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Finding Women Landscape Architects in Scandinavia

This text is to recall and reflect upon my personal experience of participating in this project and how it has given me a new perspective on the role of gender in the academic and professional fields of landscape architecture. Over the past ten months we have had three physical workshops and four digital ones, where I had the opportunity to meet some women landscape professionals from Scandinavian countries. At the first digital workshop I was still a little unsure what the whole project was about, who was in the network (and why), and what my role was. But these questions gradually found their answers during the first physical workshops in Copenhagen and Malmö, when we worked in small groups indoors and in the field. People were no longer just names and faces on Zoom. They were the prolific and hospitable Henriette and Svava, the senior and experienced Catharina and Torben (the latter one of the few male participants), the young and energetic Karin and Johanna, the outgoing and smiley Vera... Together they made up a “group portrait” of Scandinavia’s women landscape professionals.

During our day trip in Malmö last November, we had lunch at a small establishment called Yalla. A woman arrived late and sat next to me. While waiting for our food to be served, we started talking. On her mobile phone, she showed me her beautiful and dreamlike light sculptures. I did not know who she was, and I thought she was an artist. Later that afternoon, we visited the *Glass Bubble*, and then I got to know that Monika Gora – that was her name – was also a landscape architect. The *Glass Bubble*, a glasshouse shaped like half an almond, provides a warm and green space in a windy coastal area. It is well used and loved by its owners, the elderly people who live in the apartment complex that has embraced the bubble.

After coming back from that field trip, I sought out Monika’s works and became very fond of them. Unlike the many sculptures/land artworks/landscape projects that honour monumentalism, her designs have a light touch on the ground, without claiming to be a dominator of the original setting (such as *Two Piers*). Her light sculptures are like playful children, bringing warmth and energy to the often cold and hard environment. Most if not all of her works have a calming and accepting nature that invites people to interact with them, both physically and mentally (such as *Metamorphosis*). Maybe this could be called a feminine approach/character?

Before joining this network, I was not aware of the relevance of gender to landscape research and practice. The project activities opened up this new perspective for me by asking “where are the women?” and provoking us to explore each other

as well as ourselves. There was a distinctly unique atmosphere here that I had not experienced in other research project activities.

For example, each workshop had a number of tasks that we had to complete at breakneck speed. It was unlike conventional research, where one does fieldwork to collect data and afterwards spends a long time analysing the data and writing up the findings. Instead, we did everything almost simultaneously: go into the “field” (sometimes a field in the physical world, sometimes a field in your mind, or your peer group members’ minds), observe, document, and present your findings and reflections. Because we were only given a small amount of time, we knew we were not expected to produce a grand piece of research, which removed the stress/pressure caused by the quest for perfection. The working process was a flow. What we needed to do was to follow this flow, experience it and document it as authentically as possible.

Since the tasks were done collectively – working either in teams, or individually but in the same place and at the same time – and people shared each other’s work, I sometimes worried whether what I had created was good enough.¹ This mentality was a little annoying, but I learned during the process to replace it with a more playful mood. We supported each other and appreciated each other’s ideas and works. Therefore, the moment of sharing was not a time to be critical, but a time to enjoy the diversity as all the ideas came together.

Several of the methods used in this project involved the self and bodily experience. For example, the travelling transect fieldwork method allowed travellers (that is, project participants) to “design their journeys to encompass field preparations, being in the field and refining field findings, in various acts of ‘thinking together’ pre-, during-, and in post-journey discoveries”.² The yoga warm-ups before the writing workshops, the writing of reflective texts, and the review process also became a journey of self-exploration and a discovery of the mind-worlds of others. Removing the mask of objectivity, and allowing personal feelings and memories to emerge, produced great freedom and joy in doing research.

The whole experience has questioned the boundaries of how research is defined, in terms of both content and method. The network has created a warm, welcoming and encouraging magnetic field that generates multiple connections: connecting

1 When reviewing this text (reviewing each other’s texts was one of the project activities), Catharina pointed out that this worried mindset might come from the academic environment we live in: “We are encouraged so much to compete, and we are forced to compete for funding and also forced to accept being reviewed in ways that we do not always think are in line with our intentions” (Catharina Nolin, personal communication, 25 October 2022).

2 Women in Danish Architecture, “Malmö Travelling Transect 25 Nov. 2021,” Flyer for first physical workshop 2021.

mind to bodily experience, connecting self to others, connecting perspectives from different times and disciplines. Connecting is a way to cross boundaries and create flows. Perhaps this is a demonstration of what a feminine approach is?

Reference

Women in Danish Architecture. "Malmö Travelling Transect 25 Nov. 2021". Flyer for first physical workshop. 2021.

