

Colours of designed nature: Growing seeds from a cultural think-thank, artistic readings on colour and nature in Sweden

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The research project aims to explore colour and spatial experience in green urban spaces, created and ordered by human intervention, in this case specifically avenues. It has been carried out in the Swedish Island of Öland through the observation of an attractive avenue of elm trees, with its rhythmical changes of shape and shifting of colours. The leading approach and applied methodology is through observations, photographs and reflections, the workbook method and some steps of the Identity Tool Kit (ITK). The researchers, Henriette Koblanck the Swedish creator of the project and Monica Moro, Italian-Swedish, are designers, who operate in different fields. Both are greatly interested in colour, and have worked jointly in this multi-, inter- and trans- disciplinary subject. The project is being carried out as a part of the cooperation between two cultural think-tanks, both based in Sweden. A summer Art Exhibition, named “Kulturarv – källa”, was held in Näsby, Öland in June 2017.

Received 10 April 2017; revised 27 July 2017; accepted 4 August 2017

Published online: 29 September 2017

Introduction

Motivation

The experience of colour in nature over time can provide a link between the contemporary moment and history, not only giving a different view of an environment, but also in many ways being of significance to our experience of life. Our initial thought was to proceed on an experimental and experiential basis and to involve different disciplines. The research project is part of a larger research frame, consisting of the cultural think-tank “Kulturell tankesmedja – möte mellan konst och vetenskap” (Cultural Think Tank – meeting between art and science) and its cooperation with “Experimentellt kulturarv; Linnéuniversitetet”, (Experimental Heritage project) both located in Sweden.

The setting and relevance

The project was carried out through the observation of an attractive avenue about two kilometres long, situated on the Swedish Island of Öland, geographically located in the Baltic Sea. The island has a unique nature with rich suggestion of continuous human settlement, in fact for over five thousand years, from prehistoric times to the present (Figure 1) [1]. It is the second largest Swedish island. In the year 2000, the agricultural landscape of Southern Öland, was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site [2]. The justification says:

- *Criterion (iv): The landscape of Southern Öland takes its contemporary form from its long cultural history, adapting to the physical constraints of the geology and topography.*
- *Criterion (v): Southern Öland is an outstanding example of human settlement, making the optimum use of diverse landscape types on a single island.*



Figure 1: Iron Age burial ground at Gettlinge, Öland¹.

The project was initiated by Henriette Koblanck, who was attracted by an avenue quite near her home in Öland, lined by tall elms, decided to collect pictures of it at different seasons and times of the day (Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2: Leaves of the elm trees, Öland.

¹ Reproduced from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=316564>.



Figure 3: The elm avenue, Öland.

In Öland, avenues are rather rare but still exist along certain road sections and at larger farms, but besides the royal estate at Solliden Palace, the summer residence of the Swedish Royal Family, there are very few big farms. The usual tree species are ash, but other trees are also used. In Sweden, avenues began to be built in the 17th century and it was only later, mainly during the 19th century, that the construction of avenues became common, for example in courtyards.

Description of the project

The project is aimed at exploring colour and spatial experience in green urban spaces, created and ordered by human intervention. The core space considered in this case is specifically the avenue.

The applied methodology was through a first approach of observations, photographs and reflections of the rhythmical change of shape and shifting of green colours over time and day. Pictures and videos were taken throughout the day during two periods: 25th-27th May 2015 and 18th-24th August 2016. The avenue and its specific colour and space, however, have been observed over a five-year period and this experience is the starting point of the project.

It is important to note that in this project the summer months have been specifically investigated, for climatic reasons. In Sweden there is a distinction between the three shorter sub-seasons of spring/summer, summer and summer/fall. The “försommar” or early summer is in May-June, the “högsommar” or high summer is in July when usually the highest temperature of the day in question reaches +25 °C or higher for at least five days, and finally the “sensommar” or late summer in August-September.

In Sweden the Swedish Meteorological and Hydrological Institute (SMHI) defines the summer as the time when the daily average temperature has been above 10 °C for at least five days in a row. After 15th May, the temperature per day usually exceeds 10 degrees in average and it begins to flourish as well. The summer usually ends after 15th September. The first half of September, however, is usually quite summery. Even during the summer months, however, there is often snow, not only in the Swedish high mountains but also in somewhat lower regions.

Thus the choice of the time period was to show how the Nordic summer very significantly alters the perception of the landscape. The leaves change colour from light to dark deep colours not only during daylight hours but also by the influence of time. In fact the reason for exploring it during the summer period was, first of all, the need to limit the period in relation to the overall project, and then because it is in the summertime period that the strong colour and space experience will be perceived. There is a marked passage from the total white of long snowy winter, with barren black or dark-brown trees, through a dull colourless early spring to the chromatically explosive spring/summer.

During the summer, the high production of chlorophyll and the various kinds of chromophores determine the palette of colours through photosynthesis, giving the leaves their greens, while in autumn, with shortening days and longer cold nights, the production of chlorophyll slows, causing it to break down and the yellow colours to become more prominent.

The avenue

An avenue, from Old French *avenue*, feminine past participle of *avenir* (“approach”), from Latin *adveniō, advenīre* (“come to”), from *ad* (“to”) + *veniō, venīre* (“come”), is a road or walking path lined with trees or shrubs running on both sides. It is widely used in landscaping and garden design, and has been a major feature in the history of gardens [3-6].

One of the oldest representations of an Egyptian garden is that describing Sennefer’s garden, the ancient Egyptian “Mayor of the City of Thebes” who lived during the reign of Amenhotep II of the 18th dynasty at Thebes. The famous garden plan comes from a tomb and presents a complete picture of the villa. You can observe in the painting that in the upper garden there are symmetrical avenues of sycamores, and different palm trees (Figure 4) [7].

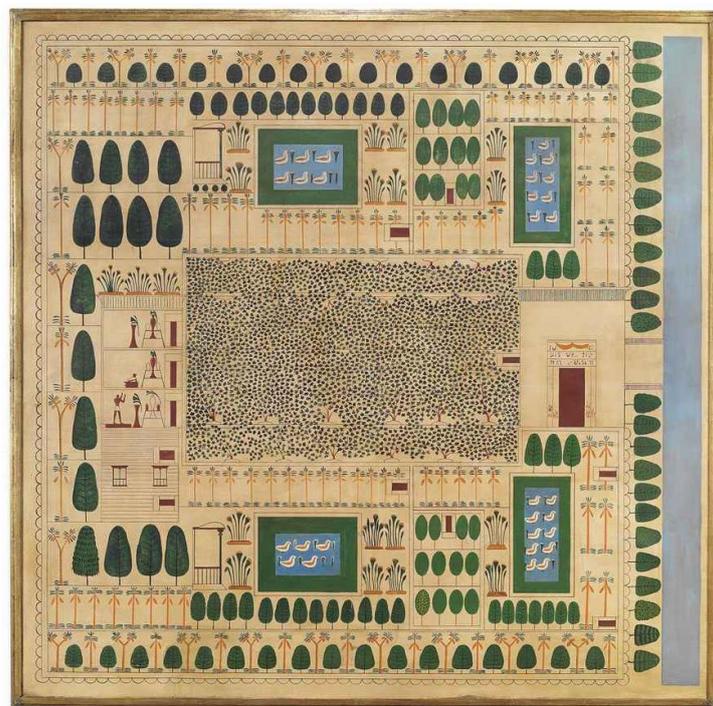


Figure 4: Reproduction of an Egyptian garden plan, by Sennefer (© Heidelberg Universal Library).

The trees planted in an avenue are usually of the same type, in order to give an aesthetic continuity to the appearance along the avenue. The variety of species determines the different colours and moods of an avenue. Both the colours and the shape of the leaves and of the bark create a changing in the

experience. An example of how urban environments have been planned based on avenues, albeit primarily from a social perspective, is the group of six Berlin districts that have been part of the UNESCO World Heritage List since 2008. They were built mainly during the Weimar Republic era and represent a new type of social-housing construction from the time of the classical modern, where the planning and construction occurred mainly from 1913 to 1934. They are the Falkenberg Garden City (Treptow), the Schillerpark area, the Britz residential areas with the well-known Hufeisensiedlung, the horse-shoe area (Neuköllen), the residential area of Carl Legien (Prenzlauer Bewrg), the Weiße Stadt (White City (Reinickendorf) and the residential area Siemenstadt. All these areas have extensive tree-lined avenues and what are called semi-social areas, smaller green areas directly adjacent to the relatively large residential complexes.

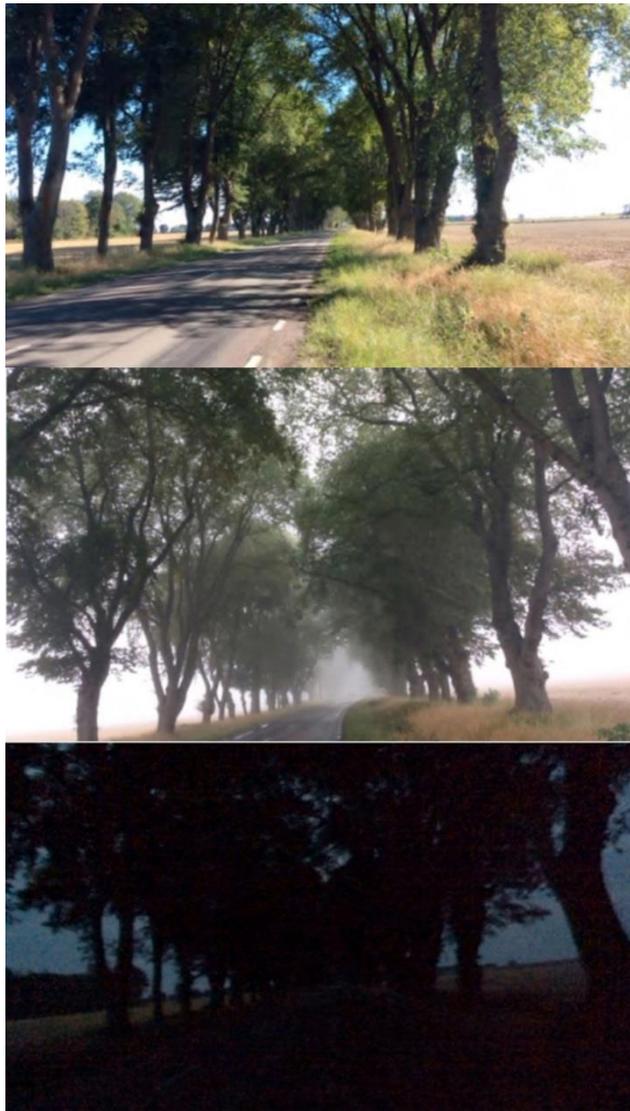


Figure 5: The Avenue during different conditions of atmosphere and light: daytime in a very sunny day (top), in a moment of fog (middle) and in the darkness of night (bottom).

Today, the green element in urban planning is becoming increasingly important considering, besides the evident decorative advantage, (the colour green in itself is restful for the eyes and is perceived as refreshing and fresh), among other things, the anti-pollution barrier, the purification of urban air, the climatic effect of milder temperature and the survival of bees and bumble bees.

Development of the research

Methodology

The presence of nature in an urban space gives us not only the chance to be aware of the time passing but also provides us with a setting for our emotional moods. The avenue is unique in its kind in Henriette Koblanck's own words (Figure 5):

“To walk through it at different times during the day gives you different impressions. Early in the morning its green colour is light and easy, but late at night it becomes dark nearly black, a place full of secrets”.

The basis for the development of the research was set by a discussion on how to frame the project, to create a space with a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach. The starting point was colour but it was of primary importance to find the links to history, architecture and suggestions the different aspects gave about “how the ideas flowed between the present and past, between colour and light, architecture and space, etc.” The concept of space could easily be related to Norse mythology, to Colour, to Light, to Architecture and to Philosophy.

The methodology has been empirical through photographs, reflections and research on artistic and archetypal languages through the Workbook method. A series of mood boards was constructed, using as a reference the Identity Tool Kit (ITK), that works well as a method of investigating a place for a group of people or as a design method. The mood boards make it easier for us to see the links between a place's historical identity [8-10].

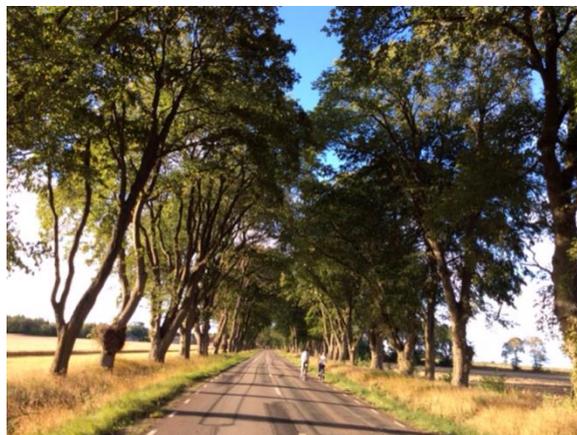


Figure 6: Romantic rendering of the Avenue.

Here, from the image in Figure 6, one could make a connection to Nordic national romanticism in art. The national romantic style was a Nordic artistic and architectural style during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which developed in a different way from similar movements in other countries, as it expressed progressive social and political ideals, through a revival and combination of vernacular and classic architecture.

As example we could think about the “blue painter”, the Swedish artist Eugène Jansson (1862 - 1915) who, among other things, painted mainly views of the city of Stockholm strongly related to the special atmosphere in the Nordic light and colours, with a focus on the parks, avenues and small woods as elements of colour in the city (Figure 7) [11].



Figure 7: "I skymningen" - In the twilight, and "Vid skogsbrynet" - At the forest's edge, by painter Eugène Jansson².

The Norse mythology of Ask and Embla

A further thought is that the experience late in the evening, when it is dark, could be conceptually related to a meeting between Adam and Eve. In cultures around the world usually one or more divine figures created the first human beings, either through a dream, a thought, a word, a dance if not a song, or by shaping some type of material. Adam and Eve, the two first humans, are in Norse mythology called Ask (Adam) and Embla (Eve) respectively male and female. The deities Odin and his brothers created them using two different trees. In fact, while Ask means the Ash tree, Embla is also the Latin name for the Elm tree (Figure 8) [12].

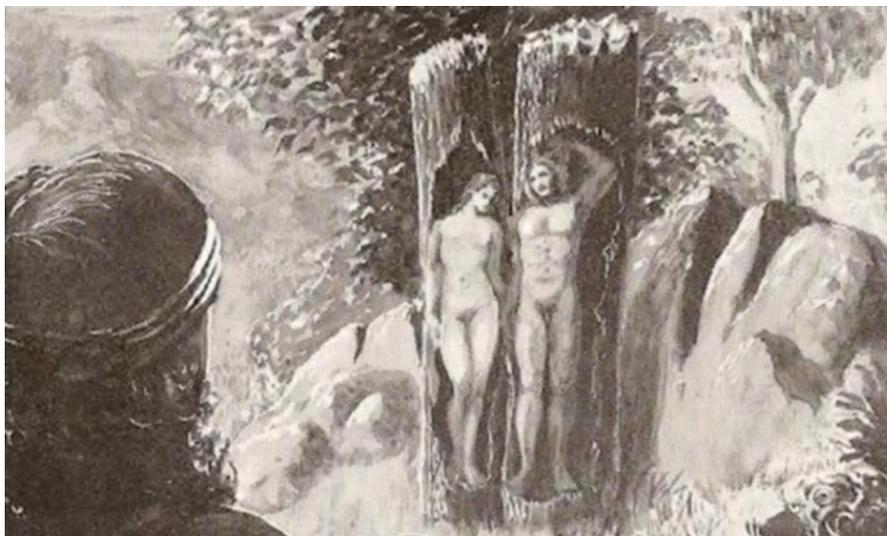


Figure 8: "Ask och Embla" illustration³.

In the distant past a sacred place was often an open space surrounded by unique trees. There is also, of course, the connection to the theatre, but as an individual experience of a particular place and over time [13-14].

² Reproduced from https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eug%C3%A8ne_Jansson#/media/File:Eugene_Jansson_-_In_the_Twilight.jpg.

³ Reproduced from <https://i.pinimg.com/originals/e6/5e/c1/e65ec11506a9b68820d8e197d3765bfb.jpg>.

A place identity, and sense of place

The connection is to the Nordic mythology of creation but also to the theme of the *Genius Loci*, which was a natural or supernatural entity linked to a place and object of worship in the Roman religion, and in many cultures it indicates the character of a place. The Norwegian architect and philosopher Thorvald Christian Norberg-Schulz treated it in his book “*Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*” (1979). This was widely influential and today when we say place-making we refer to the *genius loci* meaning to identify the socio-cultural, architectural, language, habitat characteristics that are the particular features of a place or a city) [5].

The identity of a place linked to the perception of a room/space by light/colour is an important perspective. People and places are part of a common creation of identities, as well as of the power relations that govern such processes. Experiences and feelings based on cultural identities affect how specific sites are used and perceived [15-16].

Here we thought of using parts of the ITK as a way of visualising our experience. The method has six successive steps, and it begins with the creation of mood boards describing the present state of a place, a company or what the future visual identity could express. Then there is the position board aimed to describe the context, followed by the shape and colour defining a maximum number of colour and forms in the design process, and the tone expressed by key words framing the emotional and conceptual future profile and visual identity. Finally there is the definition of the guidelines of the project [7-10].

The very definition of “place” is to be understood as “a meaningful location” (Cresswell, 2004: 7) [17]

“Places and territories are social constructs; the fruit of the historical interaction of human groups in their appropriation and transformation of the natural landscape. They reflect the history, identity, and values of the populations that inhabit them.

Cultural conceptions of place are essential for the quality of life of their inhabitants. Land-use and urban planning are therefore cultural acts, in that they acknowledge, invent, and harness natural and cultural resources, in line with a society’s aspirations for the future.” (Culture 21 and UCLG, 2015:13)

The trees in this specific avenue are elms. The growth habit of elm trees is that branches and leaves grow horizontally, which contributes clearly to the experience of a “room” (see Figure 5). The green foliage changes colour during the day and the seasons, thus changing the perception of what we define as “room”. You can observe this happening also in a city, or a neighbourhood, through the presence of trees as “urban furniture” designed to be placed in lines as decoration, and to become, after growing, also pillars supporting green arches and shaping new spaces, almost an archetype or a precursor of colonnades [18].



Figure 9: Vertical Forest, Stefano Boeri.

The presence of green elements definitely changes the genius loci. In Milan there is an example designed by Stefano Boeri and called Bosco Verticale, Vertical Forest, because each tower block has trees between three and six metres high, which help to mitigate smog and produce oxygen. Moreover they moderate temperatures in the building in winter and summer, and attenuate noise (Figure 9).

The Rhizome

The project is also metaphorically referring to the botanical world to give an image of how to associate quickly over time and space and subject according to the rhizome theory (Figure 10). A nice definition of the rhizome's horizontal movement, going against “chronology and organisation” and preferring instead a random system of growth and spread, is given by H. Mattsson and S O Wallenstein in their book on Deleuze [19]. They consider this as a model where culture spreads like water, extending to all the available space, crumbling down everything that comes its way, and running down into new areas through cracks and gaps.



Figure 10: A rhizome⁴.

The surface can be broken and moved, but these disorders leave no trace because the water is loaded with pressure and a constant potential to find its balance point and thus seek a level surface. The concept emerges out of what they call the “Smooth space” – it refers to an environment, a landscape in which a subject operates. Deleuze and Guattari [20] described it as follows:

It is a space of affects more than one of properties. It is haptic rather than optical perception (...) It is an intensive rather than extensive space (...) Conducive to rhizomatic growth and nomadic movement, smooth space consists of disorganized matter and tends to provoke a sensual or tactical response rather than a starkly rational method of operating or a planned trajectory.

In the future new technologies and new ways of agricultural concepts will probably change the environments where we live. Some city utopia theories like No-stop City (Archizoom) or Agronica (Weak Metropolis) by the Italian architect and designer Andrea Branzi (Figure 11) [21-22] and the recent work of several other professionals, such as the architect Emilio Ambasz from Argentina, integrate green and technology in their buildings and projects (Figure 12) [23].

⁴ Reproduced from https://alternateroots.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/rhizome_example.png.

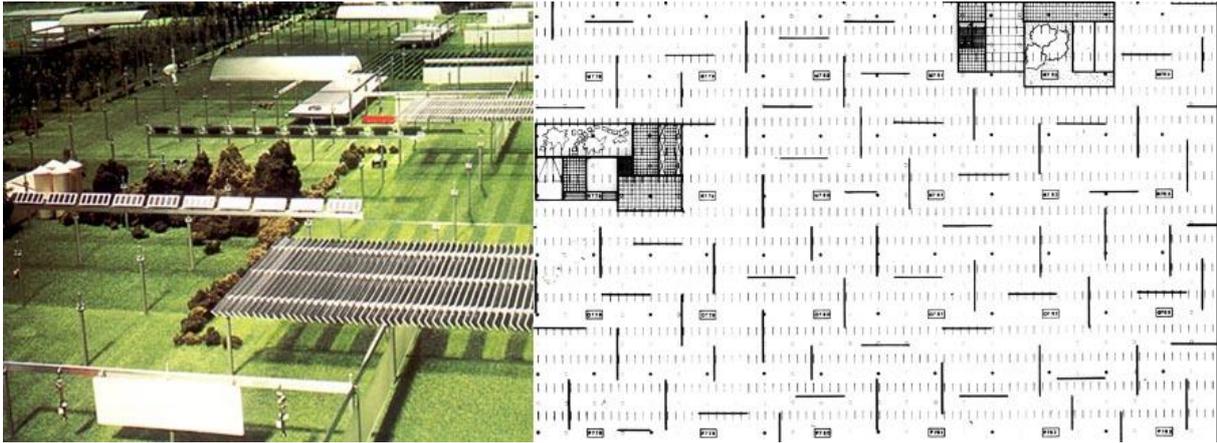


Figure 11: Agronica by Andrea Branzi (left) and No-stop City by Archizoom (right).



Figure 12: Acros building with roof garden, Fukuoka, Japan (left) and landscape by Emilio Ambasz (right).

The art exhibition

Cultural and artistic practice

An art exhibition was held in Näsby Nav, Öland during the summer of 2017 (24th June – 19th July) on this subject, named “Kulturarv – källa” (Cultural Heritage-Source). The idea arose from cooperation between the Cultural Carnival entitled “Kulturell tankesmedja” (Cultural Think Tank) and the LNU Linnaeus University, in the form of a research project in the years 2017 and 2018 supported by the Kamprad Family Foundation. The project is entitled “Experimentell kulturarv och entreprenörskap – utveckling av kulturarv och konstnärlig utövning i samverkan mellan forskare, kulturentreprenörer och studenter” (Experimental heritage and entrepreneurship - the development of cultural and artistic practice in collaboration between scientists, cultural entrepreneurs and students) is led by Bodil Petterson, Associate Professor of Archaeology at Linnaeus University in Kalma who writes in the catalogue that:

”The Experimental Heritage project combines researchers’ knowledge of cultural heritage and archaeology and in some cases even biology and the design of designed nature on the island Öland with artistic practice in untested ways. The goal is to develop new ways to use and present cultural heritage and art in different aspects. The aim is a richer, more varied cultural life and increased knowledge about both well-known and less-known cultural heritage of the island of Öland that can be displayed and discussed in new ways.”

Culture intrinsically has two main meanings: one refers to intellectual or artistic cultivation, the other to socially transmitted patterns of living. Culture also often refers to a universal human ability to communicate experiences materially and symbolically. Hence a group of artists, members of the association, was invited to participate in a collective show in summer 2017, focused on two exploration projects – artistic vs scientific knowledge. What similarities and differences are there in the ways of working, how can each learn from the other? Questions that concern the connection between past and present are an additional point of view: in what ways can we make cultural heritage important to us today?

Cultural heritage has three main areas: the cultural landscape, cultural environments and cultural objects. The term culture comes from Latin *cultura* which means “processing”, “cultivation” and “formation” and, in turn, is derived from “colo” (cultivate). The term has gained a broader meaning for all human activity.

The modality of presentation of the works of art were divided into two parts, the first was within the frame of the “Sju källorna” (the seven springs), which had a natural scientific connection, whilst the second exploratory project was named “Colour of designed nature”, which explored an environment by an artistic approach on colour, nature and cultural heritage. The latter theme featured on the poster presented at the conference Progress in Colour Studies (PICS) [24] at University College London (UCL) in September 2016 (Figure 13), and at the Bridging Ages Conference, Kalmar, Sweden, in September 2016 [25].

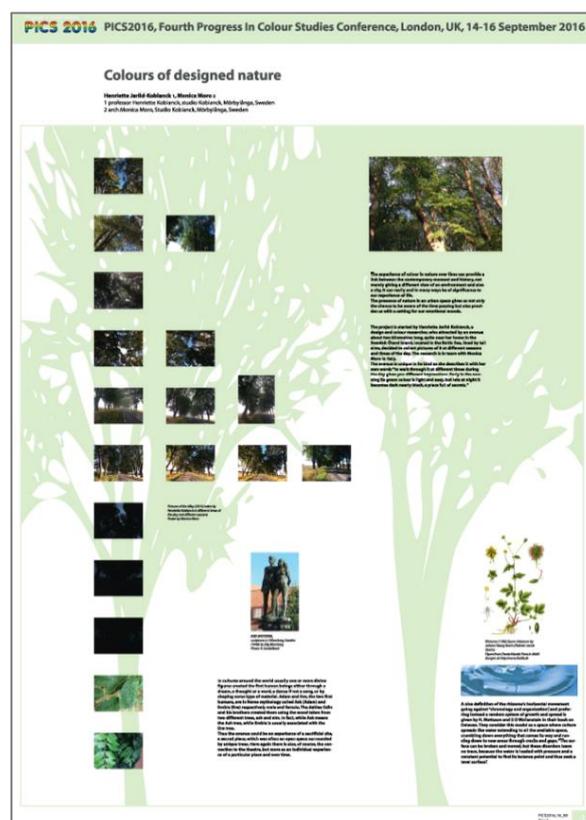


Figure 13: Poster at PICS 2016, London.

The two projects formed the framework for the exhibition and were described in the form of what can be called workbooks, a description of processes, ideas, methods in sketches, and in works and texts. The invited artists assumed a personal and free interpretation of the exhibition’s theme. The tension lay

between the artistic exploration, in groups or individually, the cross-border between different subjects and the more research-oriented artistic research. On Sundays conversations with the artists were programmed and also meetings with the Cultural Heritage association through lectures.

The invited artists were: Gunilla Pantzar, Anders Lönn, Ellen Ehk, Monica Backström, Patric Lems, Petra Pettersson, Katarina Frank – Fudge, Harue Takami, Karlheinz Sauer, Pamela Karlsson, Martin Hallberg Åkerberg, ADDI/Johan mfl, Jangir Maddadi, Maj-Anita Brevik, Tove Martens, Lina Hultberg and Kicken Ericson. All invited artists had a connection in one way or another to the Kalmar/Öland region (Figure 14).



Figure 14: “Kulturarv – källa” summer Art Exhibition in June, 2017 at Näsby Nav, Öland.

Conclusions

Proposal for future evolution

Is it possible to explore a cultural and historical place from an interdisciplinary point of view, but with the starting point of an artistic approach? That was our question here. As designers, from two different areas of design, we are used to working, in our research, with influences and support from other disciplines, and we answer undoubtedly yes. To build a space by a given context allows us greater freedom to work artistically in depth and width and provides a greater flow of innovative ideas.

The project will continue in a future “design” phase (Figure 15). Three key questions are: (1) Place, colour and emotion? (2) Place, colour and transformation? (3) Place, colour and point of relation between different perceptions and cultures?



Figure 15: Place of transformational emotions.

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