Editorial

A New Normal – Three Reflections on JoDLA 2021

Landscape Architecture as a discipline was already in upheaval at the beginning of this century; "digital landscape architecture" was already a community, and a conference, a body of work, and a fertile ground for innovation. At the beginning of last year, DLA2020 was intended as one more physical gathering of the tribe, with JoDLA 5-2020 slated to have the largest page-count yet. Then came the tidal wave of novel CoronaVirus complications and pandemic lockdowns. DLA2020 went virtual overnight, and ushered in a year of Zoom, Zoom, Zoom, videoconferences and virtual presence, all the time, everywhere … Now as we approach the anniversary of that time, with 're-entry' plans and promises of a return to 'near-normalcy', landscape architecture as a discipline, and DLA as a community, face an uncertain future with only one certainty – the usual one: change.

One such change that we have already benefited from, starting with DLA2020, is the inclusion of a larger and more diverse international audience for DLA than ever before, and with a lower carbon footprint for their participation than ever. In particular, more students from more parts of the world than ever before have been welcomed into, and contributed to, the community and the conference.

We – especially in educated/academic/affluent societies – have learned that many things analog and physical, such as telephone handsets and in-person meetings, printed pages and paper currency (though not good food, forest walks, or close human companionship) can be replaced with virtual equivalents, along with a balance sheet that tallies both advantages and disadvantages of all of these (perhaps false, but nonetheless functional) equivalencies. Less commuting, less air travel, potentially lower carbon footprint; more tools for online collaboration, more development of Mixed Reality software, more global outreach and participation. In education as well as practice, and in research and academic conferences, the results are mixed, and unevenly distributed, but there are many indicators that the 'new normal for the third decade of the 21st century will entail a number of dramatic changes, as well as more gradual ones; in economics, employment, entertainment, computation and communication, real-estate, environmental design, and construction, the irreversible imprint of COVID-19 will surely be visible.

In a 2021 Pew report (https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2021/02/PI_2021.02.18_New-Normal-2025_FINAL.pdf) an impressive array of researchers, futurists and observers predict a vast panorama of post-pandemic changes – some good, some bad, some ugly – from better tele-medicine to worse proliferation of misinformation … Documenting how these changes reverberate in landscape architecture is the work of the DLA.

What are the essential tools of landscape architecture? Mixed Reality, drone-mediated site-visits, and machine-learning-from-big-data approaches to geospatial analysis have all been accelerated to launch velocity, as reported in this JoDLA 6-2021. What are the dimensions of 'landscape'? Beyond those I have called 'Olmstedian' (topography, vegetation, water and structures) we now must anticipate dealing with virtual and intangible equivalents, including digital signals and sensations, sensors and actuators, virtual and collaborative experiences

delivered through new- and social-media. Can a video-game environment be considered a work of landscape architecture? Is a virtual forest a forest at all? Is a responsive landscape alive? What kinds of virus lurk in the cyber-wilderness? How do bio-informatics, autonomous vehicles (air-, land-, and sea-), high-tech urban farming and 'tele-everything' affect the lives and work of landscape architects, and planetary citizens? These questions are grist for the JoDLA mill. Read on!

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In Digital Landscape Architecture circles the term virtual reality has been used for decades.

It was always associated with representing the real environments via a digital replacement. While these replacements of reality were rather crude in the beginning, they have now become convincingly real in a sense that it is hard to distinguish nowadays whether something is real or simulated and virtual.

Similarly, conferences such as the Digital Landscape Architecture conference were always held in real environments where we could meet real people. Nowadays, the term virtual also stands for meeting real people via online communication platforms thus introducing some sort of a virtuality as we do not meet other people in person, we only meet them virtually.

This is somewhat similar to a representation of a virtual reality which is always some sort of an abstraction of the real world. In a virtual conference environment interaction with other participants is less spontaneous, less interactive, less sensory, less everything, but it allows to interact with other people in the Digital Landscape Architecture forum and it allows to exchange ideas without the need of travelling. At least, this also helps somewhat to mitigate the climate change effects of conference travel.

From a more disciplinary perspective, the advantages of representing our environments virtually, also frees up time and opens opportunities for exploring distant locations when for some, in these times, travelling is either not permitted or when it has become rather difficult due to quarantine or other regulations.

In this sense, virtual reality, is a real bonus and suddenly the old claim that we can save time and money through virtual reality becomes somewhat real. E.g., estate agents have learned quickly and for prospective buyers instead of visiting property in person, they have adapted quickly to the new situation and offer panoramic explorations of property or even stereoscopic walkthroughs by using a mobile phone in a stereo device thus saving time and money on the side of everyone involved in the process of buying or selling property.

As in previous years, conference presentations at the Digital Landscape Architecture conference will make use of virtual reality and will let us all explore remote places around the globe, sharing ideas, new insights and providing inspiration for future research.

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After a year of virtual work, we are conducting our second virtual DLA conference. Early reports indicated that many really appreciated this opportunity for working virtually; I have not been one of them. As an introvert I am fine not chatting with people, but I prefer "parallel play" – I enjoy the feeling of being around people who are also working. I suspect that it has also been a difficult year for everyone else. However, I can think of two quite positive things that may have resulted from being forced into virtual lives.

First is that a lot more people have been exposed to the DLA Conference. I hope that we continue to have inexpensive virtual attendance and that we explore more ways to integrate it with in-person attendance. I am also excited about the increased exposure for the Journal of Digital Landscape Architecture as an open-source journal about developments in the field. I hope many more people consider it as a way to share their research and practice experience.

Second is the search for ways to make the virtual experience more palatable; to reduce "Zoom fatigue." It looks like some of the techniques that have been discussed at the DLA for a decade and more are about to go mainstream. For instance, Microsoft intends to bring Mesh, the mixed-reality platform that works with its Hololens, to Teams. While we have been experimenting with VR, AR and MR for some time, this will give us an opportunity to actually use it for teaching and collaborative design.

Ben Franklin is supposed to have said, "Out of adversity comes opportunity." We have been shown the adversity, now we need to seize the opportunity.

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