

23.05.2025

09:00 - 13:00

ETH Zurich, HIT F12

LUS DOCTORAL CRITS

**Guest Reviewer: Dr. Merve Bedir (Visiting Professor,
EPFL Architecture)**

**Reviewers: Prof. Dr. Tom Avermaete, Prof. Maria Conen,
Dr. Jennifer Duyne Barenstein, Prof. Teresa Galí-Izard,
Prof. Hubert Klumpner, Prof. Freek Persyn,
Prof. Milica Topalović, Dr. Fernando Túlio Franco,
Dr. Nazlı Tümerdem, Dr. Ina Valkanova,
Prof. Martina Voser**

Programme

09:00 - 09:15	Introduction
09:15 - 10:00	Luke Harris
10:00 - 10:45	Camila Medina Novoa
10:45 - 11:00	Break
11:00 - 11:45	Stefan Laxness
11:45 - 12:30	Raquel Jerobon
12:30 - 13:00	Concluding Discussion

Making performative grounds: infrastructuring soil in New York's East River Park

Luke Harris

In urban climate infrastructure projects, soil is increasingly understood as an active agent—a living infrastructure that supports ecological functions while being designed and specified like any other material. This talk examines the epistemology of soil design, focusing on climate adaptation projects in New York City to explore how soil is framed, manipulated, and instrumentalized within design processes. It traces how this way of seeing and producing soil weaves together often-contradictory geotechnical, agricultural, and architectural perspectives to define and assemble these heterogeneous mixtures.

Drawing on collaborations between designers and soil scientists, I examine how practices like soil specification and mixing negotiate tensions between ecological “liveliness” and the demands for predictability and control. These technocratic approaches reveal the biopolitical stakes of soil design and its broader potential to shape urban geographies. By critically analyzing these processes, I argue that rethinking soil—from inert resource to vital infrastructure—offers a foundation for more creative and ecologically attuned practices of city-making.



Figure 1: Soil mixing facility, New Jersey. Credits: by the author

Luke Harris is a registered landscape architect and doctoral candidate at the Institute of Landscape and Urban Studies at ETH Zurich. His research examines the metabolism of designed urban substrates in the New York metropolitan area. He is a founding member of the collective Office of Living Things, which develops community-based design strategies to foster dynamic living systems. Previously, he practiced at Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, where he focused on planting design and landscape infrastructure projects.

His work has been published in *Landscape Research Journal* and *OASE Journal of Architecture*, as well as in several edited volumes. He is a co-organizer of the 2025 NSL Colloquium at ETH Zurich, *Beyond Maintenance: Responsive Practices for Changing Landscapes*. He holds a BA in International Studies from Macalester College and an MLA from the University of Virginia, where he received the Stanley and Helen Abbott Award for excellence in landscape architecture and the Benjamin C. Howland Traveling Fellowship.

A Rare Tree in a Banquet

Camila Medina Novoa

Visuality, as art historian Daniela Bleichmar and science historian Lorraine Daston explain, was central to the production of natural knowledge between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Herbariums and botanical drawings—developed within the Linnaean classification system—served as “avatars” of faraway exotics, making them accessible to European botanists. However, the social events surrounding the first transplantation of *Araucaria araucana* from Chile to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, London, offer an opportunity to explore how non-scientific events, such as the dinner party, transformed living collections into more movable, tactile, and joyful experiences. Beginning with a footnote that places an *araucaria* at a royal fête, this presentation focuses on the role of the dinner setting in shaping a sense of wonder around exotic species—where discussions on botany could emerge through display and taste.

This presentation—originally published as an article—forms part of the first chapter of my dissertation. It contributes to a broader argument about how plant transplantation influenced epistemological approaches to trees and their ecological, cultural, and aesthetic meanings—ultimately shaping present definitions of ornamental trees. At the same time, it reflects on how these practices beautified imperial plant appropriation, foregrounding the need to recognise and restore the agency of hidden human and non-human actors shaping the histories of botanical knowledge and display.



Figure 2: Araucaria araucana female cone at the tip of a branch. Cone of Monkey Puzzle Tree, Dropmore, catalogue number 38017, stored in The Economic Botany Collection at Kew Gardens. Credits: by the author

Camila Medina Novoa is a doctoral candidate at LUS, ETH Zürich, under the supervision of Professor Teresa Galí-Izard and Dr. Nils Güttler. Her research is situated within the field of Landscape Architecture History and Theory, with a focus on gardening practices related to trees. She is the main editor of the book *Landscape is Not Nature*, published in Chile in 2020, and has been an invited lecturer in the MScLA program at ETH Zürich since 2023.

Co-producing community-led landscape restoration

Stefan Laxness

I will present a synthesis, observation, and outcomes from yearlong participatory action research on the theme of community-led landscape restoration which, in May 2025, culminated in an SNF funded scientific exchange in Tbilisi. The research sought to explore, problematize and co-produce 'community-led landscape restoration' as a conceptual framework for describing and analyzing citizen led landscape restoration. The discussion group and exchange brought together five community organizations and a group of trans-disciplinary experts. Finally, I will elaborate how the outcomes of these discussions inform the structure of my doctoral thesis.



Figure 3. Community-led landscape restoration in practice and science, SNF Scientific exchange in Tbilisi, May 2025. Credits: by the author

Stefan Laxness is a Doctoral Fellow at the Institute for Landscape and Urban Studies (LUS) at ETH Zurich where he is researching community-led landscape restoration initiatives in Europe through ethnographic and participatory action methods. His research explores the intersection of landscape restoration with place, commoning and urbanization. Previously, he was a project leader at Forensic Architecture and taught at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London. He holds an AA Diploma from the Architectural Association.

Piercing the Veil of Wilderness in the Maasai Mara: Tracing the Transformation of a Subsistence Territory

Raquel Jerebon

The mythology of wilderness continues to unfold on African lands, leading to vast enclosures as land is set aside for wildlife and nature conservation. These are not new processes, as 'wild' and 'wilderness' ideology have been mobilised in colonial pasts that prompted the initial movement, displacement and dislocation of peoples and their subsistence livelihoods, and frontiers of nature conquest were established. Within this shroud of 'wild', nature and wildlife conservation thrive. Socio-spatial transformation processes are, however, rendered invisible as all else is cast aside and simplified to construct a cohesive vision of landscapes in need of preservation for future good and where 'uncontrolled' human occupation is cast as a threat.

Today, displacement and dislocation are still present, but these frontiers have been requalified as sites of extraction from nature through experience and tourism. These lands are again at the centre of change in long lease arrangements that overwrite the territory with wildlife conservancies, hotels and resorts. Displacement here is either direct and immediate, often with violence, or long and indirect over longer times, where actual movement and migration are induced, but also livelihoods and futures are altered, prompting migration to other more promising locations and livelihoods. In this context, agro-pastoral Maasai become implicated in these processes.

We take Narok and its hinterland as an entry point to qualify and situate the continuum of displacement and its attendant transformation of subsistence lands to consumption landscapes. Starting with the 1904 and 1910 Anglo-Maasai treaties between the British and the Maasai and the forced movements that followed; the Narok town centre which today serves as the gateway point and entry into the 'wilderness' of the Maasai Mara, unearths the juxtaposition of land use change, population growth, land ownership structures and tensions that are still present. Working with historical maps, documents and secondary literature, we trace colonial control, sedentary push, enclosure processes, mobilities, frontiers and gateways to see a territory of subsistence being overwritten by consumption.



Figure 4. Maasai Reserve. Source: G. R. Sandford, *The Masai Reserve*, Scale ca. 1:1,000,000, in *An Administrative and Political History of The Masai Reserve* by G.R. Sandford, Frontispiece. London: Waterlow & Sons Limited, London Wall, 1919

Raquel Jerobon is an urban planner and designer and is currently a doctoral fellow at the LUS Institute at ETH. Her research investigates how and to what extent extended urbanization processes in indigenous Maasai territories are being impacted by these changes specifically concerning spatial production processes and transhumant livelihoods of the local community. She holds a Master of Human Settlements degree from KU Leuven, Belgium and an undergraduate degree in Urban Design and Development from Technical University of Kenya.

Guest Reviewer

Dr Merve Bedir is an architect. She works with infrastructures of hospitality and mobility, towards the collective intelligences and imaginaries of the landscape. She is currently a visiting professor at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne- EPFL Architecture. Bedir is a co-founder of Kitchen Workshop in Gaziantep, and Center for Spatial Justice in Istanbul.

Merve Bedir holds a PhD from Delft University of Technology, and a BArch from Middle East Technical University in Ankara. Previously, she worked as Assistant Professor in Hong Kong University, Department of Architecture (2018-2023). She co-chaired Design for Partnerships for Change panel at the United International Architects Conference (2023). Her recent publications include “Goldwater” in *Raw Earth Agriculture* (forthcoming/ 2025), “Kitchen Workshop: Cityzenship as Infrastructure” in *Feminist Infrastructural Critique* (2024), and *New Silk Roads in e-flux architecture* (co-editor, 2019, 2024). In 2016, Bedir co-founded Aformal Academy, an independent school program for urbanism and public culture/art between Shenzhen and Hong Kong.

Bedir’s recent design projects include an industrial kitchen in Gaziantep, Turkey (2023), and Postane repair project in Istanbul (2021). Her fellowships include Alserkal Foundation (Dubai, forthcoming/ 2025), Pogon (Zagreb, 2024), BAK (Utrecht, 2023), Schloss Solitude (Stuttgart, 2019). She co-curated *Hands on/ Hands off* (Viper Gallery, Prag, 2023); *Automated Landscapes* (Urbanism and Architecture Biennale Shenzhen, 2017-19). She curated *Vocabulary of Hospitality*, (Istanbul, 2014 and Rotterdam, 2022), and *Uncommon River*, Plovdiv (2015). Her work has taken part in Istanbul Design Biennale (several editions), Urbanism and Architecture Biennale Shenzhen (several editions), Venice Architecture Biennale’s main exhibition (2021), Sao Paulo Architecture Biennale (2017); and most recently installed at the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (2025), Saltonline (Water Assemblies, 2025), BAK Utrecht (Hauntologists, 2023), and Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum (*Designing Peace*, 2023). These were reviewed in *The Guardian*, *Avery Review*, and *Frieze Magazine*.

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