

2017

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Recommended Citation

McGinniss, J. (2017). Walk the Future like a Landscape: Theorizing an Interdisciplinary Approach. *Urban Library Journal*, 23 (2). Retrieved from <http://academicworks.cuny.edu/ulj/vol23/iss2/4>

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Walk the Future like a Landscape: Theorizing an Interdisciplinary Approach

Jeremy McGinniss

Abstract

Locating the place of the academic library in the current socio-political, economic environment is a fraught task. Being able to visualize library function in the future is even more difficult. The three concepts of maintaining perspective, creating context and building connections serve to anchor this presentation. Informed by the writings of John Stilgoe, Keller Easterling, James Scott, and related library literature, this presentation locates these three concepts in two different metaphors. The first is that of a giant; the second that of the ant. These metaphorical views provide and are dependent upon perspective, context, and connection. Employing the giant and the ant offers opportunity to engage examples from landscape studies, space studies, and cultural studies in order to illustrate why libraries must think both like the giant and the ant. Theory and history, as realized in shared vision of the giant and the ant, engage the constantly changing nature of things in order to work meaningfully and actively within that environment. Locating perspective, context, and connection in discussions of library futures generates a rich and thought-provoking engagement with seeing, hearing, and interacting with the past and present.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary, Future of Libraries, Library landscape

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Landscape is regularly deployed as a term in the library literature as a means of giving scope to concepts such as the “landscape of practice,” “information literacy landscape” or “the landscape of the library.” What, then, is actually being addressed when talking about landscape and how does it affect future planning?

Defining Landscape

As a term, landscape is multi-layered. Thompson (2004, p.1) defines landscape as “simultaneously a physical environment and way of perceiving that environment; it is both a world and a culture constructed to make sense of that world.” When used in the library literature the term is typically deployed as shorthand describing the state of an idea or practice at a particular moment in time. Employing landscape as metaphor generates related metaphors such as horizon, mapping, explore, exploring, journey etc.; terms which also have a long history in the library literature. How do these metaphors shape our thinking about the present and future? As Shannon Mattern (2017, para. 16) observes, “metaphors shape policy and modes of governance.” Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 30) support this, writing “your field of vision defines a boundary of the territory, namely, the part that you can see.” Landscape is an ontological metaphor used “to comprehend events, actions, activities and states” (p. 30). While **what** is perceived is important, it is even more important to understand **how** landscape is perceived. It is in regarding the “how” that the interdisciplinary connection of the landscape metaphor and library becomes clear. Landscape studies seek to see the intersection of past and present in order to prepare for and engage in future action. The area observed is seen in the present but the observer must also see the effects of the past actions and decisions which brought the present into being. To be effective in the future requires the close observation of traditions and patterns of the past to better understand their shaping of the present and subsequently the future.

Building upon Thompson’s definition, Stilgoe, a prolific landscape studies historian, defines landscape (1982, p. 3) as “shaped land” that has been acted upon “by contrivance, by premeditation, by design.” Landscape as shaped land recognizes that some force, or forces, were active in that shaping. This is particularly poignant in examining library futures considering what forces have shaped and will continue to shape library practice, role and impact. As poet Claudia Rankine (2017, p. 151) observes “we’re all together inside a system that scripts and constructs not just behavior but the imagination.” We shape and are shaped by the landscapes we inhabit.

In the landscape there is evidence of the past and suggestions of the possibilities of the future but neither are perfectly clear or fully realized. Stilgoe (1999, p. 111) calls for the observer to see the landscape in both present and future, illuminated by the ghostly past; “the explorer looks around and sees the patterns and revelations

disclosed by things absent.” He calls this practice “seeing the nothing” (1999, p. 111). The ability to see things absent gives form to the past in the present. Seeing the nothing is to see the landscape in its present form as well as to see the forces that both are and have been active in shaping it. In her article about landscape in library practice Lloyd (2005, p. 572) writes “the structure and organization of landscapes affords a range of opportunities for people to engage with the sources of information that give the landscape its unique shape and characteristics.” Lloyd connects the shaping of the landscape to engagement with sources of information following Stilgoe’s definition. Thompson’s definition of landscape as a place both constructing and constructed gives weight to the idea that information similarly shapes and can be shaped by its readers. Patterns of shaping are revealed in and over time, interpreted through a set of traditions and practices. The ability to identify patterns for future action requires perspective, context and connection. These three ideas are given significant weight in the library literature on future planning. However they are too often considered individually rather than combined together. As an imaginative way of collectively engaging future thinking with perspective, context and connection, consider the examples of the giant and the ant.

The Giant

Benton MacKaye, the progenitor of the Appalachian Trail, laid out his vision for the project placing “the reader on the trail at a high altitude and likened their range of vision to that of a giant” (Easterling 2001, p. 67). MacKaye writes (1921, p. 325) “Let us assume the existence of a giant standing high on the skyline along these mountain ridges, his head just scraping the floating clouds. What would he see from this skyline as he strode along its length from north to south?” The giant can see very far in time and space, providing a sense of the terrain in all directions. The giant sees both present and past states. The giant moves slowly but covers significant distance when in motion. The giant can connect what seem to be isolated events because of the scope of vision. The giant must be careful when walking because of the distinct possibility of crushing what is underfoot. The giant’s distance from the landscape affords a mosaic-like view of the world in view, allowing for connections and overarching understanding of seemingly disconnected events.

The Ant

Gaston Bachelard (1994, p. 169) captures how the ant’s view reframes the world. “He lay down behind the blade of grass/ To enlarge the sky.” The ant sees the details and obstacles on the ground and moves quickly over short distances to engage and interact with them. The ant possesses an intimate knowledge of its immediate environs though lacking a greater understanding of the surrounding terrain. The ant is aware of the changes to the landscape as is the giant but sees

them happening more immediately and limited to the ant's location. It takes longer periods of time for the ant to cover the same ground as the giant but the ant explores and knows the intricacies of the topography and the terrain. The ant experiences the more immediate impact of the events that the giant observes at a remove.

Perspective, Context, Connection

The ant and the giant both offer perspective, context and connection to the landscape. Wessels (1999, p. 21) writes "seeing nature in a larger context...[provides] a fuller understanding of the patterns that have shaped its landscapes. Through some knowledge of history and the broader view of seeing a forest and not just its trees, we begin to see the forces that shape a place...Reading the landscapes is not just about identifying...patterns...it is an interactive narrative." Wessels identifies perspective, context and connection in this quote arguing for how recognition of the collective roles played by these concepts is essential to understanding the shaping nature of landscape. The future requires that we are able to hold these three ideas from the point of view of the giant and the ant simultaneously. Considering perspective, context and connection only from the giant's or ant's view results in a fundamentally incomplete understanding of the landscape. Understanding landscape as "shaped land" locates shaping forces from a distant and close perspective, identifies internal and external contexts and placing these at the center of a web of connections. It is necessary to recognize this incompleteness when encountering ideas such as innovative disruption or the latest technological offerings whose proponents claim have the power to reshape education.

To reiterate, neither the giant's view nor the ant's view is complete on its own. The giant and ant tell their stories as informed by their points of view. Separately these points of view appear complete but instead must be combined if the future is to be thoughtfully and meaningfully engaged. The giant and ant offer metaphorical reminders of an integrated way of seeing the future as a shaping force currently in progress that is also shaping our response to that future. Ellsworth (2005, p. 38) acutely observes "[pedagogical] dynamic[s] that create the *experience* of an idea, of a way of making sense of self, the world, and self in the world...encounters with the future as in the making."

The giant and the ant not only see the landscape's past; they are also observing the landscape as it is being shaped in the present. MacKaye provides an example of how this can be done as Easterling (2001, p. 44) describes; "MacKaye proposed looking long enough to see, in time lapse, the activity changing a slowing animating landscape—to see not the still but the motion picture." Graham and Thrift (2007 p. 10) build upon this idea arguing for the necessity "to see beyond [the working

service]...to the empire of function” that is, seeing the nothing which has impacted, and is still impacting, the landscape in order to understand how to proceed. It is such an empire of function that produces the system(s) within which libraries operate. Consider the ACRL Framework | Standards debate. The function of the Framework is difficult to understand without understanding the Standards. This history should be recorded, studied and discussed, as it already has been, to recognize and trace the development of the role and pedagogy of information literacy. In a similar vein, understanding the role, growth and history of discovery layers, proxy services, vendor agreements and infrastructure; places where the library engages with the empire of function that purports to operate transparently but whose actions must be understood as landscape shaping. The ubiquity of these functions requires the future-ready librarian to see the nothing at work, particularly when seeking to engage particular traditions and practices established as standard. As Drabinski (2014, p. 480) observes, “Standards are abstract and posited as universal, they fail to account for the local and contextual nature of teaching and learning.”

The landscape, as it carries the imprint of past and present actions, shapes acts in the present with an eye towards the future. As Easterling (2001, p. 41) observes regarding MacKaye’s giant: “The high altitude enlarged views while the narrow path collapsed many historical epochs into a single body and a single moment.” The “enlarged views” is the giant, dreaming and planning for the future, while the ant is focused on the individual moments in time. High altitude contains the greater perspective and context while the narrow path also links perspective, of the single moment, with context and connection. Brought together the giant and the ant serve as a means of observing the landscape of librarianship offering an “inversion of perspective” where “the miniscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world” (Bachelard 1994, p. 149, 155). Serving the future requires that we both enlarge our vision and concentrate it; bringing together theory and history to inform practice.

Hall (2003, p. 163) reminds us that “cultures are composed not only of cultural institutions, but of symbols and representations...[that are] a way of **constructing meanings** which influences and organizes both our actions and our conception of ourselves.” Culture and landscape are active forces in the construction of meaning, tradition and practice for those engaged or enmeshed in those contexts. Recognizing this allows librarians to examine the past, present and future broadly identifying patterns of innovation and tradition as set within a framework of standards of practice. Seeing libraries as places that shape and are shaped by the campus environment, administrative decisions, vendor options, and faculty perceptions in addition to the shaping work of greater political, economic and social forces is an exercise in holding an enlarged view of the past while maintaining a narrow view of the individual moment which is essential for the future.

Wessels (1999, p. 15) describes understanding the shaping work of the landscape as learning to read the history imprinted upon the landscape. He describes this as “helping people read the history written in the landscape by seeking clues that explain differences.” If the reader understands that the landscape is shaped by its history, what should the reader look for when working to decode those shaping moments as inscribed in the present landscape? Learning to recognize the effects from disturbances in the physical landscape such as (p. 15) “fire, blights, logging, etc” serves to teach the reader what to look for, enabling them to recognize the signs when reading other landscapes. The work of learning to read the landscape shapes the reader as knowledge is produced. As a shaping force, reading the landscape takes on pedagogical significance and weight. Specific to this case, pedagogy of information literacy seeks to employ perspective to look at information, the context in which information, and its use, occurs, and subsequently explores and builds connections. From as broad a topic as the landscape of librarianship to the specific landscape of a particular library why should we care about a particular landscape? How do we look at it in a meaningful or purposeful way? How does this motivate and guide the focus of our actions? Easterling (2001, p. 67) addressing the legacy of Benton MacKaye observes the following:

“MacKaye’s infrastructures had no definite boundaries but rather a repertoire of possible behaviors that could change over time. A site of intervention, understood to be part of an ecology, need not attempt comprehensive control over the organization to affect it. MacKaye’s interventions were wild cards, usually involving partial or tactical adjustments that would have some radiating effect within the organization.”

As sites of intervention, composed of a repertoire of possible behaviors what partial and tactical adjustments can libraries make for effective future engagement?

Wendy Holliday in her keynote address for the 2017 Information Literacy Summit specifically addresses the desire of librarians to engage students as active agents of critical change, the giant, while also wanting them to learn keywords, the ant. Can librarians do both? Holliday advocates for the possibility of connection through any means available, including that oft-maligned information literacy vehicle, the one shot. Holliday urges librarians to take advantage of any opportunity, arguing for the value of opportunities to connect with students and building upon those connections when teaching information literacy concepts that transcends students’ time at the university. When viewed through the giant and ant metaphors, Holliday’s keynote serves as a strong reminder that librarians are teaching for the future as well as the present.

Conclusion

How librarians proceed into the future will be shaped by the means that professional librarians choose to read the landscape and take action. Efforts like OA Button, Project Info Lit, Center for Open Science, [SocArXiv](#), Open Journal Systems, LIS Scholarship Archive, Humanities Commons, and punctum books should be heartening and also be supported. Libraries have the ability and power to change the landscape but we need to marshal our forces and expertise to do so. Engaging the vision of the giant and the ant requires that we change how we are seeing. Marshall Berman (1984, p. 123) captures this sentiment perfectly when he writes

“my horizon...[is] crowded with human passion, intelligence, yearning, imagination, spiritual complexity and depth. It’s also crowded with oppression, misery, everyday brutality, and a threat of total annihilation. But the people in the crowd are using and stretching their vital powers, their vision and brains and guts, to face and fight the horrors.”

Theory and history, practice and place as realized in the shared vision of the giant and the ant, recognize the constantly changing nature of things and endeavor to work meaningfully and actively w making imaginative connections to the past for action in the present with an eye to future impact.

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