

Interview with Christian Werthmann*

*Conducted and/or edited by the Volume Editors.

Volume Editors: Interest in these ‘wicked problems’— social, cultural and environmental problems that are difficult or almost impossible to solve—is something that has driven your work over the recent times. You’ve been engaged in Haiti and in Colombia while being in a home institution in German as a Professor for Landscape Architecture and Design at the Leibniz University in Hannover. What such problems have you encountered in your work, and what approaches have you explored in dealing with them?

Christian Werthmann: The term ‘wicked problems’ is something that I ran across a couple of years ago, coming from the social sciences. There are certain problems that you cannot solve. There is not one single solution. You cannot even define them properly. At the time, I was frustrated about doing work in very complicated urban spaces in the world, and this theory helped me understand what I’m dealing with. Many urban problems can fall into the category of ‘wicked problems’. For example, if you take, transportation planning and biodiversity, there you can get into a situation where you have a great transportation solution, but you destroy habitat. And let’s say that you solve both—better transportation and more biodiversity—maybe then you create gentrification. So, all these mechanisms you set in place to improve a situation might decrease the chances of improvement of another situation. I think that’s really interesting when you look at complex issues like we all did in the past 10 years looking at informal settlements. You have to find out what areal improvement is, and for whom and for how long. So, it gets very complex, and I think it is very comforting to know that there are no solutions, and that it can be the hardest thing to define an improvement. An example for me is what we’re researching about landslides in Medellin. The problem seems to be very clear. The people have houses on slopes that are prone to landslides. Of course, what you can do is to say, OK, their lives are threatened every day, there is no other place to move to and then you say, OK, let’s develop something that improves their lives and helps them to detect landslides earlier. Now, what we don’t know yet is for example, maybe it improves their lives and reduces the risk of being killed by a landslide and people live with less fear. But maybe more people move to the area, because they talk to each other, and say, “hey, it’s safer here”, and so let’s move here and build more houses. So, we are immediately caught in a complex wicked problem. And we say we try one

improvement, but we have to test if it's really an improvement in the long term, and where are the boundaries of this improvement. And that's something that interests me a lot. To think about it and not to fall into the category of empty promises—that we can somehow solve all the problems of the world.

VEs: Where do you see that it is necessary to get involved? As an educator and mentor?

CW: That's very difficult to answer. The first thing is: how do we define ourselves? I'm trained as a landscape architect. I happen also to be an educator because I'm a professor for landscape architecture. At the same time, you have to see what the limits are of your profession, for example: how much can I do about drug addiction as a landscape architect, which is also part of disenfranchised areas, or gang activity. For example, how can you reduce gang activity in those areas? You have to acknowledge the boundaries of your professional impact and at the same time expand them. For me, this only works when I work with other disciplines. If you're trying to claim architecture can save the world, or landscape architecture can save the world, then you're immediately a liar. Nobody owns the city alone. No discipline owns the city alone. So, you have to know what you are in your discipline, and for me of course there was, for landscape architecture, a large shift from really knowing the technicalities of building public space to the social process of implementing and deciding and programming public space. So, you are much more reliant on this social field. On social workers. On communication, in terms of where and how a settlement should develop. So, this is a big expansion in my profession right now. The ecological aspect has always been part of it, so it's expanding less in that direction. I think that's the most important thing as soon you start to work with somebody who claims that they can do everything in their profession. You should walk away from that.

VEs: It seems that the SDGs and the wicked problems have a different spirit, as you just explained that wicked problems are ones which cannot be solved, whereas the SDGs do offer strategies to solve problems. How do you think these two concepts can be reconciled?

CS: When we look at the SDGs, they are written in a fairly open manner. There is wide room for interpretation. I think this is the advantage of the SDGs. I see them mostly as a political agreement that helps us in our work. The content of the SDGs is something that we as designers and planners who work in the urban field, have been talking about for a long time already. So, yes, they are written in a way that says, 'Yes,

let's do it, let's try to solve it', and there are potential markers for that, and I think that's OK. When I read the SDGs, I don't see that they're written in a way in which they might be destructive. In the past, for example, we had destructive global goals, like when we were all looking for best practices, or when we had goals like 'Cities Without Slums'—remember that slogan?—which was, then, also misunderstood to be something that led to slum clearance instead of improvement. So it's very important how it is written. For me, in order to rally people around a goal, yes of course, you have to have some optimism that you can bring improvement. The SDGs are very aspirational. I think pretty much anybody knows that we are trying to work towards them, but to fully achieve them might not be realistic.

VEs: Back to your personal work. Can you tell us about the context of 'Dangerous Landscapes', where the topic is often also a question of life and death, and what your role as a designer is in relation to them?

CW: 'Dangerous Landscapes' was a reorientation of my training that came through the practice of working in areas where my training would not be sufficient anymore. There are bigger problems. I can do a nice public space and a nice plaza and maybe plant some trees with the help of the people, but if the whole settlement is brought down by a landslide, I did not do much here. So, I had to go deeper to the subsurface of the situation, which then leads you to the so-called 'dangerous landscapes' which is by the way, an ironic title. There are no dangerous landscapes. It's only our behavior that can put us into danger in a certain landscape. If you build on floodplains, you build on landslide-prone slopes, if you walk into a lion's den, then you put yourself in danger. So, there are no dangerous landscapes as such. For me, it's a provocative title. But by working in underprivileged areas of urbanization, I ran so often into situations in which people get flooded, they have fires, they have droughts, they have landslides, they have earthquakes. In Medellin, you have such situations with 200,000 people living on the hills in self-built homes threatened by landslides. It has been like that for 30–40 years. So, when you start working there, you have to deal with those issues. You cannot just ignore them, 'Hey, let's leave this to the firefighters and the warning agencies, and somehow they will be OK'. Or the other way is to say, 'OK, let's not do anything, let's just move them away from the dangerous territory, the dangerous landscape.' But that's not realistic for 200,000 people. The city also doesn't have the capacity to resettle them and you have to find a way to live with the risk. And as we know, in 2050, , we might have many more millions climate refugees on the planet. Some people say we'll have one billion. Nobody knows exactly. So, as a designer you have to deal with life and death issues. As in my case, growing up

in Germany, you think certain people have been responsible for risk management and I can build on top of those situations. But this is not guaranteed anymore, because climate change has upended the game. , Areas that have been safe from landslides and flood in the past—are not safe anymore because of changing climate conditions and more extreme weather. So, that's why I'm saying that especially landscape architecture has to deal with these risk zones, because urbanization is happening there. In an ideal world, there should be no houses in a floodplain, or on a landslide-prone slope, but they are. So, what does it mean that they are?

VEs: You have been working many years at different universities, on top of being a landscape architect. Do you see something emerging that you could call an alternative paradigm to what to what we think of as a city or an urban lifestyle?

CW: I think there is one definitely striking moment, and there is a lot of agreement in various disciplines. And that's the value of the community that is in place. If you look into social science, or if you look into geography, even with engineers, a lot of people talk about community-based solutions, community-based organization, community-based development. There is a growing understanding that there is, even in the most impoverished communities, there is an intelligence and knowledge that needs to be supported and brought out. I think that's the wider movement in the last 10 years. But, we are also at the point of recognizing the boundaries of community-based development. It is not safe to assume that the community, if you help them a little bit, can solve all their problems. A community that lives in a floodplain, where the flood comes from upstream, has a really hard time solving that problem, because it is out of their control. The problem needs larger scale coordination, like negotiation with the communities living upstream. So, that's something you as a designer and planner can do.

Another important change in thought is the changing relation between city and country. We are saying since a long time that we have to give up that dichotomy, like we have to stop the dichotomy between informal and formal, between fight or flight. These dichotomies are not helping in dealing with the issues. We have to understand city, landscape and the rural as a gradient. You cannot separate a water reservoir that is 80km away from the city, from the city. The water reservoir, even if there are only a few guys running it, it is part of the city. This is something we're trying to better understand—a metabolistic understanding of landscape, and our position in this metabolism, and how you create a possible improvement.

VEs: Do you feel that we are missing a stronger theoretical discourse?

CW: Right now, in our school and with my colleagues, we are discussing theories on the Anthropocene. Theories on how we should look at things differently, coming from the humanities like Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway and others. We have to change our relationship and treatment of the biological world. For example, the ideas and trials of an organism democracy—which would have a big impact on landscape. Such theories are very much in vogue right now in certain circles in landscape architecture. The problem is that the discussion about the Anthropocene doesn't focus much about issues of inequality, which is very much something that's on my radar. The other problem is that theory too often loses the ground, and is hard to reconnect.

VEs: What do you thinking in missing this debate, and do you think the SDGs are even the right forum for such a debate?

CW: As somebody involved in landscape architecture, urban planning, urbanization, when you read the SDGs, you might think, 'This is important, let's do it', but there's nothing in them that surprises me. To be clear, I'm very happy that the SDGs exist and that so many countries agreed to them. That's a political success that should not be underestimated. The next step is to connect them, and find out which connections are the most fruitful ones. You have 17 SDGs, and SDG 11 deals with sustainable urbanization, but what about the gender issues, which are in another SDG? How do you connect SDG 11 with the issues that are in other SDGs? How do you connect them to the country, and the space? In landscape, all the SDGs come together. This is the unexplored field where you say, 'Which ones, in their combination, are the strongest ones?' For example, when we worked in Haiti, and researched more integrative forms of evacuation practices, we ran across oral traditions in which Haitians have songs about how to recognize hurricanes, and how to behave during a hurricane. I realized the huge cultural aspect of the task. Maybe as a designer, I have to write a new song. Maybe I have to work with somebody else on it, or develop a children's book, or a new comic, in order to reach people. Then, the next question is, how can I use cultural traditions to adapt to changing environments during climate change?

In between SDGs, there is a huge potential for innovation, and I think you can only discover them when you are physically engaged in the territory.

VEs: Do you think that universities are the places to see what is going on, and are communities empowered by this attention?

CW: In the end, universities are places of education and knowledge production. That's the mission if you follow Humboldt. In terms of making an impact that can be felt, it seems to me that we are less and less relevant if we follow the quality, measurements and standards that universities demand of us, for example to publish a lot of peer-reviewed articles. Then, your quality as a scientist is measured by that. The problem is that articles are only read by other experts. It is obviously important to enable expert to expert knowledge exchange, but you also have to go outside this realm, beyond academic research and peer-reviewed journals. The most interesting format of research for me right now is what we call in Germany 'Living Labs'. The researchers go outside, get involved in the messy situations on the ground and work with laypeople, politicians, NGOs, private firms, and others, to gain knowledge about a certain situation and to try to create context-bound knowledge. It goes away from the idea to develop universal knowledge that works if you're in Germany, or in Haiti, or in Japan. As every landscape architect knows, every context is different. My hope is that the Living Lab methodology, which we're using in our work, will be more widely acknowledged in the science community. We have to also present our findings more in the public eye, either through digital media, or by simply being active in a way that people can see and feel it on the ground. That could be in the form of temporary installations, actions, activities in the territory. We're starting to do more and more of that in our university in Germany—to be outside and be more approachable.

VEs: Do you think that we're living through a moment of revolution, and if so, how does that affect generations differently?

CW: The next generation has a huge role to play, and I'm incredibly grateful that they are on the streets. People have to rebel against something in order to be heard. If Greta Thunberg had done her demonstrations on Saturdays, nobody would know her. She did it on Fridays, because that created a stir. As the older generation, I hope we can create the space for them.