

# Urban Forestscapes

**Saskia de Wit <sup>[1]</sup>, René van de Velde <sup>[1]</sup> and Lisa Diedrich <sup>[3]</sup>**

<sup>[1]</sup> *Delft University of Technology (The Netherlands)*

<sup>[2]</sup> *Technische Universität Berlin (Germany)*

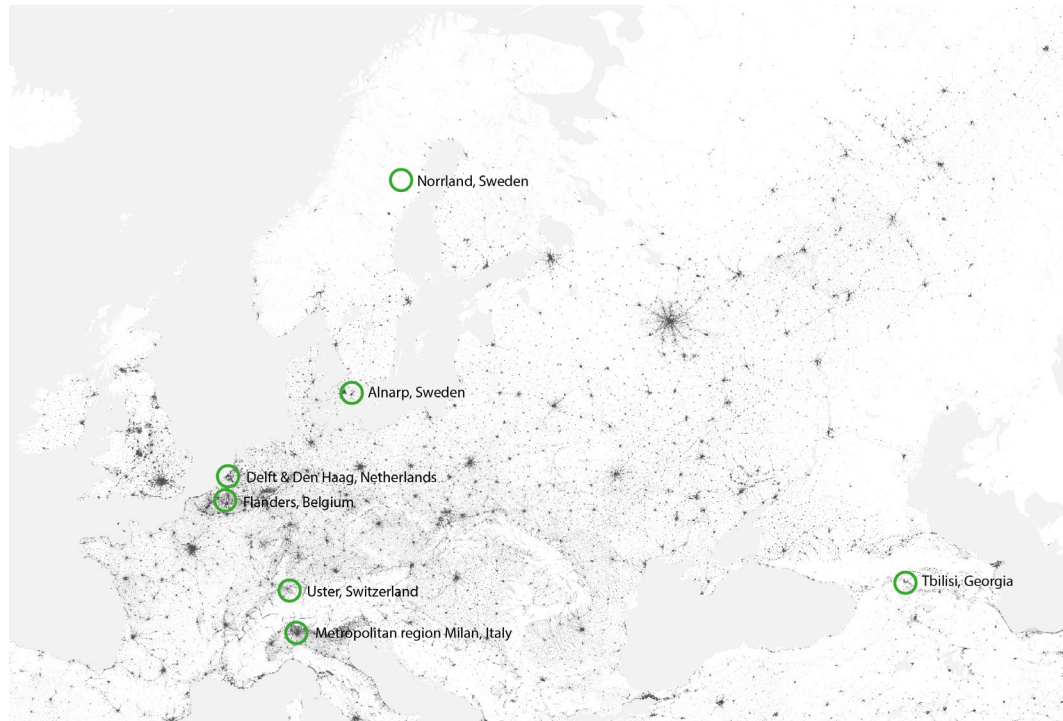
This issue of SPOOL elaborates a designerly perspective on urban forestry. Evidence has increased rapidly in the recent years to confirm the agency of trees and urban forests to cure a number of ills besetting urban societies. An expanding range of disciplines, in varying and novel combinations, are turning to an urban version of forestry to re-configure green (and grey) infrastructures, re-write neighbourhoods, re-purpose derelict territories and re-vitalize disparate peripheries. As such, in the face of the growing number of challenges facing cities globally, we see that urban trees and forests are becoming increasingly central to spatial planning and design practise. And yet, with all this work done on the environmental, ecological, technical and recently also urbanism-related aspects of urban forestry (cf. *Journal of Landscape Architecture* 1/2023), its site-specific, spatial, aesthetical, and cultural dimensions have received less attention in research. For us as SPOOL editors, this is an invitation to focus on trees and forests from the vantage point of landscape architecture and the related thread of SPOOL, called 'landscape metropolis'. This thematic thread addresses the dynamic, composite, and layered urban landscape with all its biotic and abiotic elements from a design perspective, with the intent to transcend the conventional city-countryside dichotomy, and to understand landscape as a permanent underlying subtext of the urban condition, with repercussions into the remotest corners of the globe. From a landscape metropolis perspective, cities are understood as complex territorial mosaics where the conventional categories of urban and non-urban give way to a mix of material environments in various stages of 'naturalness', or to put it another way: natures in various stages of becoming 'cultured'. Building on the potentials of an alternative reading of the urban territory then, in this issue we feature a number of select authors who elaborate on this condition, expanding on a designerly frame of knowing and doing in urban forestry. Publication formats also help: besides regular papers, visual essays are featured as a lesser-known yet highly appropriate category of exploration for design research.

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## Urban Forestscapes in the Metropolitan Mosaic

We want to speculatively call our designerly approach to urban forestry 'urban forestscapes'. This term is inspired by the inter- and transdisciplinary research platform SLU Urban Futures at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, which labels one of its investigative alleys 'urban forestscapes'. We welcome the epistemic elusiveness of the term as it allows for a multitude of interpretations and invites for many actors of different disciplinary inclinations to meet around a common concern. According to SLU Urban Futures, whose member and forest scientist Dimitris Athanassiadis joined us as associate editor, the concept of urban forestscapes 'provides a way to emphasize how forests intersect with urban processes across the landscape, interacting with places, people, meanings, and materials' (SLU Urban Futures, <https://www.slu.se/en/Collaborative-Centres-and-Projects/slu-urban-future/regional-hubs/umea-hub/getting-our-cities-right-3---reflections/>). One of the potentials of the term urban forestscapes is its presentation of an alternative trope to the prevailing dichotomy of forest/nature versus urban/culture; a dualism that

plays out in the way forests and cities are seen and imagined – and subsequently projected, shaped and managed. Despite the apparent fusion of the two realms in the term urban forestry, we see that forest and city are seen and designed in a traditional way and in complementarity to each other, and at worst in relative isolation. The subtext to much of the theory and practice from the forestry (life sciences) side of things is that the urban forest needs to become more like a natural forest, while the subtext for engineers, architects and urbanists continues to speak to visions of the city as infrastructural system, collection of artifacts and human-centred environment free from the constraints of the natural world. However, the urban territory has been the setting of all kinds of connections and conflations between nature and urban life, with tree complexes and tree mosaics interwoven with the form and identity of urban places, neighbourhoods and cities, and in turn their social and cultural machinations.



**FIGURE 1** Locations of the urban forests addressed in this issue of *SPOOL*, within the landscape metropolis of Europe and adjacent regions (illustration by Michiel Pouderoijen, TU Delft, on a map by Copernicus Global Land Service: Land Cover 100m and Esri; Garmin International, Inc. World Water Bodies).

## Experience and Experimentation

A critical thematic that comes to the fore through the lens of urban forests is the centrality of human experience (of forests, of cities and of their hybridizations), and the role of imagination and the sensorial in how we experience ‘tree-dominated spaces’. Thus, we open this issue on a visual essay by **Winogrand** who unfolds what might be called ‘the subtle art of urban forest design’, in the Swiss city of Uster. The innovation of the project lies in a new interpretation of functional woodland clearings with a design language of reduction and simplicity. Not the forest has been designed but its void: the design focuses not on planting trees but on exposing the existing qualities of a particular place in the vast and complex mosaic of the urban region, over time.

Two other visual essays explore designerly approaches for the making of urban forests, through hands-on experiments. **Cowles** and **Hackenberger** narrate the afforestation of the hillsides of Tbilisi, Georgia over the years, to bring new life to the remains of the mono-cultural forests of the Soviet era. Site-specific plantations, new drawing tools, civic engagement, and rigorous monitoring over time allowed them to formulate design guidelines beyond the generic, yet transferrable to other places in search of designerly principles for urban forestry. A similar in-situ approach characterises the hands-on study of urban soils at different locations in the Dutch city of The Hague, to understand how they can be best prepared as a foundation for the design of future urban forests. This comparative case study by **Gauthier et al.** also distinguishes itself by synthesising and communicating sites, methods, tools, and lessons learned through a powerful visual approach, inviting for replication elsewhere.

We are happy to feature six papers from very different parts of Europe which do not only reveal the geographical, ecological and cultural differences in Europe, but also the complexity of the problematique on a larger landscape scale. What are the dimensions of the European metropolitan afforestation project, and how does this inform our understanding of urban forests?

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## Researching through Living Labs and Large-scale Urban Projects

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In their paper **Andreasson** and **Dahl** observe that urban forestry practice is dominated by systemic approaches such as ecosystem services or nature-based solutions. Offering fieldwork results from the study of select sites of the 'Landscape Laboratory' of SLU's Alnarp Campus in Southern Sweden, the authors note the potential of landscape architecture to complement the gaze of the forester and ecologist by elaborating on the social, recreational, and spatio-temporal dimensions of urban forestry. **Vanautgaerden** and **Gobbato** Liva elaborate on similar issues in the context of their work on Flanders' ambitious reforestation and afforestation programme. They reveal how a characterization of the territory couched in the term urban forests resonates with a hybrid planning practice developed to realize woodland expansion goals in this highly (sub)urbanized region in Belgium. The development of a tailored coalition-building process, connecting policy and governance, different levels of scale, and various institutional and private stakeholders are strategies that underline and work with the hybrid nature of the territory. Zooming into a neighbourhood scale in Flanders, **Wambecq** and **De Meulder** draw on the results of a design studio on the Western Witness Hill of Leuven in their exploration of the potentials of the concept of the 'forest figure'. They elaborate the depth of relations particular to this site and vernacular practices of urbanization and woodland establishment and management over time. Their concept of the forest figure is a three-pronged strategy to overcome urban and forest fragmentation through new alliances of territorial curatorship where forest and urban spaces are conceived as joint projects by inhabitants and other land managers.

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## Unveiling Political Narratives and Historical Evidence

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In her paper on the Forestami initiative for metropolitan territory of Milan, Italy, **Pastore** stresses the need for multiple modes of organization and dynamic socio-spatial processes. She points out the preeminent role of forging novel and diverse networks of stakeholders, to successfully navigate the complexities of large-scale metropolitan forestry initiatives. Another paper focusing on the political stances of urban forests comes from the boreal landscapes of Northern Sweden where the urge for a 'green transition' dominates the political agenda and gets implemented in the urban realm through the trend of building

with timber. **Berríos-Negrón, Redeker** and **Kokins** reveal the impact of this seemingly 'green' and 'locally resourced' building material on the wooded landscapes of the region and dismantle the 'green' narrative as an argument in favour of extractive industrial practices. They call for a comprehensive regional framework and corresponding local competence, giving agency to both human and non-humans most affected in their livelihoods and habitats.

In the final paper of this issue **De Jong** and **Van der Velde** reveal the historical foundations of designing urban forests. In their analysis of tree plantings in the city of Delft between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century they note that trees became a foundational component of urban spaces, resulting in a huge variety of group, line and volume arrangements across and beyond the city walls. They stress the need to understand the *longue durée* as a foundation for future design practice that would take inspiration on both the large-scale design of forests in the landscape metropolis, and the micro-scale of individual trees and plantations, and the interaction of these components, including the human experience.

This takes us back to the start, to the sensorial qualities of urban forests. These qualities have been lauded since the early stages of urbanisation, can rightfully be called a landscape architectural design tradition with manifold benefits for all forms of life, and they deliver a strong argument to place designerly approaches centre-stage in the ongoing European metropolitan afforestation project. The term urban forests can be understood as a mind-opener, a call to think and act together from various perspectives, galvanized by a sensitive and designerly mindset. The suffix 'scapes', in this respect provides a useful linguistic tool for research and practice to allow for porous boundaries and integration of knowledge across the disciplines and professions working with the topic. It also allows transversal fluidity, for 'thinking out of the box', to access new epistemic grounds, and for the intellectual openness needed to keep the box open for a while, along evolving transdisciplinary scholarship.

#### **DOI**

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