



Pieter Uyttenhove, Michiel Dehaene,
Luce Beeckmans, Ana Michelena, Bruno Notteboom,
David Peleman, and Dagmar Pelger (eds.)
Labo S Works 2004–2014.
**A Landscape Perspective
on Urbanism**

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The importance of *Labo S Works 2004–2014. A Landscape Perspective on Urbanism* may, perhaps, be underscored by making a comparison to the Outlook Tower. At the end of the nineteenth century Patrick Geddes (1854–1932), the Scottish biologist, sociologist, and urban planner, bought a tower on a hill at the edge of Edinburgh, Scotland. He called it the Outlook Tower. Once ascending the tower, the visitor—aided by a camera *obscura*—could observe the continuity of city and region around Edinburgh. Then by descending one level, he landed in a gloomy space named the ‘inlook’ room, and was offered a seat for contemplation. Finally, when entering the tower’s lower levels, in which Geddes had displayed a wide array of research tools, the visitor observed a body of knowledge gathered from various sciences and spatial observation instruments, showing the evolutionary phases of Edinburgh, the entire English-speaking world and, ultimately, Western civilization. A splendid collection of topographic, thematic, and relief maps, paintings, drawings, photos, globes, and measuring instruments represented a panoptic observatory that was founded on an evolutionary cosmology. The visitor discovered the spatial patterns of the past and the phenomena of regional social welfare, which—seen as germs—the planner could regenerate for the near future. The Outlook Tower was an exhibition machine, as well as a reform machine, aiming at the emancipation of the citizen into a cosmopolitan. By attending Geddes’ Summer School programmes, the citizen could learn to observe evolutionary landscape transformations, expressed by the universal principles of what Geddes called the ‘survey’. The survey was the galaxy from which to observe and get an evolutionary panorama of existing landscapes. According to Geddes, before one starts to make plans and designs, the survey, as the knowledge instrument *par excellence*, should be practiced: survey before action.

Observing is a complex neurological exchange between the eye and the brain, implying several levels of understanding. In a heroic attempt to observe the world behind the veiled Flemish urbanized rural landscape and legitimize their survey interventions, *Labo S Works* demonstrates research by design instruments, not in the sense of blueprint drawings but as a way of visual thinking. The authors’ reflection on

observation processes appears similar to the act of contemplation that Geddes intended in his ‘inlook’ room. The book offers erudite observations, and retrospective reflections, on research projects developed by design teams—in variable compositions—at the urbanism laboratory of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning at Ghent University over the decade of 2004–2014. The book opens with a timeline showing the chronology of the research projects (pp. 19–20) and concludes with a catalogue of the projects and their commissioners (pp. 169–198). Textual essays and an ‘image gallery’ are piled high from start and finish, reflecting on the urbanization patterns of the Flemish territory. The texts are prototypes of the authors’ strategy to dig deep into urbanism processes. In ‘Strolling Through Landscapes: A Labo S Chronicle’, David Peleman and Pieter Uyttenhove explain how they approach the Flemish landscape, observing the territorial, historical, visual, and social dimensions. In ‘From the Nebular City to the Horizontal Metropolis: Notes on the Continued Urbanisation of the Flemish Territory’, Michiel Dehaene scrutinizes the challenges and pitfalls of recent urbanization theories and methods, aiming to make a dash for the long-term urbanization process of the Flemish territory. In ‘Landscape as Image’, Bruno Notteboom considers the notions of the Flemish landscape and demonstrates the importance of landscape representation. In ‘When the Mayor Calls the Designer’, David Peleman and Dagmar Pelger reveal how Labo S communicates with their commissioners, who expect tailor-made solutions for the problems they face.

Labo S connects specific survey methods, spatial instruments, and concepts to key notions of ‘landscape’. By stressing it as an instrument the landscape is given various meanings: ‘an analytical device, a design instrument and a communication tool’ (p. 128). These meanings are fundamental to unveil the Flemish landscape. The map, the photo, and the analytical drawing are considered to be a spatial deposit of (historical) knowledge and observation of the territory. For instance, the book includes a research project about a landscape approach to areas with few historically valuable elements; a study about regional identity; research by design concerning innovative collective residential projects; and, a

re-photographing assignment coupled with a study on the twentieth-century metamorphosis of the Flemish landscape. The book proposes the Flemish landscape as a perfect example of international decentralization patterns. The authors, however, do not believe in a linear evolution. They make an evocative statement in their editorial: 'By studying real places which go largely unnoticed, and examining concrete problems that are not debated in the spotlight of the media or academia, Labo S champions the cause of the urbanized landscape in its position as anti-hero: an almost ridiculous character in the grandiloquent epic of spatial planning, a role predestined to take all the flak in situations which it has nothing to do with. By starting from a certain empathy for the landscape, by immersing itself in it and getting to know it, Labo S was able to feel the fragility and impotence of the landscape with respect to oversimplified spatial dynamics and processes' (pp. 7–8). Their self-reflective journey through the veiled Flemish landscape initially looked like a safari through a nebulous urbanity, but on closer observation—getting acquainted with the layers of understanding—they identified a kind of 'underground' urbanization at work, an accumulation of landscaped commodities with their own shapes and features, changing and hyperactively reacting to violence, fear, greed, challenge, or whatever libidinous traces of the international market. Having observed the many faces of private initiative in Flanders, the authors do not embrace the canonized, fashionable, and moralizing analyses of the contemporary *condition urbaine*. No doom scenarios, such as the 'generic city', no vague 'nebula cities', no blends like *Zwischenstadt*, no city-countryside dialectics about 'sprawl', no magic-realistic *genius loci*. Instead, based on fieldwork, Labo S proposes the creation of image archaeology and mapping of the underground forces.

What happens with research by design in a situation when commissioners almost beg for instant interventions, policy recommendations, and problem solving, but mostly lack the power, or are otherwise unable, to enforce plans? This brings us to the quintessential difference between the concept of the Outlook Tower and the concept scaffolding *Labo S Works*: the certainty that knowledge of the past does not offer guarantees for the future, and that planners

working in an insecure ambience need to rephrase their commissions. Labo S is not a reform machine, but a thinking machine. The results of their visual thinking activities are, like in every good research, unpredictable. As explained in the essay by Peleman and Pelger, the designers ask, in an intelligent way, for a time-out in order to recapitulate and reconsider the design question or commission patiently, to introduce fieldwork, and to visualize and imagine the urbanistic topic at stake, also in the interest of the patron and the performer(s) who are eager to intervene. The strength of accommodating design questions and planning problems in a laboratory situation is the recognition of risks and chances that the experiment entails.

How are the commissioner(s), the stakeholders, and the design team communicating? In fact, the landscape is presented as the stage for an urbanistic role-playing game. The designer acts not as a creative hero, but more likely as a mediator who aims at 'healing'. This might sound as a fairly soft game, or like kissing a wound. But, the wounded landscape is the residuum of a historical conglomerate that is already wrinkled by infrastructural and other spatial incisions. The wound has to be healed through a subtle operation capable of avoiding too much scar tissue. Labo S researchers fuel the dialogue between problem owners and negotiations about operations in the Flemish landscape with well-described targets and an operative procedure. The outcome of the preparatory work in the laboratory is not a designed object with Labo S as an author. They work as an actor in the overall design process and are in charge of the game. Labo S is an Outlook Tower without belief in evolutionary progress and, as such, does not deliver blueprint solutions. On the contrary, by using the collective capacity of the players, it offers a toolkit to facilitate a close reading of spatial conditions and create tailor-made proposals.

So far, so good. Nonetheless, the book sparks a disconcerting question, tellingly by making no pronouncements about the present position and the condition of urban design and landscape planning. The authors do not explain which are the contemporary urban planners' specific tasks, but they cheerfully embrace the challenge in the proper understanding that they will be among

the many authors or, at best, process coordinators of the future landscape. Some people may see the modest attitude emerging from Labo S as a fitting and correct answer to the contemporary 'need' to integrate participatory design. Others may consider it to be the last phase of a long evolutionary process—from overall planning in the era of the monarchs during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the bourgeois elite in nineteenth century to the democratic planning guided by experts in the twentieth century, and, finally, the indecisiveness and feeble-mindedness of contemporary politicians and policy makers—with urban designers following in their wake—working in a crisis society where people are predominantly participating only in their own backyard; a view implying that urban design is in decline and that we can no longer expect any big plans. This simplistic story of the loss of morphology in contemporary landscapes is not really at stake. We live in a turbulent society, which we are unable to understand because we are standing right in the middle of it. So, it seems astute to produce surveys presenting knowledge and helping us to observe landscape processes and their transformation. We still need survey before action.

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