



Pages from Alexander von Humboldt's *American Travel Diaries 1799-1804*: showing post-travel reflections pasted directly on top of on-site travel notations. Source: Berlin State Library/Prussian Cultural Heritage

Criticality in Research/Criticality as Praxis: Knowledge tools for designing urban futures

Course responsible:

Lisa Diedrich, Prof. of Landscape Architecture/Director, SLU Urban Futures
Andrea Kahn, Prof. of Site Thinking in Research and Design, SLU Landscape

Examiner:

Lisa Diedrich, SLU

Higher education credits: 4 ECTS

Subject area: Landscape Planning/ Landscape Architecture

Language: English

Prerequisites: Registered PhD students in fields concerned with urban landscape futures (design, planning, environmental science, landscape architecture, architecture, urban history, ecology, architecture, sustainability studies etc.)

[Application requirements can be found on page 8]

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"Thinking is an action. For all aspiring intellectuals, thoughts are the laboratory where one goes to pose questions and find answers, and the place where visions of theory and praxis come together". bell hooks

"Broadly speaking, criticality comprises - and is a composite of - three things: thinking, reflecting and acting. In emphasizing "action" in addition to thinking (in the form of argumentation and reflective judgment), "criticality" might thus be seen and conceived of in relation to established definitions of critical thinking as trait." Martin Davies

"Knowledge is always knowledge for what. It must be interpreted to suit the practices, and practices must be ready to integrate knowledge" Helga Novotny

Introduction

Critical thinking, an interactive process that puts theory and practice into productive contact, deploys the active power of thinking to destabilize apparently stable worlds (Dewey). Criticality goes further still. As a socially situated thinking practice, reflecting and acting criticality exposes a disposition to position oneself outside received frameworks of understanding to engage other-wise, and in other ways, with the world (Davies). Such critical processes and practices do not belong to any one disciplinary domain or practice-based arena. Rather, they proffer tools for observing and gleaning understandings from the many forums through which useful knowledge gets produced, and operates.

Thanks to its simultaneous embrace of academic research and professional practice, landscape architecture's design field harbors critical – in the sense of significant – potential to synthesize distinct work modes, operational methods, and forms of knowledge. The practice of designing urban landscapes involves weaving together insights and know-how from many academic disciplines (natural and social sciences, technology, humanities, etc.) and non-academic professional arenas (industry, politics, culture, and more). Thinking critically – in the senses of reflectively and seriously – about how such interactive interweaving happens can yield valuable knowledge for grappling creatively with challenges arising from uncertainties surrounding urban futures as well as important research questions for theoretical consideration.

Critical theory recognizes that practice always and already informs the work of theorists (Brenner). It is also attentive to the circumstances conditioning its production. As such critical theory, like criticality, is always both a reflective and situated practice. Building upon these fundamentals, this course, "Criticality in Research/Criticality as Praxis", aims to mobilize the insightful force of critical thinking to enrich and help evolve epistemological norms and received practices towards new forms of knowledge production. It offers participants a chance to engage with texts on critical theory, critical thinking, criticality and reflexivity; analyze publications written from a critical perspective on urban landscape futures; and undertake an exercise in critical writing. Adopting a landscape architectural perspective, it welcomes researchers from multiple disciplines, in order to rehearse interactive and synthetic critical thinking processes. It is open to participants who wish to sharpen understanding of their own research aims within broader disciplinary contexts, and to strengthen their capacity, as researchers, to contribute to the evolution of landscape knowledge for sustainable urban futures.

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Course structure

The core of the course is an intensive 2-day seminar (with four ½ day-sessions scheduled over 3 days, in fall 2020) that will take place at THE FACULTY OF ARCHITECTURE AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT, TU Delft, The Netherlands, from 5 to 7 October 2020. The timing is such that participants may have an opportunity to attend the International Architecture Biennial Rotterdam, (assuming no scheduling changes to the IABR 2020). *Note: Applicants must confirm availability to travel to Delft and will be responsible for their own travel and accommodation costs.*

Coursework

Preparatory coursework (independent)

Prior to attending the core seminar, students undertake four types of preparatory work. This allows participants to familiarize themselves with a shared body of literature, and each other's PhD research topics. Prior to meeting at the core-seminar, each participant will:

- closely read 2-3 required sample critical writing texts
- closely read 4 required theory literature texts (3 PDFs; one book, to be purchased)
- prepare 4-sentence *rhetorical précis* paragraphs for each theory text (guidelines provided) and circulate via mail to all participants;
- prepare a 3-sentence *critical précis* (guidelines provided) of the critical position they wish to develop in their paper, and a 1-paragraph synopsis of that final paper topic

estimated time: 30h

Core Seminar coursework

The core seminar takes place over 2.5 days, and includes four half-day long work-sessions. The first two sessions focus on assigned literature, including examples of critical writing on landscape topics and theoretical texts from various fields. Presentations and student discussion of sample critical publications will emphasize how (and why) such critical texts are produced. Discussions of theoretical literature will address key, framing concepts, guided by the reading of participants' *rhetorical précis*. The final two work sessions focus on developing participants' critical research praxis, using the *critical précis* as a tool to sharpen positions, nuance vocabularies, and strengthen writing skills. Constructive inputs on student written assignments will be driven by fellow PhD students, Lisa Diedrich and Andrea Kahn. The core seminar will include two lectures, one on critical design practice by Lisa Diedrich (Director SLU Urban Futures platform, and editor of Landscape Architecture Europe/LAE) and one on critical research praxis, by Andrea Kahn (design theorist, SLU professor and founder of designCONTENT, a strategic consultancy for designers).

estimated time: 20h

Post-seminar coursework

4 weeks devoted to final critical paper. Papers will be evaluated by Lisa Diedrich and Andrea Kahn.

estimated time: 50h

Course Timeline

20 APRIL 2020

Preliminary course information available, circulated through networks

15 JUNE 2020

Application deadline (see below, p.8, for application requirements)

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Course Timeline (cont.)

15 AUGUST: 2020

Distribute updated course information, literature list, course schedule, and participant list

until OCTOBER 2020 (hours allocated at participant discretion)

Preparatory work period for course reading and preparatory course assignments.

EARLY OCTOBER, 2020

Four (4) *rhetorical précis*, *critical précis* 1-paragraph final paper synopsis due (circulate to participants)

5-7 OCTOBER 2020

Core PhD seminar, four (4) ½-day work sessions at TU DELFT (exact locations TBC)

CORE-SEMINAR: OVERVIEW OF 4 WORK-SESSIONS (preliminary hourly schedule, TBC)

½ DAY 1 MONDAY 5 OCTOBER SESSION 1 (Room X)

13:00-13:45 **Course Introduction**
WHY/WHAT/HOW/WHO/WHEN and WHERE

Session 1: Critical FRAMES/Critical RESEARCH

14.00 Talk – “Critical WRITING Praxis”
14.30 *Break*
14.40 Author presentation of sample critical text – How’s it done? Why is it done?
15.30 *Break*
15.45 Group Discussion – How is a critical position articulated? Group discussion literature
16:45 Summary of day/overview of session 2
17.00 *End of day*

DAY 2 TUESDAY 6 OCTOBER SESSIONS 2 & 3 (Room X)

Session 2: Theoretical FRAMES/ Critical RESEARCH PRAXIS

Advance Preparation: Participants draft 4 *rhetorical précis* (1 per assigned text) adhering exactly to guidelines provided, and circulate to all participants via email 48 hrs. prior to start of core seminar

8:45 Introduction to day’s work
9:10 Talk: “Research as Praxis/Practice as Research”
9.45 *Break*
10.00 Discussion of required theory articles (Brenner, hooks, and Novotny; see Literature list, p. 9 below) initiated by reading aloud of participants’ *Rhetorical Précis*
11.00 *Break*
11.10 Discussion of required theory articles – continued
12:00 Summary of session & overview of Sessions 3/4

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12.15 *Lunch break*

Session 3 WORKING knowledge: Formulating critical positions [TAKE 1]

Advance Preparation: Participants draft their own *critical précis* and read their peers' 1-paragraph final paper synopsis (proposed topic, and relevance to PhD work);

13.15-17.30 Critical research practices and knowledge production.

Seminar work session: Participants verbally present a brief pre-prepared critical position statement (the *critical précis*) of their proposed paper, for constructive critical inputs and discussion from peers and course professors. Focus on position and argument development - *Why* choose to write on that subject? *What* do you want your reader to 'take-away'? *How* are you contributing to current discourse in your field? Discussion will focus on strengths and weaknesses of outlines, conceptual clarity of *critical précis* and direction/suggestions for iterative rewriting of the *Critical Précis* (for follow up discussion during Session 4)

17.10 Summary of Sessions 3 findings/overview of Session 4

17.30 *Close of day*

½ DAY 3

WEDNESDAY 7 OCTOBER

SESSION 4 (Room X)

9:00-13.00 **Session 4 WORKING knowledge/Refining critical positions [TAKE 2]**
PhDs' present revised *Critical Précis* for second round of peer driven constructive critical inputs. How did your position statement and/or argument evolve in response to preliminary critical inputs? Further discussion of evolving critical positions, directions/suggestions for writing of Final Paper (15 minutes per person)

12:00 Wrap up Session 4

12:30 Core Seminar Wrap-up: final paper pairings, course evaluations, etc.

13.00 *Joint Lunch*

November 2020

Final paper submittal

Course description

"Criticality in Research/Criticality as Praxis" aims to strengthen awareness of the variety of critical theory and practice models available to academic and professional actors in the landscape field. Setting a landscape focus guarantees a shared arena for the coursework, making it easier to recognize how diverse knowledge-creation practices (including but not limited to design) generate understanding and contribute to the evolution of landscape-relevant discourse and action. The course is suitable for researchers from all disciplines concerned with the constructed urban landscape (design, planning, environmental science, sustainability studies, landscape architecture, urban history, heritage, ecology, architecture, etc.).

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Why take a landscape perspective?

The landscape field, intermixing concerns of interest to the humanities, the creative arts, the natural and the social sciences, offers a model for synthetically and critically thinking and working across disciplinary domains. As a composite knowledge area, landscape cross-fertilizes spatial, scientific, cultural, historical and regulatory perspectives. People who work in the field recognize that landscapes never exist in isolation, and are therefore best considered as dynamic constructs, complex systems and networks of simultaneous, multidirectional environmental, ecological and social exchanges. As such, landscape - as an area of study, and landscapes - as empirical realities, do not lend themselves to narrowly siloed research or sectoralized action.

Why criticality?

According to the 1990 Delphi Report by the American Philosophical Society, critical thinking is an essential tool of inquiry, making it indispensable for the individual researcher interested in ideas and concerned with the pursuit of knowledge. Criticality, extending beyond a tool to a trait or disposition, involves the ability to think outside a framework of conventional understandings; to think anew, to think differently (Burbules & Berk). In this sense, criticality can best be viewed as a practice that concerns not just the individual active thinker, but how active thinkers participate in the world. For this reason, criticism as a mode of *enacted criticality* has the ability to influence “not just how we see and understand the world, but how we act in, and in some instances, change it.” (Czerniak).

Why research and praxis?

Within the academy, engaging in a practice of socially situated thinking, reflection and action (criticality) allows researchers and educators to distinguish and discern how academic disciplines “work”. By identifying preferred and established disciplinary methods, in turn, makes it possible to recognize how such work methods inform pedagogical practices and epistemological outcomes. It reveals research (often associated with theoretical endeavors) as a practice, or praxis, in its own right. Encouraging reflection on how thinking, learning and creative knowledge production happen, this course invites the meta-cognitive and a meta-disciplinary stance associated with synthetic, integrative research (Boix Mansilla). Inviting participants from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, the core seminar provides a space to rehearse how knowledge gets actively constructed when individuals with differing views and backgrounds work together.

Why include participants from many disciplines?

Every discipline operates within, and associates with, its own normative set of practices, beliefs, and values; what matters to one discipline (what it deems worth examining, ‘critical’ – in the sense of crucial - to address) does not necessarily hold the same importance to another. In multi-disciplinary work situations, the distinct value-sets that associate with separate disciplines come into contact, but with little substantive impact; individuals (be they academic or professional) continue to work from their own discipline-specific position even as they share expertise. Interdisciplinary collaboration occurs when researchers from diverse disciplines jointly focus on a common problem; layering a variety of working knowledges increases the likelihood that integration of perspectives may result. Transdisciplinarity has at its core the creative and synthetic integration of multiple perspectives, knowledge production practices and disciplinary expertise (Sill). Prioritizing mixed methodologies to establish new practice domains, transdisciplinary practices dissolve boundaries and found new social

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and cognitive spaces. Critical thinking and criticality play key roles in opening up such new territories, encouraging active reflection upon how 'other' ways and worlds of work productively destabilize one's own.

Course content

The course has 3 aims: provide participants a framework for understanding criticality in design research and practice; expose them to various models of critical research writing; and offer tools to enrich the constructive criticism toolbox and sharpen critical thinking, reading and writing skills.

The 2-day core seminar includes close reading and in-depth discussion of sample critical publications in Landscape architecture, to increase familiarity with critical writing formats; close reading and in-depth discussion of 3-4 relevant theory literature texts, using the *rhetorical précis* tool to improve critical reading skills; and presentation, discussion and iteration of each participant's *critical précis* and final paper synopsis.

Learning outcomes

The course offers students these learning outcomes: how to develop an understanding of the concept of "criticality" through reading and group discussion of theoretical literature; how to critically reflect on their own working research praxis and assess how it shapes their capacity to forward critical positions in their work; how to engage in guided peer feedback to constructively comment upon and refine research aims; how to articulate, elaborate and integrate critical thinking in their PhD related research practice; how to use rhetorical and critical *précis* tools to support quality research.

Results and requirements

Course participants are expected to

- read all compulsory course literature (literature packages will be provided)
- write rhetorical *précis* (follow instructions provided and circulate prior to core seminar) and rehearse use as a critical reading tool
- develop critical *précis* (follow instructions provided) and rehearse use as a critical writing tool
- prepare a 1-paragraph synopsis explaining relevance of proposed paper topic to PhD work
- attend a 2-day seminar and actively contribute to discussions of readings and peers work
- give constructive critical feedback on a pre-final draft of one (1) participant's final paper
- hand in an elaborated paper at the end of the course

(for details on seminar assignments & *précis* guidelines see "2020 Criticality Assignments" PDF)

Critical reading/critical writing- why use rhetorical précis and critical précis tools?

Disciplinary training predispositions us to interpret, and formulate, critical positions as researchers in particular ways. Every research fields prioritizes its own set of issues and frames research questions differently; therefore, what 'catches our eye', sparks our interest, motivates us to engage in developing counter arguments and responses depends on our learned frames of reference.

To bring forward the formative relation of disciplinarity to working knowledge, the course adopts two "shared tools" to structure the critical reading process and in-seminar group discussions: the *rhetorical précis* and the *critical précis*. These tools help highlight the impact of disciplinarity on research and working knowledge and how that relation shapes understanding. Adopting these shared tools sets up

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the precondition for rich group discussion; adhering to a common writing format immediately and vividly renders the range of interpretative, disciplinary and critical positions apparent. All students are expected to strictly observe the given formats for each tool. [Instructions on how to write a “rhetorical précis” and a “critical précis” will be provided as appendices to the course literature package].

Participants will utilize the rhetorical précis method to critically synopsise required theoretical reading. This tool for recording and understanding the essential elements of a text follows a tightly structured 4-sentence format (see *Rhetorical Précis Guidelines*). It focuses reader attention on the relation between *what* a piece of writing says (its content), and *how* that message gets conveyed (its form). In a concise paragraph, précis-writers present the author and genre of a text, explain its discursive context, recap the major assertion or thesis, mode of argumentation, stated and/or apparent purpose, and define the relationship between author and audience. Less neutral than a simple summary, rhetorical précis-writing builds analytic and critical reading skills by exposing value frameworks at work in the development of arguments by paper authors and their readers/interpreters.

The critical précis tool provides a similarly strict writing format for participants to articulate their own critical positions, in the form of a brief statement synopsizing the arguments they wish to develop in their final paper. The 3-sentence critical précis (see *Critical Précis Guidelines*) is adapted from a model for articulating research questions and goals developed by, and borrowed from, Booth, Colomb and Williams (*The Craft of Research*: University of Chicago).

Final paper writing

During the seminar, participants will present a 1-paragraph synopsis of their proposed final paper topic and its relevance to their PhD work, and two (2) iterations of a critical précis, for discussion and inputs. Following the seminar, participants develop a paper, not to exceed 3000 words. Prior to the final paper, participants will provide written comments on the pre-final paper draft by one (1) of their peers. Parings for this constructive critical input exchange will be set during the core seminar.

Final paper requirements

Each participant will submit a word.doc text file, following submission guidelines provided during the core seminar. (November 2020)

Course evaluation

At the end of the core seminar, participants must complete a SLU course evaluation form and a brief questionnaire as a prerequisite to receiving a final grade/course certificate.

Application Requirements

To apply, candidates should please submit the following to SLU Profs. Lisa Diedrich & Andrea Kahn (lisa.diedrich@slu.se; andrea.kahn@slu.se) by **15 JUNE 2020**:

- a 1-page abstract of their PhD, including title of the research project
- a 1-paragraph statement with their motivation for participating in this course
- PhD start date, name of supervisor(s) and home institution

Note: A nominal fee of 100 euros will be required from non-SLU students. Accepted students will be asked to provide their invoicing information for processing.

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LITERATURE LIST (unless otherwise noted, required literature will be provided in PDF format)

Required Theory Literature

Brenner, Neil (2009) 'What is critical urban theory?' *City*,13:2, 198-207

Brenner, Neil (2017) "The Agency of Design in an Age of Urbanism", A dialogue with Daniel Ibañez, *Critique of Urbanization: Selected Essays* (Basel: Birkhauser) 224-237

hooks, bell (2010) "Teaching 1, Critical Thinking", *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York, Routledge)

Nowotny, Helga (2017) *An Orderly Mess* (Budapest, CEU Press). **Participants must purchase book**

Required Critical Publications

De Block, G., Vicenzotti, V., Diedrich, L. Notteboom, B. (2019), "For whom? Exploring landscape design as a political project" *JoLA: journal of landscape architecture* 14:3, 4-8

De Block, G., Lehrer, N., Danneels, K., Notteboom, B. (2018), "Metropolitan Landscapes? Grappling with the urban in landscape design" *Spool: journal of architecture and the built environment* 5:1, 81-94

Sijmons, Dirk (2020), "Contrast, Contact, Contract; Pathways to Pacify Urbanization and Natural Processes", in *Nature Driven Urbanism, Contemporary Urban Design*, (ed.) R. Roggema (Springer International)

Related Literature (recommended for participants wishing more background)

Akkerman, S.F. and Bakker, A. (2011) "Boundary Crossing and Boundary Objects", *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (June), 132-169

-discusses reflection as a mechanism for recognizing and explicating different practices.

Boix Mansilla, V. (2010). Learning to synthesize: The development of interdisciplinary understanding. In Edited by: R. Frodeman, J. T. Klein, & C. Mitcham (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook on interdisciplinarity* (pp. 288–306). New York: Oxford University Press. (AK: Possible FOR RECOMMENDED READING)

Burbules, N. C. and Berk, R. "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits" in *Critical Theories in Education*, Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler, eds. (NY: Routledge, 1999)

- posits an alternate criticality *as practice*, a way of being as well as thinking

Czerniak, J. (2018) Thinking it, doing it: Landscape criticism's range and agency, *Journal of Landscape Architecture*, 13:3, 5-7)

-editorial overview of a JOLA issue devoted to the culture of critique in Landscape architecture

Davies M., (2015) A model of critical thinking in higher education in M.B. Paulsen (ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, 30

-comprehensive overview distinguishing between critical thinking, criticality, and critical pedagogy

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Related Literature (cont.)

De Block, G., Vicenzotti, V., Diedrich, L. (2019) "Revisiting the high line as sociopolitical project" *JoLA: journal of landscape architecture* 14:3, 72-73

Facer, K. (2019) *Learning to live with a lively planet: Renewing the mission of the European University*. Inaugural Lecture for the Zennström Professorship in Climate Change Leadership Uppsala University, 1st October 2019
- reimagining the university

hooks, bell (2010) *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York, Routledge)

Nowotny, H., Scott, P and Gibbons, M, (2003), " 'Mode 2' Revisited: The New Production of Knowledge", *Minerva*, Vol. 41, No. 3, Special Issue: Reflections on the New Production of Knowledge 179-194

- discussion of Mode 2 knowledge, providing a summary of arguments presented in the authors two earlier books, *The New Production of Knowledge* (1994) and *Re-thinking Science* (2001)

Sill D. J. (1996) Integrative thinking, synthesis, and creativity in interdisciplinary studies. *The Journal of General Education*, Vol. 50, No. 4, Best of JGE: Featuring Articles from 1984–2000 (2001)