



Pages from Alexander von Humboldt's *American Travel Diaries 1799-1804*: showing post-travel reflections pasted directly on top of on-site travel notations. Source: Berlin State Library/Prussian Cultural Heritage

## Phd Course

# Criticality in Research/Criticality as Praxis: Knowledge tools for designing urban futures

Course Leaders:

Lisa Diedrich, Prof. of Landscape Architecture/Director of SLU Urban Futures

Andrea Kahn, Prof. of Site Thinking in Research and Practice, SLU Landscape

*Course responsables*

Lisa Diedrich, Prof. of Landscape Architecture / Director, SLU Urban Futures  
Andrea Kahn, SLU Urban Futures / SLU Landscape, designCONTENT

*Guest lecturers*

Thaïsa Way, Director of Studies, Garden & Landscape Studies, Dumbarton Oaks / Prof. University of Washington  
Benita Braun-Feldweg, bf studio-architekten, Berlin / Metropolenhaus designer + developer

*Course assistant*

Sonia Curnier, SLU Urban Futures / Post-doc Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne

*Examiner*

Lisa Diedrich, SLU

*Higher education credits*

7.5 ECTS

*Subject area*

Landscape Architecture

*Language*

English

*Format*

On-site intensive start seminar + on-line follow-up meeting

*Prerequisites*

PhD students (registered or applicants) in fields concerned with urban landscape futures (design, planning, environmental science, landscape architecture, architecture, urban history, ecology, sustainability studies etc.)

## **COURSE APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS**

To apply, candidates should submit the following materials in a single PDF with their full name in the document header. Email to SLU Profs. Lisa Diedrich & Andrea Kahn (lisa.diedrich@slu.se; andrea.kahn@slu.se) by **23 November, 2021**:

- a 1-page abstract of their PhD research project, including title
- a 1-paragraph statement with their motivation for participating in this course
- PhD start date, name of supervisor(s) and home institution

*Note: A nominal 1000 SEK (ca 100 EUR) fee will be required from non-SLU students. Accepted students will be asked to provide their invoicing information for processing.*

*“Thinking is an action. For all aspiring intellectuals, thoughts are the laboratory where one goes to pose questions and find answers, and the place where visions of theory and praxis come together”.* bell hooks

*“Broadly speaking, criticality comprises - and is a composite of - three things: thinking, reflecting and acting. In emphasizing “action” in addition to thinking (in the form of argumentation and reflective judgment), “criticality” might thus be seen and conceived of in relation to established definitions of critical thinking as trait.”*  
Martin Davies

*“Critical urban theory involves the critique of ideology (including social–scientific ideologies) and the critique of power, inequality, injustice and exploitation, at once within and among cities.”*  
Neil Brenner

*“Knowledge is always knowledge for what. It must be interpreted to suit the practices, and practices must be ready to integrate knowledge”* Helga Nowotny

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **A critical approach, to theory and practice**

Critical thinking is an interactive process. It puts theory and practice into productive contact. As American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey noted early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, critical thinking deploys the active power of thinking to destabilize apparently stable worlds.

Criticality, a socially situated practice, goes further still. Comprising three operations - thinking, reflecting *and* acting – criticality exposes a disposition to position oneself outside received frameworks of understanding. Criticality is motivated by an aspiration to engage other-wise, and other ways, with the world.

Critical theory, like criticality, attends to the circumstances conditioning its production. It is at once reflective and situated. As such, *doing* critical theory means engaging with practice as always and already informing the theoretical work.

Critical thinking, criticality and critical theory transcend any single disciplinary domain or practice-based arena. All three proffer tools for observing and gleaning understandings from the various forums and formats through which useful knowledge gets generated and applied. This “Criticality in Research/Criticality as Praxis” course aims to mobilize the insightful force of these critical tools to enrich and help evolve epistemological norms and received practices towards new forms of knowledge production.

### **A landscape perspective, open to all**

Thanks to its simultaneous engagement with academic research and professional practice, landscape architecture harbors profound transdisciplinary and critical potential. Embracing distinct work modes, and operational methods affords those working in, or on, the landscape field opportunities to productively synthesize diverse forms of knowledge in the service of addressing wicked problems associated urban transformation. The process of designing urban landscapes involves weaving together insights and know-how gleaned from many research areas (natural and social sciences, technology, humanities, etc.) and practice arenas (industry, politics, education, culture, and more). Thinking critically – in the sense of reflectively and seriously – about how such interactive interweaving happens can yield valuable insights for creatively grappling with real-world challenges as well as for defining theoretical research questions that arise from, and associate to, uncertainties surrounding urban futures.

This third course in the Criticality course series offers participants a chance to engage with texts on critical theory, critical thinking, criticality and reflexivity; analyze publications written from a critical perspective on urban landscape futures; and undertake an exercise in critical writing. Adopting a landscape architectural perspective, it welcomes researchers from multiple disciplines, in order to rehearse interactive and synthetic critical thinking processes. It is open to participants who wish to sharpen understanding of their own research aims within broader disciplinary contexts, and to strengthen their capacity, as researchers, to contribute to the evolution of landscape knowledge for sustainable urban futures.

### **Course structure**

The course consists of two (2) group meetings, preparatory and follow-up reading and writing work. The first meeting, an intensive on-site 4-day core seminar (24h), is preceded by a preparation phase (ca 40h) with reading and short writing assignments. Following the core seminar, a writing-up phase (ca 50h, at distance) precedes the second group meeting on-line, a 1-day pre-final paper-presentation session (6-8h). A final short writing period (ca 10h) for students to integrate peer and instructor critical feedback (provided during the online presentation session) precedes the final paper submission.

### *Key meeting dates*

The first course meeting takes place on-site, 4-7 April 2022, with four ½ day-sessions scheduled over the four days. Organized by SLU Landscape, this intensive seminar will be held on-site in Berlin, Germany at the Metropolenhaus, and will include a guest lecture on this innovative urban design/development project and a guided-tour of the area. The second meeting takes place on-line during the week of 23 May 2022 (exact day TBD).

## Coursework

### **Preparatory coursework (independent)**

Prior to the core seminar, students are required to do preparatory work to familiarize themselves with a shared body of literature, and each other's PhD research topics, as follows:

- closely read 4 chapter-length required critical writing texts
- closely read 4 chapter-length required theory literature texts
- prepare a 4-sentence *rhetorical précis* paragraph (guidelines provided), for each required theory text (4 total), and circulate via mail to all participants by 1 April, 2022
- prepare a 4-sentence *critical précis* (guidelines provided) of their planned final paper
- draft a 1-paragraph synopsis of that final paper (include working title), to be circulated via email to all participants, by 1 April, 2022

*estimated time: 30h*

### **Core Seminar coursework (group, on site)**

The core seminar meeting includes four (4) half-day long work-sessions. The first two sessions focus on assigned literature (critical writing on landscape topics and theoretical texts from various fields) with emphasis on how, and why, critical projects, writings and research are produced. Discussions of theoretical literature, guided by the reading of participants' *rhetorical précis*, will address key framing concepts. The last two work sessions focus on developing participants' critical research praxis, using the *critical précis* as a tool to sharpen positions, nuance vocabularies, and strengthen writing skills. Constructive inputs on student written assignments will be driven by fellow PhD students, Lisa Diedrich and Andrea Kahn. The course also includes a pair of dialogic presentations by a guest lecturer and a course leader. The first, on critical design practice, by guest Benita Braun-Feldweg, bfstudio-architekten Berlin (Metropolenhause designer and developer) in conversation with Lisa Diedrich (Director SLU Urban Futures platform, and chief editor of Landscape Architecture Europe/LAE) and the second, on critical research/writing praxis, by guest Thaisa Way, Director of Studies, Garden & Landscape Studies, Dumbarton Oaks/Professor, University of Washington in conversation with Andrea Kahn (design theorist, SLU professor and founder of designCONTENT, a strategic consultancy for designers).

*estimated time: 24h*

### **Post-Core Seminar writing period (individual)**

5 weeks devoted to final critical paper. *estimated time: 50h*

### **Paper presentation session (group, online)**

A one-day session devoted to pre-final paper presentations and pre-designated constructive critical peer-respondent and professor feedback. *estimated time: 8h*

### **Final writing period (individual)**

1 week to integrate presentation session inputs into final critical paper. *estimated time: 10h*

Final Papers will be evaluated by Lisa Diedrich and Andrea Kahn.

## **COURSE TIMELINE**

*October 2021*

Preliminary course information available, circulated through networks

*23 November 2021*

Application deadline (*see p.2 for requirements*)

*30 November 2021*

Close of application review period / notification to successful applicants

*7 December 2021*

Applicants email to confirm participation (required to receive course materials)

*15 December 2021*

Distribute course information, schedule, literature packages and précis guidelines/assignments and course participant list to successful applicants.

*until 1 APRIL 2022 (hours allocated at participant discretion)*

Preparatory work period for course reading and preparatory course assignments.

*1 APRIL, 2022*

Four (4) *rhetorical précis*, 1 *critical précis*, and 1-paragraph final paper synopsis due (circulated by mail to all participants).

*4-7 APRIL 2022*

Core PhD seminar, four (4) ½-day work sessions in Berlin, Germany.

*16 May 2022*

*Pre-final paper drafts due (exchange between respondent pairs).*

*Student course evaluations due*

*Week of 23 May 2022 (date tbd)*

Pre-final paper presentation session. Respondent critical comments due – (group meeting/online)

*1 June 2022*

Final paper submittal