

Dialogues with people & place: Toward an empathetic approach to mapping place identity

Introduction

The exploration of site and climate is typically presented as a technical operation which sets out to produce precise, empirical and objective data, often conducted at a location remote from site. However, in this paper we describe an evolving approach which has shifted from measurement, empirical analysis and physical characterisation to a 'discovery' of site which requires a more 'empathetic' turn. Through an anthology of projects undertaken by the authors at Design Research Unit Wales (DRUw) this exchange will be explored. These projects illustrate a shift from analysis of site and climate toward a more dialogic and empathetic process which we would argue has helped us to uncover responses for design. Through tactile, visual, olfactory and not least cultural qualities and properties, which may be shifting and changeable, this approach to site affords creative responses and has enabled us as designers to explore a building's place within its broader cultural context.¹ This shift has been driven by an attempt to literally draw out characteristics and atmospheres of a particular place.

Through the case studies this paper suggests that to be successful this careful exploration requires an empathetic turn where *listening* to a site is as important, if not more important, than *speaking* and where architecture is created *in dialogue* with its site. The case studies illustrate techniques often used in combination, including established processes of graphical mapping and physical modelling, through to walking and 'storying' in which temporal and physical distance are taken more into account. These approaches involve an active engagement with a situation where the aim is to gain an insider's knowledge of place.³ As well as physical and geographical engagement it demands an intellectual commitment in

¹ D. Leatherbarrow, *Topographical Stories*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p.10.

³ C. Tilley, *Body and Image: Explorations in landscape phenomenology*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2008, p.265

which empathic reasoning is a deliberate action, and, furthermore, may involve a bodily sense of emotional connection with site. The approach is propositional and generative, revealing the transformative potential of a place. Finally, we speculate on the potential of the work of WG Sebald, which combines memoir, historical account, travelogue, and fiction, to conjure collaged landscapes that offer a gateway to another world.

Understandings of site

'Site' is recognised as having multiple understandings but here is defined as a physical place where something is, was or will be constructed, or a place where an event or activity has taken or will take place.⁴ As designers our projects are usually located in a specific place and reconfigure that environment through their presence.⁵ Typically, in practice and often in academic projects, a site is defined before the involvement of the designer through land ownership or speculation. The designer proceeds to analyse the site, a systematic gathering of an inventory of as many facts and data about a site and its immediate physical surroundings as possible.⁶ Often including functional aspects of environment and climate alongside physical studies of terrain, scale and use, this amounts to a basic inventory of site conditions. This analysis requires a body of technical skills and the ability to sift through and reduce the gathered information, drawing out the relevant information to support a design idea.⁷ As Lynch and Hack describe:

'Analysis of the site begins with a personal reconnaissance, which permits a grasp of the essential character of the place and allows the planner to become familiar with its features.

Later, then, she can recall mental images of those features as she manipulates them.

Analysis proceeds to a more systematic data collection, which may follow some standard list, but lists are treacherous.... Through her analysis, the designer looks for patterns and

⁴ Cambridge English Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>, (accessed 1 March 2020).

⁵ C. Burns & A. Kahn, *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories & Strategies*, London, Routledge, 2005, p.viii.

⁶ G. Baudoin, *Interpreting Site: Studies in Perception, Representation and Design*, London, Routledge, 2015, p.1.

⁷ Genevieve Baudoin, *Interpreting Site: Studies in Perception, Representation and Design*, Routledge, London, 2015, p.2.

*essences to guide her plan, as well as simply for facts that she must take into account. She ends with a graphic summary, which communicates the fundamental character of the place, as well as how it will most likely respond to the proposed intervention.*⁸

Analysis of site aims to produce precise and objective data, often at distance through desktop means. This is often limited to those aspects which can be easily quantified or measured.⁹ With limited knowledge of the places in which designers are working, site information is simplified and codified and favours the physically specific, neglecting more enigmatic and potentially changing qualities of emotion, culture, weather, time, narrative and memory. This can often result in a distancing from lived experience and a loss of precision at the human scale. Ensuing buildings are often formally distinctive and unique but remain disconnected from the qualities a site possesses and have little relationship to their surroundings.¹¹ What then are the alternatives to this approach? How can we develop methodological approaches and representations that emphasise creativity and exploration over objective data collection?

Design Research Unit Wales

These issues have come to the fore in a series of projects undertaken in rural Wales by Design Research Unit Wales (DRU-w) over the past 15 years.¹² DRU-w is a design research practice based in the Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University, established in 2001 with the aim of founding the creative activities of the design studio on a research-based approach. The studio has undertaken numerous commissions in which research-based design is allied to notions of place,¹³ sustainability, tectonics, material innovation, and

⁸ K. Lynch and G. Hack, *Site Planning*, 3rd edition, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1984, p.7.

⁹ D. Hawkes, *Architecture and Climate: An Environmental History of British Architecture 1600-2000*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2012, p.1.

¹¹ E. Aldallal, *Site and Composition*, London, Routledge, 2016, p.7.

¹² The authors are both connected to the practice. DRU-w was established by Wayne Forster, who currently leads the Unit, and Dean Hawkes. Co-author Matthew Jones worked at the practice from 2005-2012 and completed his PhD at DRU-w in 2016.

¹³ Our definition of 'place' has a number of aspects: a geographically defined area; the setting for the events of human life; a sense of physical identity that sets it apart from other locations; and meaning, either cultural or historical, which may vary for different individuals or groups. See for example Australia ICOMOS, *The Burra*

economy. Projects are developed primarily through design-oriented and practice-based research. Alongside design projects, DRU-w carries out orthodox research in various fields, publishing its research interests in journals and at conferences, as well as contributing to teaching at the Welsh School of Architecture. The Unit aims to make architecture of strong forms with a resonance with their place, constructed in a legible and resourceful manner from local materials, and responding to the physical, social and cultural environment of Wales.

Dialogues with landscape and culture: Annedd and Margam Park

The studio were awarded two projects around 2006-7, both on significant but very different sites; one for a rural elderly care facility on the edge of a rural settlement and the other for a visitor and study facility in a protected historic landscape. On both we went about site analysis in more or less our usual way – topographical and climate-based studies predominated. However, we did spend longer than usual on site and in the locale, and what were usually cursory studies of history and culture became highly influential.

During the design of the care home, located on the edge of the village of Llanybydder in rural Carmarthenshire, significant cultural characteristics were uncovered that informed the conceptual development of the emerging design proposition. Our site was a rather steep, north-facing field on the edge of the village. Our analysis identified this was hardly perfect in terms of climate, orientation or accessibility. We resolved to ensure that all the living accommodation would face west, providing residents with a direct view of an iron-age hill fort that dominated the locale and originally formed the settlement, as well as ensuring solar access in the afternoons and evenings.

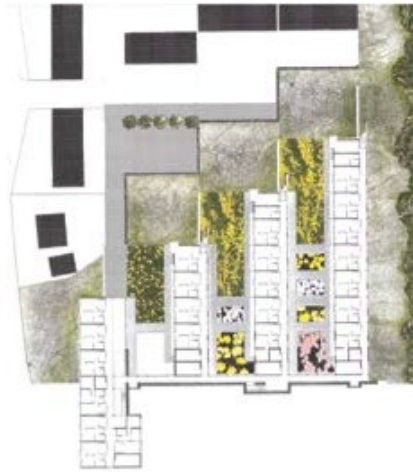


Figure 1: The plan of Annedd, designed so all apartments face west

This was very much in our established approach to site analysis, led by climate and topography. However, our extended studies of the village and its landscape led us in a number of directions. The importance of sheep farming and the woollen trade to the village suggested that many of the elderly residents would have a strong visual, practical and emotional affinity with the topographic stories of the land. The village was also home to an amazing private collection of Welsh Quilts. These functional fabrics had been raised to an art form in the 17th-19th centuries and the geometric patterns are reminiscent of the shapes, colours and textures of the Carmarthenshire landscape. Our reading of the landscape and topography was deeply influenced by these discoveries which had a formative role in the plan and sectional composition of the resulting building, conceived as a series of stepping courtyards and sheep folds held by linear framing walls.



Figure 2 : An example of a geometric Carmarthenshire Quilt which led the landscape design

Margam Park is a Registered Historic Landscape that has been 'managed' for over 3,000 years. Across the landscape of the park are found Iron Age remains, a Roman track, a ruined Cistercian monastery and a county house, the former home to the Fox-Talbot family. In this significant and sensitive landscape we were in pursuit of an architecture where an understanding of site and topography may 'structure' the project.

In *Topographical Stories*, David Leatherbarrow refers to the possibility of the building as an elaboration of the terrain which, *'is not substantial in its own terms, nor self-sufficient, but dependent, or adjective to its milieu'*.¹⁴ Leatherbarrow's explanation that, *'site – or more broadly ambient landscape – is not what surrounds and supplements the building, but what enters into, continues through, emanates from and enlivens it'*¹⁵ comes close to explaining what we tried to do at Margam. Our approach recognised that *'any place registers tangible certain aspects of many larger more spatially extensive patterns, orders, and systems.'*¹⁶ We set out to reveal and enhance the wider cultural and topographic landscapes- frame, hold, ensure spatial continuity, nestle, sense weather... and *feel* nature.

Sited at the collision of the 'picturesque' and the 'industrial', the 18th Century deer chase was directly adjacent to the furnaces of one of Europe's largest steelworks. Our studies determined that our building proposition would be 'conciliatory' with the nature of the site, accommodating all its features– landscape, water, trees, archaeology- and that the building would be a part of this system. We deliberately used the traces of these wider patterns and orders to compose the building form. A 'promenade architecturale', responding to the change in topography, guides visitors through and between the buildings, sometimes inside and sometimes out. Open but covered walkways and bridge links allows the changing nature of weather and seasons to be experienced by building users. The layout and form was

¹⁴ D. Leatherbarrow, *Topographical Stories*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p.20.

¹⁵ David Leatherbarrow, *Topographical Stories*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, p.20.

¹⁶ C. Burns & A. Kahn, *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories & Strategies*, London, Routledge, 2005, p.xii.

defined by the desire to reveal views across the site and to thread the building between the existing mature trees to minimise impact on the site. Framing portals containing shared spaces for visitors and residential groups, oriented toward the country house in one direction and steelworks in the other, capture contrasting views of the landscape from industrial to picturesque. A raised walkway guides the visitor through existing trees and over a pond at the heart of the site, connecting a series of timber clad pavilions, floating above the ground. Between these pavilions a series of outdoor courts are defined: entrance, wildlife and water respectively.

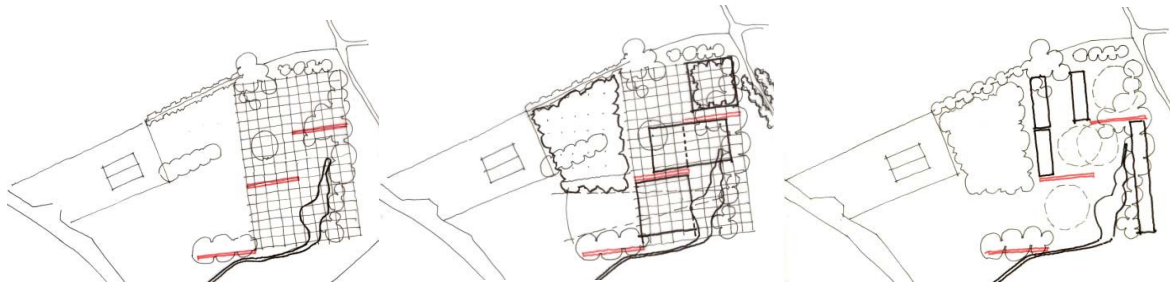


Figure 3: Margam Discovery was designed as a series of portals (i), courtyards (ii) and pavilions (iii)

These two projects illustrate the evolution of our site thinking. What was becoming much clearer was that understanding the wider topographies of place and circumstantial, sometimes chance discoveries were proving as if not more influential in the design process than the 'hard' data derived in typical site analysis. These in-between locations- one between a rural village and the surrounding landscape and the other at the meeting point of dramatic historic and industrial landscapes- offered the opportunity to create architecture that recognised and attempted to reconcile these topographic contrasts. The resulting buildings use aspects of site to 'structure' the project, deriving rules and order from discoveries emerging from their cultural landscapes and working in close dialogue with their context.



Figure 4 : Margam Discovery Centre frames views through copper clad 'portals'

Connecting place and people : Ruthin Future

The opportunity to extend the analytical approaches developing in the work of the studio was offered by a commission to develop a community-led town plan for Ruthin, a rural North Wales town, on behalf of Ruthin Town Council. With our developing analytical process in mind, the studio set out to create an in depth mapping of place and potential. The town was explored through a series of layered analytical mappings that filtered information from extensive fieldwork and desktop studies in a process of *'gathering, working, reworking, assembling, relating, revealing, sifting and speculating'*,¹⁷ recording and reading the place as found through both 'on the ground' and digital means. The aim, through abstraction and recombination of these layers, was to uncover or reveal aspects of place that may otherwise remain hidden, to *'begin to peel apart and separate the constituent layers buried in each site studied.'*¹⁸

The resulting abstracted representations of reality are made unique by careful consideration of what is included and excluded. Used on their own, each layer explores a different facet of

¹⁷ G. Baudoin, *Interpreting Site: Studies in Perception, Representation and Design*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015 p.50.

¹⁸ G. Baudoin, *Interpreting Site: Studies in Perception, Representation and Design*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015, p.50.

the urban environment. However, in order to achieve a complete understanding of the total phenomenon of place, these layers are overlaid and juxtaposed.



Figure 5 : Abstracted layered mapping of Ruthin: (i) a mapping of historic burgage plots unpicking the legacy of medieval plots in the town today; and (ii) routes around the town, including its public spaces (blue) yards and alleys (red) which were modelled as well as drawn.

The themes explored are drawn from a number of fields- geographical, topographical, architectural, historical, cultural and social. The mapping evolved from plan based to a three-dimensional multi- scale mapping process as the importance of the measure of a town- its scale, proportion, materials and form - was recognised. The mappings are seen as interrelated; their overlay and juxtaposition reveals insights and opportunities. When viewed together and superimposed as a series of layers, a *'thickened surface'*²⁰ is created that reveals the relationship of the parts; strengths and weaknesses emerge and sites to reinforce and enhance the sense of place are revealed. The layers document and record the physical environment as it exists and is used in the present, before it is interpreted and

²⁰ J. Corner, 'The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention', in D. Cosgrove (ed.), *Mappings*, London, Reaktion Books, 1999, p.235.

propositions emerge. Representations of place crafted through maps, drawings and in particular physical models uncovered new opportunities across seemingly exhausted ground, both revealing and realising hidden potential by revealing the hidden forces underlying the structure of a specific place.²¹



Figure 6: A 'thickened surface': this mapping brings together aspects of history- the derelict railway line; stories and myth- a photo of Maen Huail, connected to Arthurian legend; morphology- a section through the town and contrasting the historic core with later development, including the internationally renowned Craft Centre.

Following these initial studies, Ruthin Town Council and Design Research Unit Wales successfully bid for additional funding from Beacon for Wales, an organisation administering funding to connect academics and the public. Extending the study allowed to the team to consolidate the preceding phases of work and embark on extensive engagement with the community to develop ideas for the town's development over the next ten years. As part of a range of activities in the town, a key focus of this process was 'Ruthin Future Week'. This concentrated period of events and engagement with local people explored specific themes

²¹ J. Corner, 'The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention', in D. Cosgrove (ed.), *Mappings*, London, Reaktion Books, 1999, p.213.

emerging from the mapping study and aimed to embed local knowledge and stories in the development of the town plan.

In this stage of the project, the mapping techniques initially developed at Annedd and Margam were confronted with the '*messy contingency of life*',²² introducing a new dimension to our place-based techniques. Exploring the rhythms and rituals of the town enabled us to begin thinking about the interrelation of the spatial and the temporal, '*listening to the actual places, people, settings and bodily habits or events*'.²³ Engagement with the views of multiple stakeholders- local professionals, residents, community groups, artists and the town council- was vital the process of developing the emerging plan. The project was a collaborative endeavour and encouraged local support for a shared, long-term strategy embedding it in its place and communities. By bringing together our readings of place with the contingency and temporality of everyday life, the study evolved to, as McLucas describes, "*engage with, narrate and evoke 'place' in temporal depth by bringing together a multiplicity of voices, information, impressions and perspectives as a basis for a new connectivity*"²⁴

Diagrams, drawings, models and mappings were crucial in the evolution of this approach and enabled us to enter a dialogue with the place, investigating what exists, emphasising essential qualities, abstracting its essence and projecting it into an imagined future where those conditions are modified, adapted and transformed. The approach recognises the value and virtue of inherited urban fabric but, through the stories of and interaction with local people, sees it not as a static moment in time needing preservation but part of an evolving continuum marked by the rhythms and rituals of everyday life. Through a dialogical place-specific approach, the change, growth, flow and vitality of community could be revealed and made meaningful.

²² O. Murphy, *Town: Origins, Morphology & Future*, Westport, self-published, 2012, p.10.

²³ N. Coleman, *Lefebvre for Architects*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015, p.123.

²⁴ I. Biggs, 'The Spaces of 'Deep Mapping': A Partial Account', *Journal of Arts and Communities*, vol.2, no.1, 2010, p.6.

From Site to 'Field'

Sites for intervention were identified *through* the process of mapping, inverting the accepted norm of working from a delimited site and encouraging designers to start *'from the outside in'*.²⁵ The process encourages the designer to explore a broader spatial field or territory which is *'more contingent, responsive and depends on the flowing pervasive conditions, clouds, indeterminate edges'*.²⁶ A shift from site to field offers potential for a more in depth exploration of place, explored over numerous visits and experiences of the town at different times of day and different seasons. Furthermore, the notion of fieldwork sits well with the approach taken in all three projects, where the cultural, social and geographical aspects of place became driving forces, expanding our thinking beyond the site and encouraging us to work in the gaps between scales, professions and methodologies. This approach required repeated visits at different times of the year and many conversations; in the case of Ruthin the project has now been ongoing for close to ten years, a prolonged engagement offering potential for an in-depth understanding of the town and its people. Perhaps this approach could be considered as approaching deep mapping, *'an often slow, complex and 'unending' process that normally requires a range of critical and creative perspectives, specialist materials [...] and the kind of time, expertise and often technology that require substantive funding'*.²⁷

Toward empathy and dialogue

This paper has endeavoured to reflect on an emerging approach to site through a number of projects carried out over 15 years of practice. Our site thinking has expanded beyond normative design processes to work in the gaps between professions, engaging with not only with techniques drawn from the architectural field but with fieldwork techniques drawn

²⁵ P. Marcuse, 'Study Areas, Sites and the Geographic approach to Public Action', in C. Burns & A. Kahn (eds). *Site Matters: Design Concepts, Histories & Strategies*, London, Routledge, 2005, p.251.

²⁶ S. Ewing, *Architecture & Field/work*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011, p.172.

²⁷ I. Biggs, 'The Spaces of 'Deep Mapping': A Partial Account', *Journal of Arts and Communities*, vol.2, no.1, 2010, p.8.

more broadly from the disciplines of landscape, anthropology and archaeology. Writer Jan Morris suggested that *'there is no such thing as a Welsh Architecture'* but conceded that the distinctive feature of the building art of Wales exists in its conciliatory power, the ability to unite a structure with its setting, and make it feel part of nature.²⁸ The use of 'conciliatory' in describing the character of a Welsh architecture seems to be connected to the potential of 'empathy.' In describing the advantages of empathy, Sennett states that the processes of dialogue, and especially those involved with regular spoken conversation, involve a type of listening that attends to the implicit intentions behind the speaker's actual words. Compared to dialectics, a dialogic exchange can be more suitable for facilitating cooperation, can be less competitive and thrives through empathy, *'the sentiment of curiosity about who other people are in themselves.'*²⁹ For Sennett, dialogic cooperation *'entails a special kind of openness, one which enlists empathy rather than sympathy in its service.'*³⁰ In this type of conversation listening is equally important as speaking; only by listening can you comprehend and empathise with different points of view and therefore gain perspective on your own position. This seems related to the action of conciliation as described by Morris. However, empathy also suggests an imagining: imagining oneself in another situation or another being's situation, perhaps curiosity about who other people (or places) are in themselves.³²

In the case of these projects, an extended dialogue with multiple aspects of place aimed to embed a design response in a more measured way based on a deeper empathy with people and place. In our case, reading of site and context became something that was revisited through the design process and whose revelations became powerful design drivers. Rather than being seen as linear, here stages of analysis, synthesis, interpretation and evaluation are interwoven. The designer operates in a conversation or dialogue with the concrete reality

²⁸ J. Morris, *Wales: Epic views from a small country*, London, Penguin, 2000, p. 311.

²⁹ R. Sennett, *Together: The rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation*, London, Penguin, 2013.

³⁰ R. Sennett, *Together: The rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation*, London, Penguin, 2013.

³² A. Caplan, 'Understanding Empathy', in A. Caplan and P. Goldie (eds), *Empathy: Philosophical and psychological perspectives*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p.4.

of a site, an approach which *'raises questions and ignites the sparks of curiosity that instigate activity.'*³³ The design process here becomes one of interpretation and creation of meaning. The questioning of the situation leads to a reciprocal questioning of the designer's pre-judgments, pre-understanding, values and attitudes, to which the designer must be open, *'leaving themselves vulnerable, at risk.'*³⁴ This has some resonance with the work of WG Sebald and the potential of objective chance in the design process,³⁵ for example our reimagining the Anedd landscape as a quilt as a means to create cultural resonance. Our emerging understanding suggests a broadening of the phenomena we explore related to site, where the focus may become *'anything from analysing a televised spectacle to dissecting an object or deconstructing a text.'*³⁶ The process of design is seen as leading not only to the disclosure of the artefact through dialogue with site but, if embraced, can also be self-revelatory by exposing the preconceptions and preconditions led to its emergence including the tacit, the hidden, the idiosyncratic and the empathic. Each proposition is not only the outcome of an iterative design process but one that is judged and refined through an ongoing dialogue held with its site.

Future directions

What does this mean for our emerging work and for the work of others designers operating in rural places? The shift toward the empathetic and the conciliatory seems likely to continue as we are able to identify positive outcomes in our working process. Our 'catalogue' of empathetic design techniques includes working with images, myths, folklore, histories, stories, metaphors and mappings, all of which may be drawn on as frames of reference and potentially brought to bear in the design process. We see the approach fitting with prominent

³³ S. McLaren, *Designerly Thinking*, Livingston, Education Scotland, 2011, http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/Designerlythinkingarticle_tcm4-654736.pdf, (accessed 13 April 2015).

³⁴ A. Snodgrass and R. Coyne, *Interpretation in Architecture: Design as a Way of Thinking*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2006.

³⁵ C. M. Lerm Hayes, 'Post-War Germany and Objective Chance : W.G. Sebald , Joseph Beuys and Tacita Dean', in L. Patt (ed.), *Searching for Sebald: Photography after WG Sebald*, Institute of Cultural Inquiry, 2007.

³⁶ H. Rashid and L.A. Couture, quoted in G. Baudoin, *Interpreting Site: Studies in Perception, Representation, and Design*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015, p.1.

commentators in the fields of archaeology and anthropology such as Christopher Tilley and Tim Ingold who argue for an approach led by phenomenology and material processes, whereby *'the objective is to gain an insider's knowledge of place and landscape, as opposed to a knowledge acquired by mediated representations which can only provide an outsider's perspective.'*³⁷ Valuing the subjective, the chance discovery and the freedom for personal response enables us to rethink the process by which we engage with site. It opens opportunities for understanding of site to become an end in itself as well as something that goes on to inform the design and making process. Engaging in dialogue with local knowledge, myth and stories can bring an additional layer of lived experience to our investigative approach.

However, uncertainties about its broader application remain. How can the designer find time to engage with the physicality of site in this way when it may demand skills borrowed from anthropologists, historians and archaeologists? How does this sit with broader practice when the RIBA Plan of Work 2013 references 'Site Information' but is silent on explorations of site of this nature; is this pre-occupation outside the realm of 'normal' practice? Despite its potentially marginal position, we see the value of working on the fringes, across disciplines and with an empathic, dialogical approach. This shift has seen not only a reconceptualisation of how we approach site but also the expansion of our design processes and tools to enable us to fully understand and converse with the constellation of patterns and systems at work in a particular place, weaving the next steps in its evolution.

³⁷ C. Tilley, *Body and Image: Explorations in Landscape Phenomenology*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2008, p.265.