let's enjoy the beauty, the joy and the delight of having something that works, exceedingly well.

Sounds great, but I feel that currently many colleagues are just too easily willing to surrender to a purely economic rationale, and that seems really critical to me.

Yes, because it lacks the cultural dimension. It's like a machine that works but is not very lasting, not very inspiring and not very transformative. Equally irritating to me is provocative design work that is purely formal and aesthetic but has very little influence outside of a small group of landscape architects who might enjoy these particular provocations. We should stop thinking about it as either-or, as science versus art, economy versus poetics or personal expression versus cultural work. Let's look at the landscape architectural and urban project more synthetically.

Please have an educated guess: Where will landscape architecture go in the coming ten years?

The best direction for the field is to become more intelligent with regards to the city, because the city is where all the problems and possibilities are. If we want to live on a sustainable planet we need more people in cities, and maybe there is a new way to think about what a city is and how a city is made. Let's think of a city as if it was a landscape. When we say "landscape", most people today think of green, but many natural landscapes are not green. The city is a sort of a topography, a network, a fabric of encounters and experiences, exchanges and transactions. So why can't we begin to take on the city in a much more adventurous way, understanding the city as a network of complex systems and interfaces? Landscape architects have a better disposition towards the city than architects. Architects tend to have a very masculine way of operating, what they call "their project". They can often do that because their client is a relatively singular client,

compared to the more inclusive and contested public realm that we have to work in. This complex context requires what I call "a more feminine approach", open to negotiation and discussion. The feminine is very effective in absorbing the blows during a project, taking the feedback, actually shaping something and understanding that a project is not going to be a fixed project from beginning to end but that it will inevitably evolve. Architects don't like to see a project take different shapes and different forms. They think that their project is their project. Whereas landscape projects inevitably shift in shape and form, and it's just whether or not you're comfortable working that way, understanding the city as a complex amalgam of dynamic systems with multiple voices.

What we really have to understand is that the city (and maybe the broader landscape too, including public space) does not have a single author; it is a multiplicity, both created and received by multiple people. Landscape architects are continually operating in a public sphere and clients are typically multi-headed with serious differences of opinion and competing agendas. Our work is trying to reconcile all of these forces and opinions through design creativity. Unlike the solitary artist, the urbanist landscape architect is inevitably caught up in a complex milieu of forces that shape the work. We sometimes have to work like a choreographer or a director, managing many different voices, and a huge part of our work is rhetorical and constructive. That's what I learned from John Dixon Hunt. The art of rhetoric is needed for the construction of an argument, the basis of any project. You have to be able to listen, understand and absorb many different sets of information but also to reformulate inputs argumentatively – not from a negative, cynical point of view but from a constructive, inventive point of view. It's not as simple as being just the economist or the artist, the engineer or the poet. We

have to be both and more, because our work is political. In our office we probably spend 60 percent of our time doing political work, trying to construct and put forward the narrative, the argument – absorbing the blows and the inputs and using those inputs to shape and advance the work in creative, meaningful and truly transformative ways.

I thank you very much for sharing these valuable insights and thoughts with us!

Professor Andreas Hild, dean of the Department of Architecture at the TU Munich, James Corner and Professor Udo Weilacher (from left to right) during the honorary doctorate ceremony at the Vorhoelzer Forum in Munich

