Introduction

This anthology, Defining Landscape Democracy: A Path to Spatial Justice, presents a collection of essays that explore the concept and processes of a relatively newly formed term. As with all new concepts, it is not always evident what the term actually means. One way to clarify is to elicit a discussion that includes a variety of approaches, reflections and understandings of an emerging ontology in landscape studies, one which extends into a political realm and acknowledges a particular dimension of an aspired social existence: democracy as it relates to landscape.

We acknowledge that the extent of this collection is not exhaustive or representative of all possible angles or examples of landscape democracy. The majority of the authors in this book are landscape architects, yet there are several other contributors from spatial planning, cultural geography, philosophy, sociology, landscape management and architecture – all of whom share a mutual interest in social justice. The scope of these case studies is international and includes Central and Southern Europe, the Middle East, South America, the USA and Scandinavia. This variety of geographies, areas of knowledge, and perspectives is critical to forming the concept of landscape democracy that will continue to evolve into a universal concept of spatial justice.

The contributions to this book thus seek to frame, and at the same time propel forward, an interpretation of what landscape democracy means, but also how it can be imagined, performed, critiqued, and expanded to affect global environmental change for ‘a new democratic engagement occurring across space, time, and generations’ as articulated by Charles Geisler in this volume (pp. 54–55).

We have divided the book into two parts. Section A frames the discourses and includes several ponderings and theoretical observations on landscape democracy. Section B presents case studies to contextualise the various abstract notions in real space and landscape, discussing these in relation to a number of different perspectives, both theoretical and from a practice angle. Nonetheless, each chapter stands as an independent piece telling its own story, understanding of landscape, and visions for landscape democracy.

Section A: Framing the discourse

In her chapter, ‘Democratic theories and potential for influence for civil society in spatial planning processes’, sociologist and spatial planning researcher, Lillin Knudtzon, introduces us to democracy in spatial planning processes through an overview and analysis of four fundamental types of democratic systems, their robustness, and the challenges associated with each approach to governance. She codes these: L (liberal), P (participatory), D (deliberative) and R (radical).
For each category, she clearly highlights the role of the individual versus that of the collective. Most importantly, she does not stop at describing what is already known, but enters the realm of utopia by laying out a model for a healthy democratic process able to direct change toward outcomes that represent the diverse perspectives of all people. Radical, bottom-up approaches, even those engaged in tactics that go beyond the traditional governmental sphere, are integrated into this process.

What happens after landscape change decisions are made? This question is partly addressed in the following chapter by geographer Michael Jones. ‘Landscape democracy: more than public participation?’ goes along the lines of Knudtzon’s democratic landscape change process model. It offers a richly argued critique of participatory landscape design and planning. Jones’ findings from the Trondheim metropolitan region in Norway illustrate how democratic institutions and power relations are reflected in the construction and re-creation of the Norwegian landscape. He describes the conflicts between top-down decisions and the radical re-appropriation of public space to construct new community landscapes for the benefit of all. These cases and experiences inform a theoretical model explaining the type of landscape transformations different institutions may be able to generate, and the actors involved in these landscape changes.

Beirut-based landscape architect Jala Makhzoumi presents a pertinent approach to landscape democracy. In her chapter, ‘Landscape architecture and the discourse of democracy in the Arab Middle East’, Makhzoumi introduces readers to the problematic of a colonial concept of democracy, illustrated by the processes of top-down so-called democratisation imposed by the West in Arab Middle-Eastern countries. While providing the explanation for why democracy is often resented and not openly embraced in these countries, she argues for the role of landscape in working towards a local democracy. Public space and parks represent the loci for the daily, everyday performance of democracy; these are places where democracy could be learned and practised in the long run. As the landscape is a quintessential cultural construct, it becomes the ideal vessel for the values and beliefs of residents. It is both the outcome of social processes and a structuring element for new processes of social construction. Landscape, as she suggests, ‘contextualises democracy’. This entails overcoming challenges, which Makhzoumi says are unique and contextual, and can only be managed through a landscape approach to envisioning change, which includes its physical transformation as well as the governance processes needed for its maintenance and survival.

Another chapter that focuses on the instrumentality of understanding the cultural agency of landscape is Italian geographers Benedetta Castiglioni and Viviana Ferrario’s ‘Exploring the concept of “democratic landscape”’. They describe a way of identifying a democratic landscape from the perspective of the landscape as a physical and visual expression of a particular society, its values, beliefs and attitudes. Their chapter begins with a discussion of the European Landscape Convention and its democratising definition of landscape as inclusive of any landscape, whether the everyday, degraded, or outstanding. This is
reflected in a renewed effort on the part of policy-makers to engage communities through participation in decision-making and policy-setting. The authors argue that this might result in an ‘exercise in democracy’, that is, a way to redefine citizenship (and ownership) of the landscape. The Venetian region in Italy offers a case in point, while also exemplifying a landscape seen by many as aesthetically compromised, no longer beautiful, and thus badly managed. The authors’ analysis reveals that the disorderly looking landscape is in effect representative of the changing values and landscape attitudes of the people of the region. Moving away from the common association that only a visually pleasing landscape represents a well-functioning and just society, the authors argue that there is a need to dig deeper into immaterial components of the landscape to evaluate its democratic character.

At a different landscape scale, and presenting a planetary perspective on the consequences of the environmental crisis on society and democracy, development sociologist Charles Geisler’s chapter, ‘Shatter-zone democracy? What rising sea levels portend for future governance’, tackles some complicated unknowns. At the global scale, the overwhelming challenge is to redefine humans’ relationship to the landscape in all coastal areas, where the social effects of climate change and rising sea levels are likely to have the most dramatic consequences. The author suggests that the solution may need to be a paradigm shift that deeply alters established relationships between people and nature, and between land and sea. But he warns of a major risk: in light of these unprecedented challenges, the solution may become centralised, top-down and removed from the experience of residents and individuals, and landscape democracy may become politically inconvenient.

The political nature of landscape is also stressed by landscape architects Shelley Egoz, Karsten Jørgensen and Deni Ruggeri in their chapter, ‘Making the case for landscape democracy: context and nuances’. They argue that, in order to make a case for landscape democracy, one would need to acknowledge the political potency of landscape and its universal value. The main axiom is that landscape is a life-supporting system of material and emotional needs and a common resource. Democracy itself is an elastic concept and does not always deliver equality and social justice. Landscape democracy is a complex concept influenced and shaped by multiple variables requiring mindfulness of context and nuances. Yet the main message is that while each situation has to be handled according to specific social and cultural manners, the underlying doctrine must remain an ethical commitment to justice in terms of social equality.

The above six chapters offer some theoretical approaches. Section B provides an array of examples in an attempt to contextualise how these ideas relate to a multitude of situations, whether it is conundrums in the professional arena of activating a democratic versus an undemocratic top-down process, or stories about places where such processes have taken place, including authors’ reflections and insights about their interpretations of landscape democracy.
Section B: Contextualising landscape democracy

In the first chapter of this section, ‘Towards democratic professionalism in landscape architecture’, landscape architect Paula Horrigan and architect Mallika Bose discuss the democratic professionalism of landscape architecture, in relation to the social trustee and radical critique models of professionalism, and their blend, democratic professionalism, as studied and taught in academia. Six landscape architecture educators whose teaching and scholarship centres on democratic design praxis contribute to the understanding of democratic professionalism’s pathways, positionality, praxis and purposes.

The role of professionalism in landscape democracy is explored further by landscape planner Andrew Butler, who, in his chapter, ‘Landscape assessment as conflict and consensus’, raises the question of what it means for landscape assessments to deal with landscape as a democratic entity, through studying both the process and the final assessment documents, and asking how they may provide transparency in landscape planning processes. Landscape assessment has the potential, he claims, to contribute to democratic landscape planning by providing a medium for questioning the values of landscape, and discussing landscape and democratic processes.

The democratic process as it relates to design and landscape architecture is also what landscape architect Richard Alomar addresses in his chapter, ‘Invisible and visible lines: landscape democracy and landscape practice’. How, he asks, can landscape architects achieve more equitable and democratic outcomes through their work? The chapter presents three urban projects where invisible and visible lines serve as a point of departure for a review of the design process. The lines may divide social classes, define properties, or delineate infrastructure and jurisdiction, and working in this landscape requires an approach that allows a broad inclusion of people and methods of engagement, in contrast to the traditional role of the expert that produces top-down designs based on accepted planning regulations.

In ‘Enacting landscape democracy: assembling public open space and asserting the right to the city’, another landscape architect, Joern Langhorst, illustrates how most theoretical perspectives on the relationship between the spatio-material and the democratic, foreground highly diverse, contested and uneven urban processes’ formation and transformation. Langhorst argues that various systems of neo-liberal restructuring are threatening democracy. He proposes adopting the concept of ‘assemblage’ as a methodology by ‘[c]onceptualizing public urban space as being continuously “assembled”, and operating in fluid environments with various human and non-human actors that intersect and interact’ (p. 108). This, says Langhorst, has the potential to enhance understanding of the relations between the actual and the possible, as well as the various ways that urban inequality is produced and experienced. In addition, assemblage can be imagined as collage, composition and gathering, offering generative and actionable ontologies and epistemologies.

Landscape architects Lilli Lićka, Ulrike Krippner and Nicole Theresa King investigate a historical context of social democratic ideals in their chapter,
‘Public space and social ideals: revisiting Vienna’s Donaupark’. They examine the role of parks as urban public spaces that mirror the dynamic histories of planning approaches, design concepts and ideologies. They conclude that although common characteristics of landscape democracy, such as citizen participation in decision-making and a bottom-up process, were not embraced in this case: it is ‘a huge success in terms of “social green”’ (p. 126), adapting well to changing social needs over time. Their analysis highlights that what we might often define as practices for landscape democracy is not necessarily the only way to achieve landscape democracy.

On a community scale, and focusing on people’s interaction and participation, landscape architect Deni Ruggeri demonstrates in his chapter, ‘Storytelling as a catalyst for democratic landscape change in a Modernist utopia’, how storytelling can enhance participation and engagement in a community development process. Through a case study of the Italian new town of Zingonia, the relevance of residents’ stories as tools for achieving sustainable, democratic change is revealed, moving a community from inaction and despair toward hope, through democratic, collective action.

Movement in a different sense is the physical crossing of boundaries as a democratic right that is discussed by landscape architect Tim Waterman in his chapter, ‘Democracy and trespass: political dimensions of landscape access’. Waterman views legislation against trespassing, and the barriers to physical access to landscape that it creates, as ‘a sign of the breakdown or denial of democracy in the public sphere’ (p. 143). Democracy, he argues, is based on values of egalitarianism; enclosure is undemocratic and those who are denied access have a right to resist it. In highlighting mass trespassing events in 1930s England and the more recent Occupy movement, Waterman makes the case that ‘[t]respass is necessary to the defence of democracy, as is the idea of utopia: the dream of a better world beyond those boundaries’ (p. 147).

A group of Scandinavian countryside planning researchers, Jørgen Primdahl, Lone Søderkvist Kristensen, Per Angelstam, Andreas Aagaard Christensen and Marine Elbakidze, in collaboration with philosopher Finn Arler, add to this argument in their chapter, ‘Rural landscape governance and expertise: on landscape agents and democracy’. They claim that landscape democracy must go further than the present highly individualised and market-oriented landscape management, which has resulted in an increasing number of economic, environmental and social problems. According to the authors, the three key agents – the individual manager, the public agency and the local community – have to find new modes of collaborating constructively. The aim is to reach a level of trust and collaboration that enables the evolution of local dialogue-based institutions, such as territorial co-operatives or similar kinds of collaborative landscape initiatives.

More insights on countryside landscape management and boundaries are presented in the chapter, ‘Managing cherished landscapes across legal boundaries’. Landscape architect Morten Clemetsen and geographer Knut Bjørn Stokke investigate, through case studies from Western Norway, how management regimes of protected nature and landscapes depend on the stakeholders’ democratic agendas and perceived legitimacy. They suggest that education of
landscape planners should enhance skills and values so candidates may work as ‘integration actors’ and promote democratic and transboundary landscape management. Their theory lays the foundation for an integrated, network-based democratic landscape governance system. In this way, the authors begin to answer the question left open by the previous chapter.

The following three chapters are based on case studies in which the authors themselves were involved, and argue that landscape democracy has in effect been realised in one way or another.

The first is the chapter, ‘Landscape as the spatial materialisation of democracy in Marinaleda, Spain’, by architects Emma López-Bahut and Luz Paz-Agras. They apply the work of contemporary critical theorist Nancy Fraser regarding three scales of justice: the distribution of resources, recognition of individual rights and political representation, and analyse the development processes in Marinaleda against those criteria. They conclude with the uplifting message that, although never stated as a goal, a bottom-up democratic process ‘transformed the town and its urban and agrarian landscape through a genuinely democratic process, representing a tangible expression of their society’ (p. 187).

Also addressing bottom-up processes is architect Eleni Oureilidou’s chapter, ‘Planning the cultural and social reactivation of urban open spaces in Greek metropoles of crisis’, describing bottom-up initiatives for landscape democracy. The biggest challenge of public spaces in Greece is to correspond to social changes caused by the economic recession, immigration, and identity fragmentation. Bottom-up initiatives have to take into consideration the complexities of multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. In such cases, urban open spaces may work as incubators of cultural co-habitation and self-organisation. The author describes her involvement with a team project, ‘Kipos³-City as a resource’, in the city of Thessaloniki, mapping vacant spaces within a densely populated urban fabric to identify areas suitable for urban agriculture. The process involved social capital and fully embraced the community as an equal partner.

Social capital is also a key factor in the chapter, ‘Landscape democracy in the upgrading of informal settlements in Medellín, Colombia’, by landscape architect Eva Schwab. Informal settlements’ governmental upgrading initiatives focused on spatial and infrastructural improvements based on participatory planning and design processes. Public open spaces proved to be key intervention sites of urban upgrading programmes, as they triggered wider social and physical change in the areas.

The last two chapters explore further angles on the role of public spaces in democracy.

The Occupy Gezi Park events in Istanbul, Turkey, in 2013, started as a protest against the privatisation of a public park; it became an iconic series of events addressing people’s demand for democracy and for the right to landscape. Turkish-born landscape architect Burcu Yiğit-Turan claims in her chapter, ‘Learning from Occupy Gezi Park: redefining landscape democracy in an age of “planetary urbanism”’, that there is no such thing as an innocent reading of the production of a landscape. She describes how the Occupy movement revealed the way in which fragmented pieces of neo-liberal economic forces came
together in a transformative way to destroy a people’s cherished landscape. She argues that where there are conflicting interests, a mitigating consensus process will not deliver justice. Rather, it is exactly such expressions of conflict as those that were encountered in Gezi Park that are essential for the revelation of, and for achieving, political justice that might bring about progressive change.

In the last chapter, ‘Democracy and the communicative dimension of public art’, architect and philosopher Beata Sirowy presents the problematic of making decisions about the type of public art in cities. Discussing recent public discourses in Norway, Sirowy describes the tensions between an artist’s freedom of expression and the public’s acceptance of an art creation that is presented in public space. The author shows how public art, like any other intervention in public space, may strengthen or limit the role of public space as an arena for collective action, depending upon whether it sustains ownership and sense of belonging, or reinforces alienation. She then suggests that in order to embrace democracy in this context, the criteria for selecting art to be exhibited in public space should adopt a hermeneutical theoretical perspective inspired by German twentieth-century philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose ‘perspective [on] the meaning of a work of art is neither once and for all determined by the author and waiting to be deciphered, nor freely constructed by the observer. It is, rather, negotiated between the observer and a work of art’ (p. 231).

Overall, this collection presents varied perspectives on landscape democracy, and we hope this is just the beginning of a continuing discussion that will become another path to spatial justice.

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