

DESIGN  
THEORY  
SHOULD  
BE  
AFFORDABLE

DESIGN  
THEORY  
SHOULD  
TALK  
ABOUT  
VALUES

DESIGN  
THEORY  
SHOULD  
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PRACTITIONERS

DESIGN  
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SCARY

DESIGN  
THEORY  
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REMEMBER  
ITS  
ETYMOLOGY

DESIGN  
THEORY  
SHOULD  
CONFRONT  
THE  
CURRICULUM

## Three Games about Design Theory.

CFI Project Final Report

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## 1 Press release

Every student, teacher, and researcher at SLU Landscape carries assumptions about the meaning of the words 'theory' and 'design.' These assumptions always shape, and often constrain, the ways we teach and learn, interact with each other, and present our work to the world. But few settings are available in which we can talk about these assumptions openly.

In May 2017, in collaboration with the Design Theory Group, eight members of SLU Landscape—two students, two teachers, and four researchers—created such a setting. Over the course of two intensive days, the participants engaged in a series of role-play activities where they shared their ideas, preconceptions, and even fears about theory in general and design theory in particular. The attitudes and experiences revealed through these 'theory games' were surprisingly similar, and have profound implications for efforts to build an inclusive culture of knowledge creation at SLU Landscape.

A presentation, exhibition, and workshop on the project will take place at the SLU Landscape Days in October 2017.

## 2 Project goals

The goal of this project was to interrogate researchers,' teachers', and students' ideas of 'design theory,' with a view toward strengthening and broadening the culture of knowledge creation at SLU Landscape. The project was also intended to help articulate a new strategic agenda for the Design Theory Group at SLU Uppsala, the only subject area of its kind at SLU.

The project grew out of our sense that there was little agreement, and even greater confusion, among our colleagues and students about the phrase 'design theory.' This confusion, we believed, was probably influencing in profound ways the academic culture of our respective divisions, but we were uncertain about the nature and extent of that influence. We wanted to gain understanding in three main realms:

The **ideational**. What do people mean when they use the terms 'design' and 'theory' and the phrase 'design theory'? What do they assume others mean when they use these words? How much and in what ways do these definitions differ from person to person?

The **affective**. How do people feel about theory in general and design theory in particular? What associations, memories, or fears do these words provoke, and how do those emotions influence people's behavior, choices, and values?

The **institutional**. What do these ideas and feelings reveal about the academic and professional cultures at SLU and SLU Landscape? What challenges or opportunities do they present when it comes to building an inclusive culture of knowledge creation?

We approached these questions not as hypotheses to be tested, but rather as catalysts for an urgently needed discussion about the role of 'design theory' as such in the teaching and learning environments where we work. Our prime goal was not answers, in other words, but more and better questions.

We agreed that we would be unlikely to gain the kinds of insight we sought in the seminar rooms and lecture theatres of our respective divisions. Such settings, we thought, were far too familiar to facilitate honest discussion. They would make it too easy to don our institutional masks, to hide behind our titles ('researcher,' 'teacher,' 'student') or adopt the guarded stance that characterizes most academic fora. We wanted, instead, an *unfamiliar, destabilizing* setting—one strange enough to

prevent lapse into habit and convention, but safe enough to encourage revelation of doubt, vulnerability, or confusion.

Most important, though, we wanted to have fun.

### 3 Project activities

We decided early, therefore, to approach our questions through play. If we could turn theory—a topic we knew was not easy for many to discuss—into a game, then perhaps we would begin to elicit the kinds of uncensored responses we were after. But what did we mean by ‘game’?

For reasons of expediency we decided to consult a classic model of play, that proposed by the French anthropologist Roger Caillois. Caillois divided all human play into four categories of ‘game’:

Agon, or games of competition and winning (football)

Alea, or games of chance and risk (bingo)

Ilinx, or games of vertigo and scrambled perception (skydiving)

Mimicy, or games of pretending and alternate realities (theater)

Of these, we deemed mimicry best suited to our purposes. Scenario making and role play, we thought, were the least likely to encourage competition or awkwardness, either one of which could have impeded collective learning and exploration. We hoped that pretending to be someone else, however briefly, would allow participants to discuss thoughts and feelings they would be unlikely to reveal about themselves. For this same reason, no video or audio recordings were made of the role play phases of the workshop (the discussion phases were audio recorded). Participants also agreed beforehand to remain ignorant of the precise nature of the games to be played until just before they played them. Finally, we chose a remote location, far away from both SLU campuses, to minimize any associations with work, obligation, or professional roles.

The following is a general overview of our activities as they unfolded over the two days of the workshop. Times and durations have been omitted for ease of reading.

#### Day 1:

- 1 Arrival
- 2 Participants prepared lunch and introduced themselves with participant introductions
- 3 Coordinators introduced workshop objectives
- 4 Coordinators presented Game 1, an imaginary spoken diary entry about theory
- 5 Participants practiced then performed diary entries
- 6 Participants discussed themes and topics that emerged from Game 1
- 7 Coffee, discussion continued
- 8 Walk and talk
- 9 Dinner
- 10 Coffee and discussion

#### Day 2:

- 1 Breakfast
- 2 Coordinators introduced Game 2, writing and performing of two-person scenarios on design theory
- 3 Participants broke into random pairs and generated as many two-person scenarios as possible
- 4 Participants reconvened and each pair was assigned a scenario at random

- 5 Participants performed two-person scenarios
- 6 Coffee
- 7 Participants discussed themes and topics that emerged from Game 2, categorizing comments according to three 'realms' above
- 8 Lunch
- 9 Coordinators introduced Game 3, writing and performing of four-person scenarios on design theory
- 10 Participants broke into random pairs and generated as many four-person scenarios as possible
- 11 Participants reconvened then broke into random groups of four
- 12 Participants performed four-person scenarios
- 13 Coffee
- 14 Participants discussed themes and topics that emerged from Game 3, categorizing comments according to three 'realms' above
- 15 Dinner
- 16 Workshop 'de-brief' and discussion of next steps: synthesis, archival, dissemination
- 17 Dessert, coordinator gift to participants

### Day 3:

- 1 Breakfast
- 2 Pack
- 3 Departure

## 4 Project conclusions

As noted, this project was not aimed at testing hypotheses or establishing statistical correlation. It was a scoping exercise whose primary goal was to take the 'lay of the land' in a defined area of concern. What follows here are not final conclusions, then, but rather those themes, topics, and tendencies brought to light by our 'playshop' that we think require continued discussion and more systematic analysis. In reality these topics overlap and interpenetrate. However for ease of understanding they are expressed here as propositions grouped according to the three realms described in section (2).

**Ideational** realm ('what design theory means'):

- There is no consensus about the definition of either 'design theory' specifically or 'theory' generally
- There is agreement that achieving such consensus would be neither desirable nor necessary, even if it were possible
- There is a tendency to equate, implicitly or explicitly, 'theory' with 'research' and 'design' with 'teaching' or 'practice'
- There is a tendency to equate 'theory' with the writing and reading of written texts
- There is a general if unspoken assumption that, in contrast to 'theory,' 'design' and 'practice' are somehow semantically unproblematic
- Related to the above, there appears to be an underlying assumption that design/teaching/practice are somehow 'easy' whereas 'theory/research are 'hard'

### **Affective** realm ('how design theory feels')

- The above uncertainty about definitions ('what design theory is') appears to be causing considerable anxiety among teachers, researchers, and students
- This anxiety seems to center on confusion, particularly among researchers but also among teachers, about the kinds of knowledge creation that are acceptable and legitimate in the context of a landscape design program
- This anxiety is compounded by fears about professional consequences if one does 'theory' and/or 'research' in the 'wrong' way
- There is an us/them, insider/outsider dynamic when it comes to feelings about 'theory' and 'design'
- Related to the above, people's emotions about theory are often rooted in early experiences in young adulthood and higher education, particularly feelings of exclusion from a privileged or gifted 'in-group' to which one seeks access
- There appears to be considerable unease among researchers, teachers, and students about writing generally, and about writing 'theory' specifically

### **Institutional** realm ('how ideas and feelings shape the culture of SLU Landscape')

- Generally speaking, the above ideas and feelings are linked to dissatisfaction among researchers, teachers, and (to a lesser extent) students about the institutional contexts where they work
- There is a general sense among researchers and, particularly, teachers that their passions, interests, and methods are not seen as valuable or legitimate within this context
- There is a general sense among researchers that the availability of grant money is driving the choice of topics and methods they might not otherwise choose
- There is a sense of impotence or resignation in the face of the above, and considerable skepticism about the extent of the institutional commitment to building an inclusive culture of ideas
- There is general agreement that institutional settings where these issues can be discussed openly and honestly are both needed and rare
- There is general agreement that the main impediment to creating these settings is institutional commitment rather than money

## **5 Next steps**

On conclusion of the workshop participants agreed to disseminate and publicize these activities and conclusions, with a view toward establishing an ongoing discourse on design, theory, and method at SLU Landscape. What was needed at this point, we agreed, were not answers or even specific policy measures, but sustained open discussion.

For this reason, in collaboration with the Design Theory Group we will organize three related events about this workshop at the SLU Landscape Days in October 2017. These are as follows:

A formal **presentation** where the coordinators and participants will present project goals, activities, and findings. This presentation will resemble in its structure the present report, but will also include audio recordings made during the discussion phases of the workshop, as well as sample texts of the scenarios written and performed by participants.

An interactive **exhibition** in which the topics and themes that emerged from the project will be expressed as a series of open-ended propositions about design theory printed on posters (see the cover of this report for mockups). These posters, along with blank versions inviting the viewer to complete the proposition 'design theory should,' will be distributed around the SLU Alnarp campus in the days prior to the above presentation.

An open **playshop** where participants will be invited to reflect on these propositions, discuss project findings, propose concrete actions, and play the games described here.



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