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The Dimension of Time (Patience): Working with Fragilities

These balconies change from year to year. Situated on the south-facing façade of a new building in the middle of the city, they all feature a variety of planters and pots, empty and idle in the winter, full of shrubs, herbs and flowers in the summer. Exuberant growth can be observed on the balconies each year, each year differently, and then it decays until the spring comes again. An old container, transformed into a neighbourhood meeting venue with its name in big letters mounted on the roof, stood for some years in a run-down nearby park while the surrounding buildings were under construction. For a while it hosted a pop-up café, run by students who came from different places south of the Mediterranean and who knew how to make Moroccan mint tea and spicy soups. Then the buildings were finished, the park was remodelled, and the container moved on, to a vacant building plot where the next step of district redevelopment was planned. The same container, the same name, the same letters. But now supplemented by a new café in another container, a small bicycle repair shed, and a beehive. Over time, wooden constructions came to populate the surrounding surfaces: pergolas, trellises, shelters, benches, vegetable beds, finally an arch and an entryway – a garden. Each year something new arrived and something old left. Elsewhere, at a shopping mall in another city, two female landscape architects together with residents created a small neighbourhood garden as an extension to the reading rooms and indoor facilities of the district library. Nothing glamorous, no planters, no flowers, but colourful objects that could be used as benches, tables, or playgrounds. After some years they were removed and did not return. Further out in the same city, on former agricultural land, a vacant old mansion surrounded by a grove of huge old trees was purchased by a private person who tore everything down to build a shining new villa. The landscape architect who noticed this carnage became upset that the municipality had started transforming the surrounding fields into building plots to develop a new residential district, including a small park where they came to plant very small trees. In yet another city, a former wharf has been continuously and experimentally transformed into a new urban district, with a loose master plan during the first 10 years, developing situations somebody cares for into places that even more people will care for – a collective landscape. Meanwhile, estate agents have discovered the area, making money here and there. But for a couple of years now, two female designers – a landscape architect and an urban planner – have been directing the overall operation, learning from each other, jointly creating new protocols

for urban development, designing new residential typologies, and imagining collective landscapes. Nothing is being built as of now. Open-ended. Ross Gibson writes:

Some aesthetic forms ‘dramatise’ change. I call them ‘changescapes’. They help us know mutability by immersing us in it, by letting us be with it. Change is their theme and it is often their matter too, for they are usually of fragile and ephemeral stuff that reacts to altering conditions in the larger world. Transformations happen at their boundaries, at the limits between the inside and the outside of their systems, and then the symptoms of change become manifest in them, palpably available for our contemplation.¹

Urban landscapes, from small balconies to entire urban districts, harbour a range of fragile attributes that are easily overlooked because of their instability and transience, and which are exactly the attributes that add an essential quality to urban life. Working with these fragilities seems to ask for another form of design, namely of landscapes as changescapes. Such design does not necessarily involve the procedure taught in architecture schools: draw a plan for a client, hand it over to craftspeople to build, and deliver a finished work. Changescapes might not prompt a full-fledged plan, come with clients or require conventional crafts, and they might never be seen as finished. They might invite continuous care. Changescapes seem to be more easily recognised and created by women designers.

¹ Ross Gibson, “Changescapes: Complexity, Mutability,” in: *Aesthetics* (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2015), 7.