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The Diagrammatic Landscape

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1   Introduction

This paper reflects on an ongoing research led project with students of landscape architecture at Edinburgh College of Art with the purpose to enhance understanding of visual reasoning, in particular the engagement of spatio-temporal dynamics. The living quality of a visual field is generated by the tension between the spatial forces acting within it (KEPES 1969), providing capacities to elicit sensations, effects and motivated gestures. For landscape architecture to invest visual technique with agency stems from the capacity to visually configure spatio-temporal dynamics, visually translating dynamic interactions through the interplay of abstract gestures and effects. This describes the dynamic potentials of the visual field, but one that requires critically framing the conceptual motivations that direct these complex configurations. The diagrammatic landscape presents this framing, as a performance imperative that seeks to explore how signs are motivated toward particular effects to strategically engage the landscape.

Fig. 1:   example of the composite qualities of montage

2   Key Concepts

This project developed from research that synthetically framed visual concepts from contemporary practice, then presenting these to students within a workshop structure where in turn they could experiment with abstract material and provide a reflective basis to refine the conceptual framework. This process sought to explicate the nature of visual configuration, where the diagrammatic landscape is a synthetic framing to enhance knowledge of visual performance. From this we can summarise some of the key concepts that were effective in advancing understanding on visual reasoning.

Abstracting & Relating: The relational aspect describes a process that allows us to manipulate the pliability of landscape through an art of relationships that critically engage contemporary circumstances (CORNER 1999). Signs consist of elements that act as substitutes to what they reference in reality, which combines to visually display the nature of

a dynamic interaction through relational conditions (VIDLER 1999), elucidating spatial dynamics with a view to the transformation of a given context.
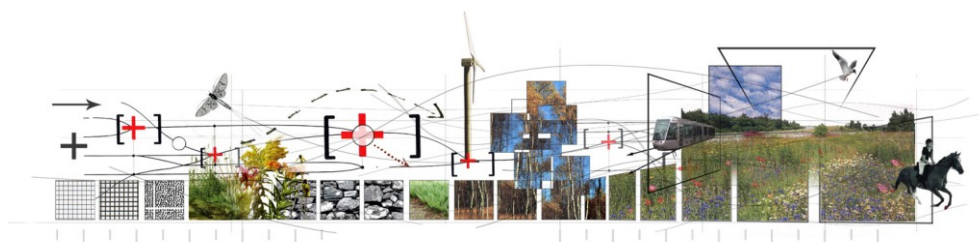

Fig. 2: example of the range of visual elements, from abstract to pictorial.

Hybridising & Interrelating: two different modalities are particular to the visualisation of landscape; 'vertical representations to horizontal signs' (KWINTER 1992). By identifying this planar modality a comprehensive visualisation of the landscape can be formed, where operational overview is dialectically interrelated with scenic perspective. Hybridising can work across planes of modality, juxtaposing visual information by integrating both scenic and operational modalities within a single dynamic visual field.
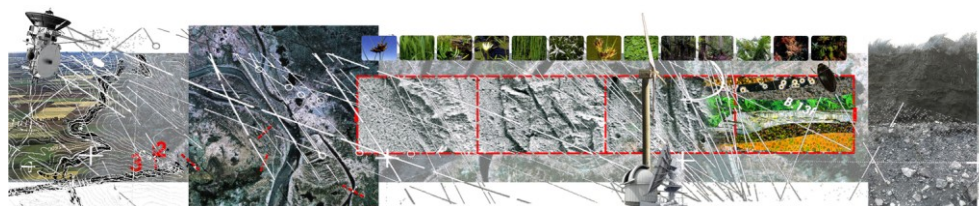

Fig. 3: example of the diversity of elements and scales within synthesised configuration

Synthesising & Constructing: the visual field can interrelate across scales, modalities and planes of expression, where varying scales, scopes and types of data can be brought into expressive interplay, shifting between the general and specific, individual and collective, fluid and fixed, as a dynamic overview where relationships between patterns, process and scale, events, movements and space can be examined.

Compressing & Intensifying: through a process of elimination and reduction, the isolation of specific aspects can create precise statements of expression, as a progressive compression of detail that retains information relevant for a particular purpose (HOFSTADTER 1979). Attention to the signifying act of compressing relates to the motivation of producing an intensification of effect, free from superfluous expression.

Dismantling & Re-connecting: The process of layering makes complex situations more manageable through dismantling proceeding through a set of criterion, which act to

rationalise and filter the landscape. The process of layering provides a strategy of revealing through a dismantling that aims for dynamic interplay through re-connection, as a complex interplay which combines to give heightened intensity when fused.

Fig. 4:   example of the configuration of layered and phased visual orders

Phasing & Adapting: phasing provides a strategy to make distinctions on the temporal performance of landscape, sequencing predictive phases as a calculated projection over key stages of developmental increments. Phasing also offers the potential to give up the assumption of long term prediction (CZERNIAK 2001), recognising that economic, social and ecological patterns require adaptive sequencing, where phases visually determine resources to catalyse new phases of development.

Aligning & Enabling: aligning evokes processes, systems and structures caught in supple fusion, of interactions emerging, self organising, adapting and shifting, configuring more dynamic processes of evolutionary change. This anticipatory framework eables phenomena to emerge, expand and proliferate as an orchestrated simulation of dynamic behaviours.

Differentiating & Synchronising: at a more advanced level visualisation can involve multi-ordered lines of configuration to configure a co-evolving visual trajectories that correlate differing spatio-temporal timelines with their own internal logic of programme, structure and process. Synchronisation occurs through linear and lateral parallelism that help to monitor multi-variant processes and emergent structures, where timeline has its own nature and pattern of growth as a complex of signs, set within a field of fields.

3   Conclusion

Within each key concept presented here there are many more considerations to enhance understanding of visual performance, but this summary outlines primary ideas for students to regard when exploring the compositional versatility of visual language. An important aspect of this understanding is how the process of configuration has strategic implications for engaging the spatio-temporal condition of the landscape, where a more conscious engagement of the signifying acts that determine visual configuration enhances understanding of how visual performance connects strategically to those of the landscape; of structures, systems, and processes. This is an important issue, as understanding the visual alone can lead to superfluous statements, but when a greater sense of the visual capacity to

connect to the strategic implications of constructing landscape is grasped it enhances the operational potentials of visual performance.

Ferdinand de Saussure identified that the conception of meaning in sign systems was structural and relational rather than referential, proposing that no sign makes sense on its own but only in relation to other signs (SAUSSURE 1983). This establishes that the material practice of landscape architecture lies in signs, symbols and associations, which condition a compositional approach to design. The diagrammatic idea places emphasis on the relational, as both the power of composite interplay, but also the relational performance of abstract material to be conceptually connected to a sense of fabricating the landscape, where to determine the sign is ultimately to determine the landscape. This emphasises the productive, as much as the representational, qualities of the visual as a signifying process that seeks to interconnect thought with production.

What is important in this research is that often exploration into visual performance tends to focus on the result rather than the process of visual reasoning, where signs are put into types, rather than a process to explore the generative qualities of visual material to elucidate spatio-temporal performance. This project sought to enhance the eloquence of students' visual fluency, to further question the strategic and pragmatic implications of a signifying process to advance their basis of operating.

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