

INSTRUMENTS OF DESIGN:
ON SURVEYING AND DESIGNING SITE-SPECIFIC MATERIAL

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“Our deepest hope as humans lies in technology; but our deepest trust lies in nature. These forces are like tectonic plates grinding inexorably into each other in one long, slow collision.”¹

—W. Brian Arthur

Design is not just what it looks and feels like; design is how it works.² This was the design mantra of the late Steve Jobs, which resulted in the beautifully crafted mp3 players and mobile phones we are so familiar with today. Of course, one cannot compare these gadgets with the design of our environment, but the message is clear nonetheless: good, functional design is also aesthetically pleasing. So why, then, do we so often consider the fringes of our cities and landscapes ugly? Can we say that they do not work properly on a functional level? Should we call this *bad design*?

There is a schism between two entities: On the one side there are the paper drawings of the designer, and on the other, the material reality in the landscape.³ This article will take a closer look at the potential connection between them and propose new tools and methods to close the gap between the designer’s work in the studio and the found material outside. I suggest that the potential for reconciliation lies in design instruments, be it for the purpose of surveying, designing or producing new landscapes, and that a renewed connection will have profound impacts on any final design. Take, for instance, computer-aided architectural design, which quickly altered the way landscapes were drawn. Suddenly it became possible to draw complex shapes and curves quite easily. Beginning with the professional responsibility to designed landscapes, this article will explore both the materials and instruments of design from an operative perspective in order to propose a new design approach for contemporary landscape architecture.

1 W. Brian Arthur, *The Nature of Technology: What it Is and How it Evolves* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 11.

2 Rob Walker, “The Guts of a New Machine,” *New York Times*, November 30, 2003, accessed January 15, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003>

/11/30/magazine/the-guts-of-a-new-machine.html.

3 Brian Davis, “Landscape and Instruments,” *Landscape Journal*, vol. 32, no. 2 (January 1, 2013), 293–308.