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“Designing Imagination: The Poetic Possibilities of Uncertainty”

Intermediate-Level PhD Student

In the field of design, it is always the case that designing requires a process, the necessity of which is undeniable because, regardless of the approach taken, the design process leads the designer to create the final product. Confronting this product, in my case the built landscape architecture, can offer a range of opportunities from ordinary experiences to imaginary atmospheres, as the most sublime possible experience any designer desires to build. Therefore, while the current study targets the role of the design process in creating imagination, addresses a common misapplied design tool, namely the “Narrative”.

If we follow the subject of “Narrative Design” in comparison with imagination discussions, I just do it with an exaggerated expression in this abstract to show better my point, in narrative architecture the designer is imposing his ideas at every moment on the perceiver, as someone who is reading the built space of the architect. On the other hand, there is an anti-narrative design approach where the designer deliberately avoids the typical conventions of the narrative and actually tries to be absent to let the perceiver to engage in a bodily experience. It is worth mentioning that the absence of the designer should not be interpreted as abandoning the design, but it should be seen as consciously creating an opportunity for the perceiver to grasp the atmosphere without attempting to dictate "How". In this regard, I employ the term "Narrative/Anti-Narrative Being" in this study to illustrate an in-between approach where although the designer has the control over his design through his scenario but intentionally leaves something for the imagination. In this design approach, the designer creates spaces that involve the mind and accordingly imagination, rather than deliberately directing it. In fact, it is the knowledge of the designer that shows his/her presence, not his/her continuous interventions. This concept raises two main questions:

- i) **How** a designer is able to build the space of narrative/anti narrative being?
- ii) **What** transforms this built space into an entity that aligns with this concept?

To be able to answer that Let's take a look at a more familiar word for narrative that is used in the art of cinema, namely “Storytelling”. Potteiger and Purinton (1998) in the book “Landscape Narratives: Design Practices for Telling Stories”, take a closer look at the meaning of this term. In narratology, “Story” is usually defined as the content plane of narrative, which means “what” is told as opposed to "how" it is told. But there is no story without its telling. The binary distinctions between story as the content and telling as the expression become difficult to maintain. As can be seen in Fig. 1, this study focuses on the “Act of Telling” which mediates and constructs the story. In this definition, narrative implies a knowledge acquired through the contingencies of the lived experience.

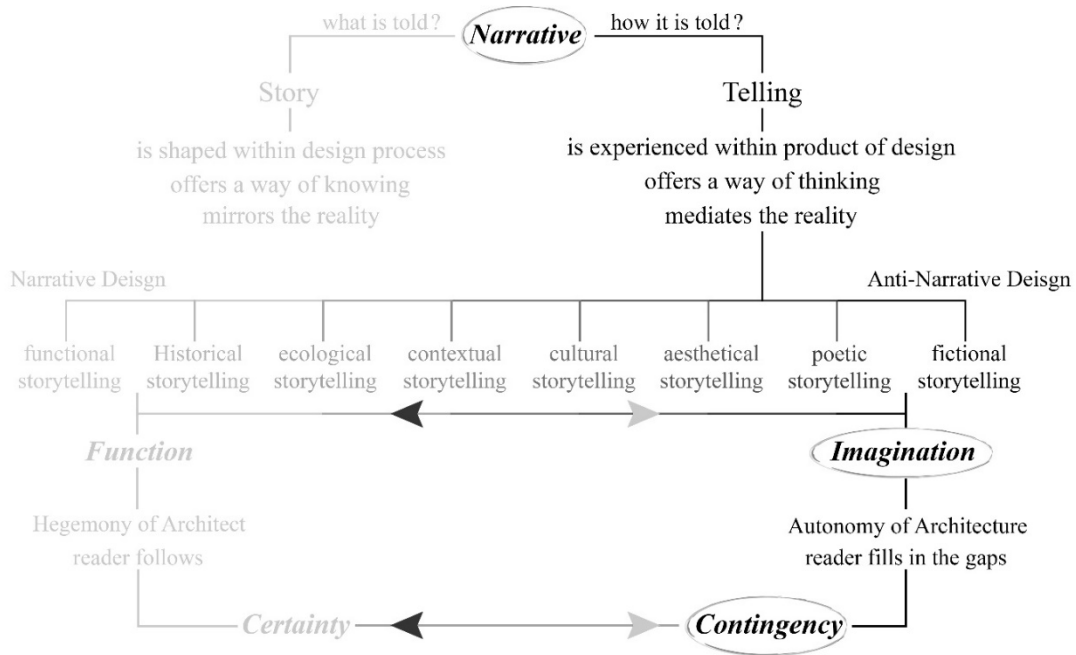


Fig. 1) The “Act of Telling” and its relation to Narrative, Imagination and Contingency in a bodily experience.

To follow this subject within the realm of design, the unifying element that ties up the trio of narrative design, imagination and contingency is their capacity to evoke the *“Poetic Possibilities of Uncertainty”* within the physical manifestations of design. Discussions centered around uncertainty, especially related to the perception/experience, has been highlighted in numerous associated phenomenological studies as a turning point for the design to become an outstanding work of art. Hence, this study considers contingency as a focal point.

In order to explain what is the exact meaning of the underestimated word of “Contingency” in design, I draw your attention to this fact that each architectural work follows 2 kinds of programs:

- i) related to "Design Process", where architects consider different possibilities.
- ii) related to "Product of Design", where the built architecture loses contingency.

Let’s think that the design process is like the design of a “game” and the final product is like a “puzzle”. Game design simply means simulating a replica, a copy or a model of product on a smaller scale, considering contingency, which means a future occurrence that is possible but cannot be predicted with certainty, a kind of “Potential”. Accordingly, the game designer tries to define a program through simulation and checking all the possibilities before making the final product to be able to produce the most difficult type of puzzle. How much he tries and considers all the probabilities, as soon as the puzzle is made, all these possibilities are eliminated and there is only one solution to deal with this product. In other words, it becomes "flat". This is exactly what happens to the most narrative landscape architecture designs that despite of their contingent design process, they finally become a physical product, which is inevitable. But what can designers do to run away this flatness?

This study suggests that landscape architecture can separate itself from being a flat unchangeable physical construction, if the designer takes the dynamic elements of nature such as water, light, vegetation, landform and climate as the leading roles of the story, as many designers do, but tells the story through defining a “Medium” which is responsive to the co-existence of "I" and "Nature" to offer more and more probabilities. To make it clear, this concept is able to promote additional potentials because it relies on two contingent factors namely the unstable unpredictable imagination of the perceiver and the ever-changing natural elements of landscape architecture. These factors are intertwined through this medium, resulting in a dual impact. It is not an ordinary medium, but the “**Medium of Contingency**”.¹

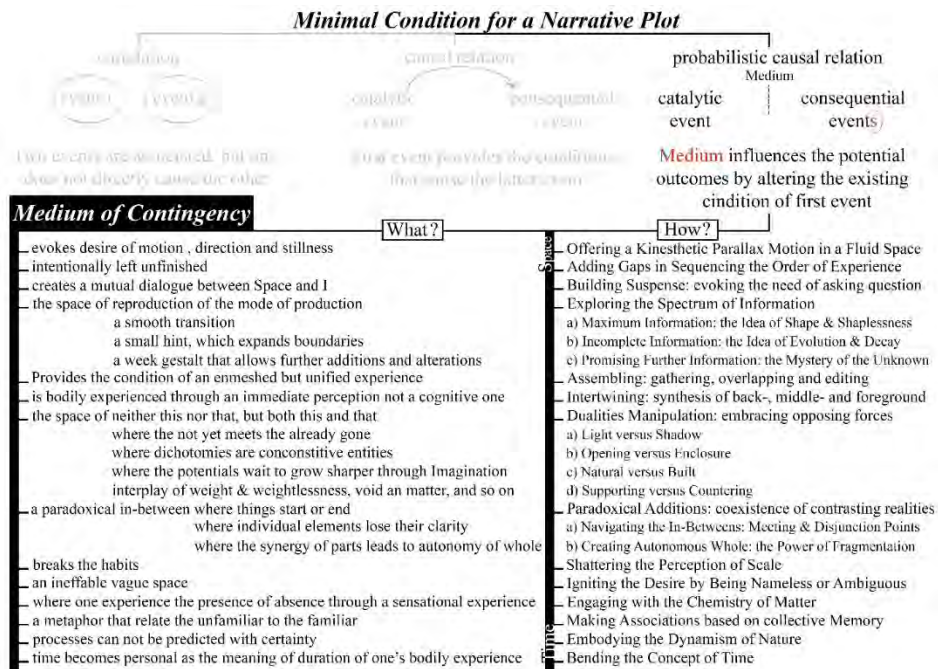


Fig. 2) Medium of contingency at a glance

The outcomes of this concept can be understood through two perspectives within the realm of design:

— Firstly, it manifests as the creative process of designing sublime imaginative atmospheres which offer an immersive experience that captivates the perceiver on multiple levels. In fact, this research sheds light on the profound impact of contingency in design, which deeply engages individuals in their bodily experiences as it evokes the imagination.

— Secondly, this concept unveils its significance as a catalyst for engaging an unending desire to repeatedly re-experience a particular work of art due to its inherent potentials for change that can be reinterpreted and rediscovered in each existential experience.

¹ In the following, you'll find the initial poster that was presented as part of the first Doctoral Colloquium in 2021, which was forged through the fusion of three disciplines: phenomenology, cinema, and landscape architecture, giving rise to the foundational framework of the ongoing study. Additionally, the subsequent poster from 2023 is presented to demonstrate the main categories of suggested contingent natural elements in built works of outstanding designers associated with each category. It is shown in the diagrams that how changing the medium between the I and Nature affects the atmosphere of the space to shed light on the operational dynamics of the concept of my study in the field of the design.

Water

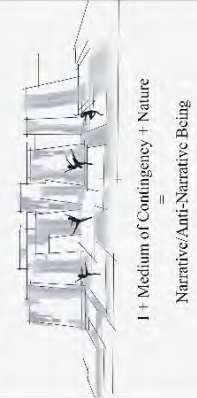
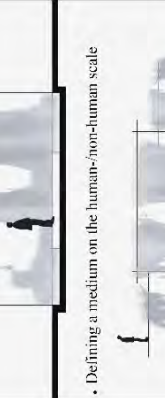
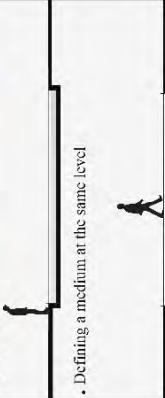
as the leading role of the story



Lawrence Halprin, Ira Keller Forecourt



Site Plan



1 + Medium of Contingency + Nature
= Narrative/Anti-Narrative Being

Light

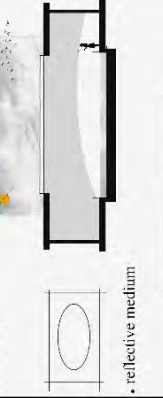
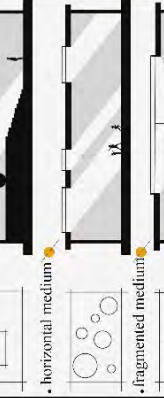
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Tadao Ando, Chichu & Benesse Museum



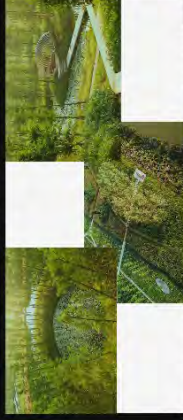
Site Plan



1 + Medium of Contingency + Nature
= Narrative/Anti-Narrative Being

Vegetation

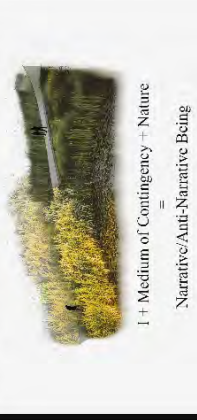
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Kongjian Yu, Tongnan Dafosi Wetland Park



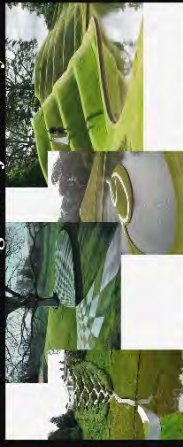
Site Plan



1 + Medium of Contingency + Nature
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Landform

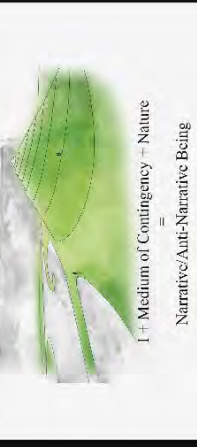
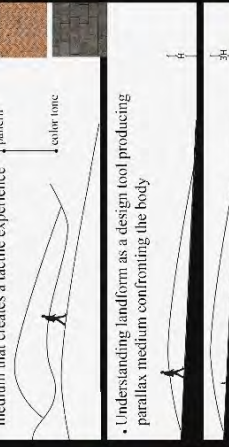
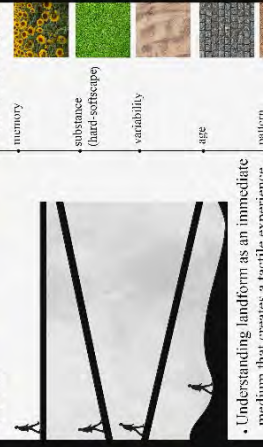
as the leading role of the story



Garden of Cosmic Speculation, Charles Jencks



Site Plan



1 + Medium of Contingency + Nature
= Narrative/Anti-Narrative Being

Climate

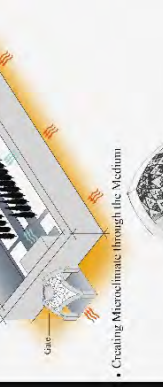
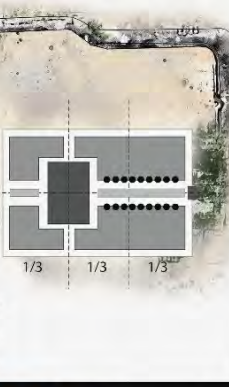
as the leading role of the story



Historical Persian Garden



Site Plan



1 + Medium of Contingency + Nature
= Narrative/Anti-Narrative Being

The Design-Driven Research & its Role:

To clear why design-based studies should be taken seriously is that, when we talk about the design science the question that always arises is that how the aspects of design that is used implicitly in design processes can be captured in the form of explicit theory or methodology, the lack of which is especially noticeable in the early stages of related researches. Put simply, professional experienced designers might have an innate sense of how to design but they struggle to transfer this knowledge to others and to explain precisely what helped them during this process.

In my opinion, due to the inherent uncertainty of art, however the design-based researches may not generally give satisfactory results in the sense of scientific studies, but I believe it is more like a self-discovery journey for each designer to dig deeper the design with the help of design itself. In meanwhile, communities like CA²RE can increase the reliability of the results by building this collective evaluation of design driven doctoral training with the help of different range of people who are involved in the design realm. Furthermore, attending similar conferences may enable the designer to produce more generalizable design concepts by learning how other people perceive the world of design in similar situations or even in other disciplines.