

AHRC Landscape and Environment Postgraduate Conference
Cripps Hall, University of Nottingham
7th and 8th January 2009

Conference Report

The purpose of this conference was to bring together students from within the Programme (most of whom had not met before), and other invited postgraduate students working in the field. Specific aims and objectives included to -

- Ensure Landscape and Environment Programme commitment to early career researchers
- Showcase some of the findings of the studentships within the programme and others beyond the programme in similar fields
- Examine common issues of collaboration between disciplines and with non-academic stakeholders
- Discuss innovative approaches to research in terms of theory sources and methods
- Explore career paths for postgraduates working in a multidisciplinary field

Delegates were drawn from a wide variety of disciplines, including Geography, History, Anthropology, Archaeology and English Studies. Comprising a balanced mix of student presentations and workshops, the event format offered opportunity for everyone to participate, encouraging participants to discuss common issues arising from their experiences which included thoughts on interdisciplinarity and collaboration, methodologies and careers.

The keynote lecture, “Starting Points: Gilles Clément and the Recuperation of Space” was given by Matthew Gandy (Director of the Urban Laboratory at UCL, and part of the “Liquid City” programme funded project). The lecture introduced the French landscape architect Gilles Clément (b. 1943), and his particular interest in urban nature, particularly the ecological, aesthetic interest and diversity present in abandoned tracts of land. Matthew’s film *Liquid City* (part of the project of the same name), was shown in the evening of day one. The film is a thought provoking intervention concerned with water, urban infrastructure, landscape and social formation in 21st century Mumbai (predicted to be the largest city in the world by 2020), and it opened up questions regarding alternative methods of disseminating research and engaging with the public.

Two panels within the conference programme provided the opportunity for a number of delegates to showcase their research. The first of these was made up of programme students, all undertaking collaborative research. This panel served to show the diversity of research being undertaken as part of the Landscape and Environment Programme. Martyn Allen, in collaboration with the Sussex Archaeological Society, used animal bone data to reconstruct human and animal relationships in the late Iron Age/early Roman Britain. This showed links with Caroline Juby’s work with the Museum of London which aims to construct a Palaeolithic landscape of the capital through the collection of a database of fossils. Carloyn Anderson’s research on the military landscape of Scotland (in collaboration with the National Library of Scotland), considered the role of the Board of Ordnance maps in the creation and contestation of the military landscape, considering the methods used in their construction. Polly Atkin’s presentation included her reflections relating to collaboration with the Wordsworth Trust, by looking at the implications of becoming an “embedded researcher”. The often challenging nature of collaborative research was picked up on by Helena Rivera, who is producing a PhD in collaboration with the Kingston and Architectural Foundation. In her presentation she discussed how she approached collaboration by

collating and displayed her work on a website, enabling engagement with the public and the documentation of a working bibliography/archive.

Many issues relating to collaboration and interdisciplinarity raised in the delegate presentations were followed up in a workshop led by Naomi Sykes. Delegates shared personal experiences of collaboration, discussing how they deal with the relationship between academic and non-academic parties. Collaboration emerged as both productive and difficult. Although collaboration in some cases simply meant beneficial access to sources, or introductions to helpful contacts, for others, managing duties in the collaborating institution (and getting credit for this work) with actual research was a real issue, but overall it was felt that the extra skills gained were definitely a benefit.

The second panel included students working as part of larger Programme funded projects and others beyond the programme who are also working in landscape and environment field. Samantha Jones' investigations into human ecological histories in the Highlands of Borneo used palynology to unearth human-environment interactions. Francisco Ferreira's presentation illustrated his work on a community based anthropological study of an indigenous region of Peru, observing their social organisation and ritual life. Maria Nakhshima's study of Kuzomen village in north-west Russia documented the village's population decline, focusing on different reactions to village architecture demonstrated by incomers and permanent dwellers. In her presentation Margherita Pieraccini looked at the complex definition and designation of common land within the context of Ingleton, Yorkshire. Matthew Flintham's work also considered issues of access to land, this time revealing how the military creates and controls space in the United Kingdom. As fences are the typical encounter most of us have with these spaces, questions emerged over how to represent both the visible and invisible aspects of military space. Oliver Dunnett transported us into British outer space, through the medium of Frank Hampson's *Dan Dare* comics of the early 1950s. This is a world where futuristic motorways, housing blocks and railway terminals dominate the landscape.

A second workshop took the form of a "world café", using small group discussion to promote debate around the implications of recent developments in archival research, the contribution of innovative and experimental methods, the common ground or divergence of academic terminology, and the future of arts and humanities based research. Delegates rotated between four different questions –

1. What is the future of arts and humanities research in landscape and environment?
2. What are the operational and theoretical issues surrounding the use of archives?
3. What are the contributions of experimentation and creativity in furthering landscape and environmental research?
4. Space, place, landscape, religion, nature, environment, site

and spent time in groups writing down thoughts and building on the ideas of previous groups. The delegates found this a useful and interesting exercise and generated some useful thoughts. Ideas were then brought together for discussion, with commentary being provided by David Matless. Emerging points included the notion of the experiment as sometimes radical, yet also as a controlled method of rigorous scientific testing. Do we have a license to be creative, or is the thesis format restrictive, limiting our opportunities to advance knowledge? The move towards digitisation of resources raised questions about documents which are neglected and remain outside of the archive. A present impulse in arts and humanities research seems now to be the need to go beyond the academic, and engage with wider publics and policy makers. This poses the question do we need to ensure the development of a single academic voice to project beyond the academy? A common language could be of value within landscape and environment research; because of the need to converse across disciplines (the range of

backgrounds brought together on this occasion highlighted this). But should we really seek to erase differences between disciplines?

Careers proved to be an area of concern and in the final panel participants were able to engage in useful questioning of each other and of panel members (Briony McDonagh – Post-doctoral Research Fellow on Larger Grant project 'Changing Landscapes, Changing Environments: enclosures and culture in Northamptonshire 1700 – 1900; Ben Cowell – The National Trust and a member of the Programme Steering Committee; David Potter – Civil Service; Graham Rimington – research student returning to academia following a varied career) to air common concerns and queries regarding post-PhD career paths. Discussion highlighted the wide variety of academic and non-academic career paths available to researchers in landscape and environment, whilst panellists pressed the importance of CV building during the PhD, building up and marketing a “packet of skills” for employers, having clear ideas for future projects, as well as thinking about getting your work published.

Outside of formal presentation and workshop sessions a drinks reception and dinner was organised on day one of the conference to encourage informal discussion and networking. As part of this a poster competition took place which was open to all delegates as an alternative method of presenting research findings. This proved to be another successful method of allowing delegates who were not providing formal presentations to actively participate, with the posters generating talking points throughout the duration of the conference.