

The Urban Forum Dialogue Tool: Reflecting on a Designerly Approach to Transdisciplinary Research

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CROSS-DISCIPLINARY STUDIES

ABSTRACT - With a view to working toward urban sustainability goals, two Swedish research platforms, SLU Urban Futures at the University of Agricultural Sciences in Alnarp (SLU) and the Urban Arena at Lund University, launched Urban Forum, a transdisciplinary dialogue format, in 2019. Designed to foster exchange between practitioners and scholars in the spatial design fields the Forum convenes actors from practice and academia working on matters of shared concern to increase their interaction and defuse preconceptions against each other. The initiative recognizes that academic and non-academic design actors are equally needed to build transformative capacities and reflects two related convictions: that siloing practice and academia is unproductive and that synthetic encounters can serve to reimagine roles and retool mindsets currently hampering mutually beneficial knowledge exchange. This article analyzes a series of Urban Forum events from 2019-21 to extrapolate procedures for overcoming entrenched notions of the practice/academia dynamic; identify criteria for productive knowledge exchange; suggest ways to design transdisciplinary dialogues; and highlight the benefit of involving designerly knowledge and working methods into the transdisciplinary methodology toolbox.

Keywords: design; knowledge exchange; transdisciplinary research; urban forum; urban sustainability

The second decade of this century has been shaped by the need to act urgently in the face of the climate emergency. Devising approaches to the grand challenges ahead will require pooling theoretical understanding

and practical knowledge from many sources. Yet, over the past decade, the authors of this article (professionally trained architects, urban and landscape designers working as design scholars in European and North American university cultures) have witnessed the emergence of a split between “thinking” and “doing” in the Swedish academic arenas they have shared. For scholars and practitioners in the spatial design disciplines looking to engage in small-scale problem-oriented conversations, this divergence has led to a lack of forums to meet, raise critical questions, share ideas, discuss work in progress, and instate collaborations across fields of expertise and knowledge.

The paucity of such critical exchange opportunities is also a function of the particularities of the Swedish context. Compared to other parts of Europe or North America, Swedish society is characterized by “a strong belief in egalitarianism and consensus,”¹ impeding development of a culture of critique. Further, Swedish design research and education is often embedded in science-oriented research universities that have historically regarded knowledge production – including design knowledge production – as the remit of credentialled academic researchers.

THE ORIGINS OF THE URBAN FORUM

To foster critical exchange between practitioners and scholars from architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design, the authors used their positions in the academy to launch an initiative that drew on and aimed to augment a growing scholarship of transdisciplinary science (TD),² which posits that global challenges can only be tackled if non-academic actors participate in knowledge production. In 2019, two Swedish research platforms, the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) Urban Futures in Alnarp and the Urban Arena at Lund University, introduced a TD event format, dubbed “Urban Forum – Practice meets Academia.”³ Its motivations were threefold: first, to mobilize TD action to address the complexity of environmental and socio-political challenges characterizing the contemporary urban condition;⁴ second, to soften a hardening line between research and practice (without precedent in the design fields) instated by increasing “academicization” of design research in science-oriented universities, and thereby disclose the value of practice-based design research within and outside the academy; and third, to counter increasing commercialization of professional design practice across Europe, which previously was marked by a stronger ethos of serving the common good of society than professional design practice elsewhere in the world.

Challenging the Growing Research-Practice Divide

The Urban Forum was conceived as a springboard for creating TD capacities, as TD projects require participants skilled at working comfortably

in and navigating amid different operational demands, expectations, and habitual practices associated with academic and non-academic contexts.⁵ It convenes design and planning actors from these two contexts working on matters of shared concern to increase their interaction and defuse preconceptions about what design research involves and how it is done. In design and planning, as in other fields that span research and practice, a presumed “theory/practice” split can color perceptions,⁶ and the perceived difference – reflecting structurally reinforced, institutionalized views rather than individual or personal prejudices – limits productive TD engagements between individuals used to an academic environment (so-called researchers, here referred to as “academic workers”) and others who habitually operate in the professional, civic, or private sectors (so-called practitioners, here addressed as “non-academic workers”). By virtue of distinct norms and expectations at play in their respective work environments, academics and non-academics engaged with spatial design issues proceed differently.

The historical tradition of the design field makes the spatial design disciplines a fruitful context for grounding an effort to question these divisive norms. Architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design have long had a “TD” character. Design education has always welcomed and hosted “straddlers” – individuals with one foot in practice and another in research/academia. Professors of design come from the professional arena as well as the academy. American scholar Stanford Anderson draws on architecture to remind us that design is historically “taught in academies, most notably in France after the Revolution, in polytechnics French or Germanic, in a professional association as in London, or in the university-based schools proliferating in the United States in the late nineteenth century.”⁷

With TD momentum as the core in design education, design research has always been an element of design practice, and the Urban Forum intended to take advantage of this long history. Increasing pressures from within research universities to “academicize” design contradict the history of design as a TD arena. They also serve to harden a line separating non-academic design researchers – so-called “doers,” from academic-based ones – so-called “thinkers.” Recognizing an urgent need to foster productive action and knowledge development across realms, the Urban Forum aimed at critically reassessing this divisiveness, supporting an argument that to constructively address complex, wicked problems⁸ requires a combination of thoughtful practice and practical research. Promoting critical reflection in design, the Forum moved to forge new alliances and partnerships, resonating with the goals of TD as formulated by the Global Alliance for Inter- and Transdisciplinarity and the Network for Transdisciplinary Research. Both academic networks aim to strengthen “the global capacity and the caliber of collaborative modes of boundary-crossing research and practice” and to transgress “boundaries between scientific

disciplines as well as between science and practice,”⁹ and to promote “mutual learning between interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary researchers and teachers across disciplinary, linguistic and national borders, thus contributing to the development of a professional community.”¹⁰

This article looks first at the history of the Urban Forum, its origin, and variations over the years. It then focuses on crafting the forum, specifically its fundamental elements, in terms of framing, formatting, and moderating. A third section is dedicated to lessons learned from the implementation experience that could be inspiring for other similar TD endeavors. The conclusion focuses on demonstrating that a designerly approach produces a valuable TD dialogue tool and that academic and non-academic design activities, if cleverly combined, could prove particularly relevant to advance urban sustainability.

A COLLABORATIVE, EVOLVING APPROACH – SEED, SEEDLING, AND GRAFT

This section of the article describes the unfolding of the Urban Forum in a sequence of seven events held between 2019 and 2021 representing three iterations of the driving concept: one prequel gathering (the seed), two in-person events (the seedling) and four COVID-time adaptations (the grafts).

The Seed

The idea to devise a practice-meets-academia format originated at *Beyond Ism: The Landscape of Landscape Urbanism*, an academic conference organized at the Alnarp campus of SLU’s Department of Landscape Architecture, Planning, and Management during October 19–21, 2016.¹¹ Focused on the fields of landscape architecture, architecture, planning, engineering, and urban studies, the conference aimed at ushering in a critical review of landscape urbanism discourse. In addition to the conventional scholarly academic paper sessions and keynote lectures, the conference included an exhibition component where ongoing non-academic and academic projects were displayed and presented in an informal, moderated discussion procedure called “floor talks.” Inviting practitioners with no academic affiliation to participate and share work with academic design researchers at a scholarly gathering was an unorthodox move for the science-oriented host university. The exhibited works combined texts with media such as drawings, models, movies, and other visual material, which established a dynamic rarely encountered at academic conferences. By devising a format based on the design review/final crit model, familiar to architecture and landscape architecture educators but foreign to non-design oriented education and educators, the event catalyzed feedback on specific projects to extract broader questions, issues, and theoretical observations with potential to invert the assumed trajectory of knowledge exchange between research and practice. Two of this article’s authors were involved

in the Beyond Ism event.¹² Drawing on their shared interest in challenging a presumed practice/academia dichotomy, both were excited about adding a practice-oriented element to an academic conference on a topic of equal relevance to academic and non-academic workers in design. Following the conference, they decided to collaborate on creating a “free-standing” Practice meets Academia initiative dubbed “The Urban Forum.” (Fig. 1.)



Figure 1. Floor talks, *Beyond Ism: The Landscape of Landscape Urbanism*, Alnarp, Sweden.

The Seedling: Urban Forums 1 and 2

The first formal Urban Forum, organized in Lund, Sweden, April 8–13, 2019, at the annual Lund Sustainability Week established the collaboration between Urban Arena and SLU Urban Futures, as organizational body.¹³ This first event adopted the thematic frame of the Lund Sustainability Week, which foregrounded aspects of Agenda 2030 and the UN Sustainability Development Goals. Following a call for ideas, fifteen projects were selected. To help foster productive, comparative discussions, participants presented their work using posters based on a pre-designed graphic template. The floor talks allowed presenters to discuss various aspects of urban sustainability thinking through design amongst themselves and with the audience. (Fig. 2.)

The next Urban Forum was organized five months later in Gothenburg, Sweden, September 11–13, 2019.¹⁴ This Forum was conceived as a plug-in component to the International Transdisciplinarity (ITD) Conference 2019



Figure 2. Urban Forum #1, Lund Sustainability Week 2019, Lund, Sweden.

co-organized by the Network for Transdisciplinary Research, Gothenburg University, and Mistra Urban Futures.¹⁵ Taking up the conference theme “Joining Forces for Change,” the Urban Forum included eight projects. To craft this event, the organizers replicated key elements from Lund: a carefully selected meeting space providing visibility yet creating a feeling of intimacy; a curated selection of thematically aligned projects presented on graphically consistent posters; and a team of moderators to ensure fruitful exchanges amongst participants. (Fig. 3.)



Figure 3. Urban Forum #2, International Transdisciplinary Conference 2019, Gothenburg, Sweden.

The Grafts: Online Urban Forum 3 Through 6

When COVID-19 hit the world in early 2020 the Urban Forum initiative came to an abrupt halt. Activated in physical space, nurtured by the design exhibition setup as a critical site of encounter, its exchange format did not fit the closed-down corona pandemic era. A new online format had to be devised. The first online Urban Forum took place in spring 2021.¹⁶ Titled “Responsibility of Design,” its call for projects invited participants to share a vision of the responsibility of design to address contemporary societal and spatial challenges. The call yielded enough responses to prompt arranging two sub-events: “Rethinking Design Processes” (February 5, 2021 – seven projects) and “Across Scales” (March 12, 2021 – six projects). Each entailed one half-day of “screen talks,” structured around a slide presentation. Projects in Germany, Austria, Sweden, Denmark, the United States, Bahrain, Tanzania, and Zambia elicited lively Trans-Disciplinarity (TD) discussion on what defines conscious and high-quality design and how it can be achieved.

Design as activism emerged as a theme connecting actors from practice and academia, who argued that both realms share a responsibility to address immediate and emerging conflicts, complexities, and crises relating to the sustainable transformation of urban areas. In fall 2021, a second online event titled “Time in Design” was organized, with two sub-events planned from the start: Navigating Past, Present, and Future (November 12, 2021 – six projects) and Temporal Processes in Design (November 19, 2021 – six projects).¹⁷ Participants joined from Sweden, United States, Argentina, Switzerland, Netherlands, and Italy. The presentations, and subsequent discussions, engaged various propositions on how and why time plays out in design processes.

Adapting from a physical to a digital format proved a fruitful experiment. Gathering online allowed for a more geographically dispersed international participant pool, and a proactively framed theme. The chat function of the digital meeting software generated a useful archive of discussions, questions, and shared references that the in-person sessions lacked. While the online adaptation did not afford the same opportunities for participants to informally mingle and reinforce new contacts, follow-up interviews with participants confirmed that it was much appreciated during a period when international and local encounters were severely curtailed:¹⁸

Participation in the Urban Forum was a delight on many levels. It exposed the participants to a number of interesting, uplifting, rigorous and thought-provoking peers and colleagues. This is a rare, yet important opportunity that we have not come across easily otherwise, especially at a time in which traveling to symposia, conferences, and other international events is extremely limited.¹⁹

On site and online, the Urban Forum had been carefully designed and refined to cultivate an inclusive, mutually respectful space for dialogue. Its details, developed through an iterative process involving multiple organizational team meetings, were crafted with a specific intention: to allow non-academic and academic workers to convene and feel comfortable enough together to openly discuss burning questions, critical issues, inspiring findings, and crazy new ideas.

DESIGNING THE EVENT: FRAMING, FORMATTING AND MODERATING A FORUM FOR EXCHANGE

I love that kind of thing, the casualness of meeting people. You learn so much. For me it was wonderful. It was small and that was really important because people could just talk. It didn't feel hard to do and to show what we had worked on.²⁰

This section focuses on the crafting of the Urban Forum, describing its intangible parameters, key components, and the challenges faced when offering a supportive space for knowledge exchange.

Successful knowledge exchange depends on structuring a secure setting for intellectual and creative risk taking. Several aspects of the Urban Forum have proven crucial for productive outcomes, among these thematic clarity, simple presentation requirements, strict timeframes, suitable physical and digital spaces, limited participant numbers, and synthesizing moderation. In organizational terms, these aspects can be grouped into three key complementary actions: framing, formatting, and moderating.

Framing

Framing the event begins with finding a venue. Physical Urban Forums were initially organized in conjunction with a larger gathering that could host the intentionally smaller Forum encounters, drawing a wider audience than an intimate stand-alone event. As an autonomous component within conference settings, the original Urban Forum concept was to invite non-academic workers to the table of international scholarly conferences for academic workers in the design disciplines. Framing also involves identifying a theme for selecting projects and focusing discussions. The first two physical events took their thematic cues from the host conferences: "Urban Sustainability" and "Joining Forces for Change." Wide-open conference topics were nuanced with a specifically drafted call for projects posing open-ended, deliberately polemical, questions. The shift to digital format removed the need for a host event, making it possible to explore independent themes. Based on the participants' feedback, those themes seemed crucial to their decision to participate.²¹

Reaching out to the right people is also a framing task and much effort went into this organizational aspect of launching a new initiative with a novel

format. The Urban Forum call for projects was circulated through various channels, including academic newsletters, personal mailing lists, and social media. For early events, many attendees were personally invited to participate. Little by little, word of mouth enlarged the potential participant pool. The reputations of the two host institutions, as well as of some moderators, also played a crucial role in attracting people to take part.

I joined because of the format itself, the fact that it was scheduled in the evening, the informal and experimental approach. I dared to test my ideas, in an international context [...] It was an opportunity to reach out during the pandemic, to a mix of academics and practitioners. I also saw it as an opportunity to meet Andrea Kahn, whose work on site thinking I had read.²²

The framing process continues with project selection. Acceptance criteria included the clarity of submitted abstracts, relevance of the question raised, and complementarity between projects. Keeping the gatherings on a small scale (6–15 teams of presenters per event) ensured a collegial atmosphere and helped participants feel part of a caring community. Some participants thought that opinions on, and approaches to, themes were at times too “coherent,” making for less debate than they had expected. In the digital iterations, a larger number of relevant submissions allowed for defining subthemes and shaping smaller, more targeted dialogue groups.

Since they were people that were more academic-based, or less academic-based, it was an interesting group of projects and it felt like they really came together. There was a lot of overlap.²³

To ensure a fruitful dynamic dialogue, the presentation order of floor and screen talks was carefully sequenced. Each program alternated between non-academic workers, academic workers, and straddlers, crafting event specifics by toggling between practice and academia, stronger and more reserved personalities, greater and lesser-known names.

Formatting

As elaborated above, the Urban Forum was not simply an opportunity to discuss design, it was a design exercise in itself. Every aspect was carefully formatted to foster constructive exchange between professional practice and academia. Attentiveness to cultural differences between these two work realms proved key to overcome engrained polarization issues.

Site Selection and Spatial Design

The event formatting starts with finding a space for the exhibition and floor talks conducive to stimulating an open exchange of ideas and experiences. Creating a collegial atmosphere is a spatial design task; environments “can

be either facilitating or inhibiting for certain behaviors.”²⁴ The process of locale selection and exhibition arrangement involved considering aspects of circulation and proportions to delineate a space that would operate at the intersection of intimacy and exposure, autonomy and community, center, and periphery. The space selected for the first Urban Forum at the Lund Sustainability Week illustrates these key considerations. It consisted of a nook by the patio of the LUX Building, designed by Jais Architects. Located off the main circulation paths, the nook provided a relatively quiet area, still readily visible to passers-by. Its size and location supported a gathering of 20–40 people, including participants and curious onlookers. The fit between space and group facilitated a certain degree of autonomy; the site was neither so small as to make participants feel irrelevant, nor so big as to compromise nuanced interaction between individual presenters and the participating group. (Figs. 4, 5.)

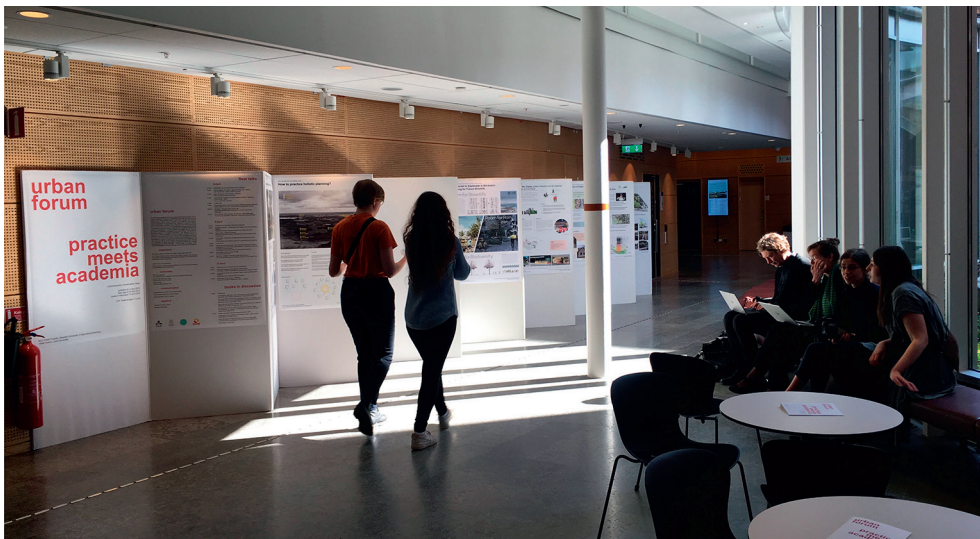


Figure 4. A cohesive exhibition with a variety of poster expressions.

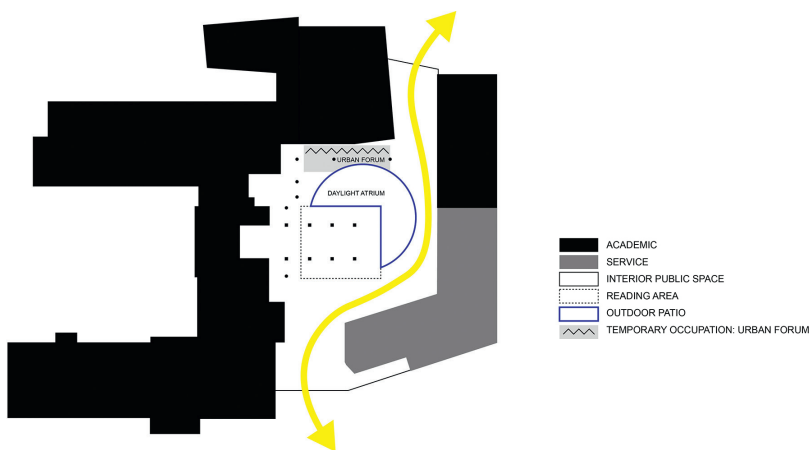


Figure 5. Diagram, main circulation through the LUX Building.

Presentation Formats and Graphic Design

Another characteristic of the Urban Forum was strict assignment formats devised to make both non-academics and academics comfortable, while asking each group to operate in unfamiliar ways. The required formats placed all participants on equal footing when entering the conversation, helping to dissolve preconceptions about traditional roles (the expert, the creative, etc.). The aim was to challenge participants to proceed in unfamiliar ways, without overloading them with effortful demands. Starting with the call for projects, abstracts had to adhere to a strict template. Participants were asked to submit one image, a short summary of their academic research or design project, and one question they wanted to raise. While writing abstracts is common in the academic research world, non-academics can feel challenged by the task. Conversely, communicating content through graphical means is expected in design practice, whereas in many academic research contexts, especially science-oriented ones, treating graphics as idea-rich content (versus supplemental illustration) is unusual. Ability to adhere to the requirements disclosed the capacity of applicants to concisely present their work and their openness to receiving critical feedback.

Required presentation formats were intended to be visually engaging and simple to produce. In Lund and Gothenburg, organizers opted for the poster, a standard academic conference format. Non-academic workers, used to presenting graphically on boards, are less familiar with this pre-formatted scientific communication-style device. Providing a graphic template imposed a visual framework open to different design interpretations; it allowed participants to express themselves while flattening work-culture differences between practice and academia. Mounted on folding screens, posters were displayed as a single coherent exhibition that did more than spur critical dialogue and knowledge exchange. Non-academic workers, in particular, viewed the exhibition aspect as a marketing opportunity. Gaining public exposure in an academic context seemed attractive for several design firms that chose to join the events. (Fig. 6.)

Pacing and Time Format

Designing the overall organizational calendar of the event and the timings of each gathering was another formatting tool used to blur work-culture differences and put all participants in the same situation. First, the time period between event announcement and execution was short. This suited design firms practiced at meeting short-term deadlines, but was relatively uncommon for academic researchers accustomed to the much longer lead times for peer-review publications and research funding applications. A call was circulated two months before the actual gathering; notification of acceptance and presentation instructions were distributed two to three

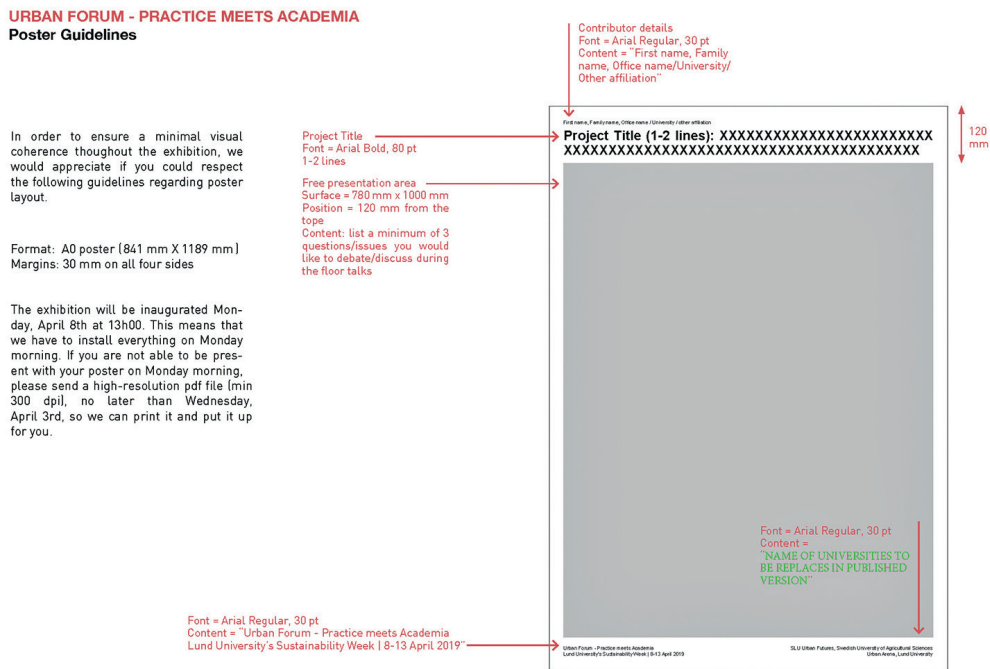


Figure 6. Poster guidelines for Urban Forum #1, Lund Sustainability Week 2019, Lund, Sweden.

weeks before the actual gathering. During the event itself, floor talks were strictly timed, limited to thirty minutes maximum per project. A concise ten-minute presentation was followed by twenty minutes of rapid-pace feedback. This quick tempo initiated an atmosphere of attentiveness and alertness, appreciated by academics and non-academics alike.

I am impressed by the Urban Forum’s careful and striking ability to work with space. This format enables a safe space, the timing adds dynamic tension to spark things up, get ideas bubbling. It shows the importance of working with space and time, thinking deeply how to build up spaces that allow transdisciplinarity and manage conflicts. It reminds me of the ‘bauhaus imaginistas’ exhibition in Bern, which showed how different architects, artists and craftspeople came together to discuss and do things, even dance in Monte Verità.²⁵

The physical Urban Forums took place over three consecutive afternoons. This schedule made it possible for many participants to attend several sessions and pursue ongoing conversations over the three days. Multiple integrated program breaks ensured opportunities for informal discussions, contributing to the collegial feeling of the event. Academic and non-academic workers – both increasingly pushed to account for every hour of every workday – took part on a voluntary, pro bono basis, as there was no funding to compensate for their time.

Redesigning the Knowledge Exchange Format in COVID-19 Times

When the Forum went digital in 2021 the original exchange format had to be adapted without compromising its intentions. Retaining the idea of a set template and a fast pace, participants were asked to present projects in seven minutes using only seven slides. To frame the subsequent fourteen-minute moderated discussion, the final slide had to include a question the presenter wanted feedback on from their peers. Constraining presentations and strictly adhering to time limits placed everyone in the same predictable, controlled situation. Presentations were digitally submitted a week before the gathering, upending a disciplinary tendency (in academia and professional practice) to work until the last possible minute. This early hand-in also gave organizers time to carefully curate a presentation order and prepare in advance for the moderation. The overall timeline, intentionally designed to disrupt disciplinarily engrained work habits, encouraged participants to step outside their routine, reflect, and be open to critical feedback and critical engagement with each other's work. (Fig. 7.)

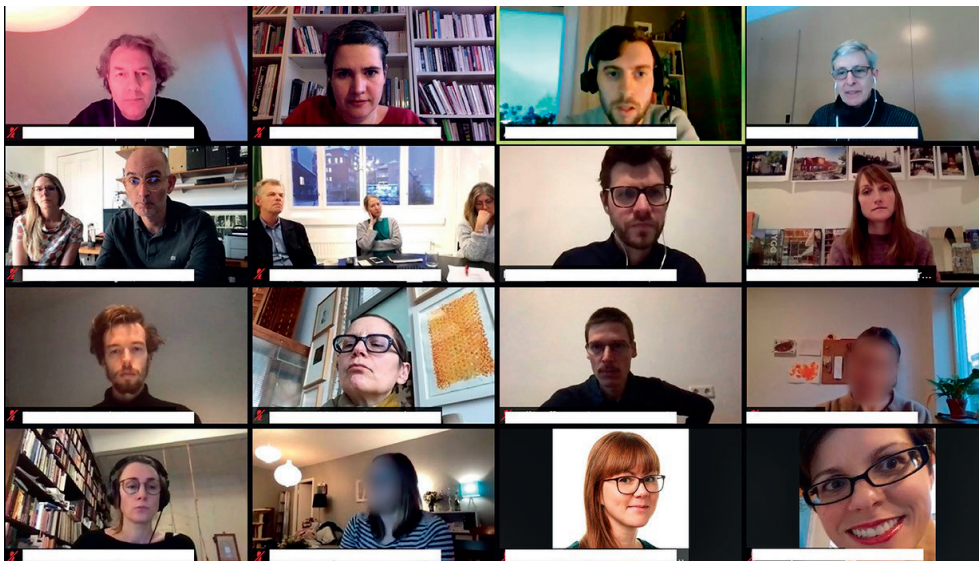


Figure 7. Screen shot, Digital Urban Forum #1, February 5, 2021.

All Urban Forum event-design decisions are intended to create a mutually respectful atmosphere where all participants feel comfortable enough to actively take part in the discussions. One big challenge of adapting to a digital Urban Forum was safeguarding this open, non-competitive, and non-threatening atmosphere. To this end, the number of attendees was limited so everyone involved in the event could be seen together on a single screen. Participants were asked to limit their project team presence to three, and those attending had to identify themselves and be visibly present for the full duration. To allow participants to speak freely about

ongoing projects and unresolved issues, share intuitions and bold ideas, the online event was neither openly accessible nor recorded. Urban Forums 3 and 4, organized thematically around the “Responsibility of Design” gathered deeply engaged and concerned non-academic and academic workers. The result was a noticeably collegial atmosphere, remarked on by participants themselves:

To me the event was not too big and not too small but just kind of right. [...] In general, it felt like a very good space to be able to reflect, talk and present.²⁶

We had been reflecting on our project for a while and we thought, ok, why not offer that to the platform as a contribution. It is intimate and it is not out there in the open.²⁷

Moderating

Inspired by the art of critique or project review,²⁸ well known in the design disciplines, the idea behind the Urban Forum is to reintroduce critique into the professional and academic realms and to produce knowledge, collectively. Academic design workers tend to put work out in the world for comment only once it is “finished” and somehow indisputable. Non-academic design workers are trained to engage in critical dialogue about in-process work; yet despite their training, practicing designers rarely take part in the public critique characterizing their design school education, since business competition leads them to avoid exposing ongoing work to anyone other than colleagues or clients. Moderating the critical discussions successfully requires awareness of these institutionalized practices and plays an important role in making joint knowledge production possible. Consequently, the Urban Forum exercise was as much about receiving as delivering critique. A shared theme and curated project selection allowed for overlap in questions raised by participants. It helped create a feeling of community and encouraged engagement in discussions.

From the start, Urban Forum organizers also served as moderators. Over the series of events, they developed and refined their moderation practices, juggling between active and passive moderation techniques, to facilitate open and vocal participation by all. Whenever possible, moderating consisted of giving the floor to the participants, and intervening to ensure that “talking time” was equally distributed by drawing out the less vocal participants and keeping more loquacious presenters in check. Since rapid-fire communications in fast-paced formats can lead to oversimplification, the moderation tasks also included encouraging presenters to clearly articulate points, framing rich questions to presenters and synopsising or unpacking complex arguments. During the Urban Forum series, participants with work experience in both academic and non-academic arenas, and therefore capable of acting as a translator between practice and academia,

proved very useful since they felt immediately at home in the Forum's TD setting. This figure of the "straddler" emerged as crucial to fostering dynamic exchanges. For this reason, straddlers were purposely integrated in the selection of participants.

I have always tried to straddle; it's never been either or. Obviously, there are moments when I am busier with one or the other. As a scholar, I believe that practice is an extension of a scholarly habit.²⁹

Since we are from the same context, working at the university while being practitioners as well, we felt very comfortable. It's not only a few people, you feel like being part of a major community. Which we know, but experiencing it is always good, also on an international level [...] ³⁰

INSIGHTS: THREE TAKE-AWAYS TO INSPIRE FURTHER DESIGN TD ENCOUNTERS

This section of this article unfolds lessons learned from the Urban Forum. A dialogue tool that emerged from needs in a particular context due to the pandemic, evolved into a less site-specific format for mobilizing academic and non-academic workers to engage and thereby create conditions for advancing designerly inputs to TD research, in support of urban sustainability goals in general.

Break Old and Make New Habits!

The Urban Forum invited both practicing designers and academic researchers to step back and critically reflect on their own process and its outcomes. In the research university environments familiar to the authors, academic workers in the spatial design disciplines are expected, like their colleagues from non-design disciplines, to start their enquiries from a research question prompted by gaps in existing literature. Traditionally, collegiality and knowledge sharing about ongoing work were common in scholarly work environments.³¹ More recently, this collegial tradition has effectively been eradicated by intense competition for funding, radically diminishing the custom of openly sharing in-process work with peers. Knowledge is shared only after peer review and publishing. This intellectual environment prompts hesitancy to discuss ideas in formation, disincentivizes intellectual risk taking, and hampers true collaboration. At the same time, the collegial ideal endures, if only as a marketing image of a community of academic workers, perpetuated through and expressed in university strategy documents and working environment regulations.

For non-academic design workers, in-process dialogue is typically confined to "in-house" only discussion, largely concentrated around the problem at hand. Designers entering the professional arena are often compelled to

adopt competitive positions (akin to their academic counterparts) when in dialogue with people not from their office,³² leading to work getting presented as a *fait accompli*. The Urban Forum invited non-academic design workers to step back and critically reflect on their own process and its outcomes. This was key to repositioning their work (and their roles) as more than problem solvers for clients. Seeing work in a larger context shows how it can contribute as research into questions that transcend the limits of a single project.

The Urban Forum uses structured communication to intentionally provoke participants into questioning and reimagining culturally constructed academic and professional roles. For non-academic design workers, it aimed to build confidence in and awareness of their part in a wider collective endeavor to build new knowledge, exceeding the confines of a competitive vision of practice. For academic design workers, it aimed to broaden their horizons to consider how to make practical use of their research, transforming hypothetical, theoretical explorations into tangible results. Problematizing the received theory/practice dichotomy, the Urban Forum strove to develop reflective practice and practical theory. It did so by practicing these activities, that is, learning by doing, to expose to academic workers how practice can deliver questions meriting further research and inquiry, and to encourage non-academic workers to view themselves as practice-based researchers.

Time is running so fast. Every chance to pause and reflect, together, is likely to be rewarding.³³

Build Trust, Foster Understanding!

As straddlers, the authors have observed how unarticulated assumptions about practice and academic – about purported values, strengths, and weaknesses – can hinder fruitful conversations and collaborations. Setting aside preconceptions is the first step to creating a constructive TD actor constellation, where all parties can come together with mutual trust and shared understanding. The latter are identified by international TD scholars and associations as basic prerequisites³⁴ for any TD work. Evaluating participant feedback, the Urban Forum was perceived as an opportunity to get rid of old assumptions, create trust and, eventually, understanding.

I am not an academic, so you know, but to me as a practitioner I am interested in coming back into the academic world and feed in with my experience.³⁵

Urban Forum is a platform, an eye opener, building understanding, common language and common knowledge.³⁶

From “Safe Space” to “Productive Space”?

The term “safe space” refers to a place to develop trust and understanding among actors with different backgrounds. Originating in LGBT culture, the concept has expanded into many realms of society, from workplace to university campus. The Urban Forum provided such a space to develop mutual trust in conversation, even conflictual ones. Participants took the risk to share doubts about their own work, discuss conflicts with clients or scholars within their project setting, and point out moments of tension impacting their work process. The most engaged discussions arose around these instances of charged, “unsafe” yet ultimately productive experiences, prompting valuable take-aways, and enticing further action beyond the Urban Forum to explore, among other ideas, the positive, productive agency of open conflict and public risk taking in knowledge exchange situations.

Transdisciplinary science dialogue tools that are conducive to productive tension need concerted, collective support. The Forum brought to light engaged academic and non-academic design workers who wish to change their habits, share their ideas, and pool their skills to build a sounder and more sustainable urban future, together. This idea(l) of collectiveness, which underlies the principle of transdisciplinarity and cross-fertilization, was evident among those involved in the events.

The reflections from the other participants confirmed that we had to stick to our idea. They encouraged us.³⁷

We joined because we wanted to get the academic perspective on our work, hear feedback, take a step back, look from [a] distance, learn about similar thoughts and challenges of the others, contributing to and building a local discourse [...] ³⁸

I received qualified comments on my work, from a combination of academics and practitioners. I saw how my theoretical work could be taken up by practice, what doors theory opened, and if not, to consider throwing theory out.³⁹

It takes a lot of people to come up with the right solution. There is a history of the idea that design just comes from someone’s head. It does come from your head, but to make it exist it takes a lot of research, a lot of people, a lot of science and a lot of thoughtfulness and creativity. That is what design is.⁴⁰

CONCLUSIONS: RECOGNIZING THE VALUE OF DESIGN FOR TD RESEARCH

The Urban Forum represents a limited sample, embracing small numbers of participants and iterations.⁴¹ Nevertheless, this real-world experiment confirmed that a real desire exists for a critical dialogue tool in the context of Sweden. The adaptation to a digital event, of international scope, revealed that this interest extends beyond the Scandinavian context from which the project originated. It also showed how non-academic and academic design workers engaged in research can offer particular skills and know-how to enrich TD methodology and practice.

This pilot project revealed that demonstrating the value of a designerly approach for developing a TD dialogue tool is particularly important in science-driven, academic research environments. It can create awareness for design in contexts where the value of design knowledge is repressed, under-appreciated, or underrepresented. In specific academic contexts, such as the Swedish arena prompting its launch, critical design knowledge exchange formats like the Urban Forum showcase that design entails more than form making; that it translates as a methodology apt to transgress boundaries between academic and non-academic work; that it embodies a TD mindset at its core. To build trust and understanding among academic and non-academic design researchers, a dialogue tool needs careful design, in spatial, temporal, and graphic terms. For non-design, TD-oriented audiences, the Forum provides an example of a designerly approach to TD projects and research. Engaging in design work requires the same creative/synthetic and formative/synergistic skills and knowledge needed to address complex TD challenges.⁴²

In an interview, Urban Forum participant Maria Frölich-Kulik from Haus Bräutigam at Bauhaus-Universität Weimar argues that “[d]esign is the tool for synthesizing ideas. Design is a process. It is not about putting something down on a paper and then it is done. Design means that you are part of a process in which you are facing new problems again and again.”⁴³

For designers to increase their influence on TD arenas it is worth highlighting that as a speculative and experimental activity, design can add a qualitative dimension to urban development and building activities, which becomes increasingly important to foster in a context where quantitative practices too often fail the social, cultural, ecological, and aesthetic dimensions of space making. Interviews and discussions at the Urban Forum verify the urgency of fostering knowledge about how to activate open-ended, iterative processes, as described by Frölich-Kulik: “Urban Forum is sustainable, gaining knowledge through thinking, rethinking, designing, putting things into the world, looking at them, discussing them and doing it all over again.”⁴⁴ Precisely thanks to their synthesizing capacities, designers are particularly suited to help TD teams develop work

processes that weave together different types of knowledge, workers, and ways of working.

Finally, the Urban Forum, by being carefully designed to encourage and support fruitful collaboration between practice and academia, aimed at turning the intimacy of a safe space into a productive one from whence thought and action could arise. Based on the idea(l) of collectiveness and TD, it proved to be aligned with and supportive of the emergence of a new generation of design doers and thinkers who view their work with broad scope and purpose, beyond isolated, problem-solving activities confined to either practice or academia.

Notes

1. Bo Holm-Christiansen, "A Pilot Study of the Critical Cultural Features of the Swedish Businessman in the Eyes of a Dane" (M.Sc., University of Gothenburg, 2010): 45.
2. Helga Nowotny, Peter Scott, and Michael Gibbons, "Mode 2 Revisited: The New Production of Knowledge," *Minerva* 41, no. 3 (2003): 179–94.
3. In 2019, two authors of this article were directly involved in the two research platforms; Lisa Diedrich at SLU Urban Futures, and Per-Johan Dahl at the Lund University Urban Arena. See "Urban Forum," Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences - <https://www.slu.se/en/Collaborative-Centres-and-Projects/slu-urban-future/projects/urban-forum/>, accessed January 23, 2023.
4. Uwe Schneidewind, Mandy Singer-Brodowski, Karoline Augenstein, and Franziska Stelzer, *Pledge for a Transformative Science: A Conceptual Framework*, Wuppertal Paper no.191 (Wuppertal, Ger.: Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy, 2016); Roland W. Scholz et al., "Transdisciplinary Case Studies as a Means of Sustainability Learning: Historical Framework and Theory," *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education* 7, no. 3 (2006): 226–51; Christian Pohl et al., "Researchers' Roles in Knowledge Co-Production: Experience from Sustainability Research in Kenya, Switzerland, Bolivia and Nepal," *Science and Public Policy* 37, no. 4 (2010): 267–81.
5. Daniel Stokols, "Training the Next Generation of Transdisciplinary," in *Enhancing Communication & Collaboration in Interdisciplinary Research*, eds. Michael O'Rourke, Stephen Crowley, Sanford D. Eigenbrode, and Jeffry D. Wulforth (New York: Sage, 2014), 56–81.
6. Nigel Cross, "Designerly Ways of Knowing: Design Discipline versus Design Science," *Design Issues* 17, no. 3 (2001): 49–55; Andrea Kahn and Carol Burns, "Why Site Matters," in *Site Matters, Strategies for Uncertainty Through Planning and Design*, eds. Andrea Kahn and Carol Burns (New York: Routledge, 2021), 1–14; Caroline Dahl and Lisa Diedrich, "Building Transformative Capacities: Integrating Design Research into Port-City Transformation," *PORTUSplus* no. 9 (2020) - <https://portusplus.org/index.php/pp/article/view/207>.
7. Stanford Anderson, "Architectural History in Schools of Architecture," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (Architectural History 1999/2000, September, 1999): 282.
8. The concept of wicked problems in complex societal processes was articulated by Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (June 1973):155–69; Richard Buchanan, "Wicked Problems in Design Thinking," *Design Issues* 8, no. 2 (Spring, 1992): 5–21.
9. "About," *Global Alliance for Inter- and Transdisciplinarity* - <https://itd-alliance.org/about/>, accessed January 23, 2023.
10. "About td-net: Network for Transdisciplinary Research," *Network for Transdisciplinary Research* - <https://transdisciplinarity.ch/en/about-td-net/>, accessed January 23, 2023.

11. <https://www.slu.se/en/Collaborative-Centres-and-Projects/future-urban-sustainable-environment-fuse/conference-beyond-ism/>.
12. Lisa Diedrich served on the conference organizing team and Per-Johan Dahl presented a design research project at the exhibition.
13. Urban Forum faculty at Lund included Per-Johan Dahl from Urban Arena at Lund University (LU) and Lisa Diedrich and Sonia Curnier from SLU Urban Futures at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (Alnarp/Malmö); architecture students Johanna Jonsson and Rebecka Strandquist (LU) served as the project assistants, and Camilla Zakrisson Juhlin (SLU) ensured the communication aspects.
14. Organizing team: Lisa Diedrich, Tove Stenius (SLU), Per-Johan Dahl, Andrea Kahn, Marta Mares Guijarro (LU – student assistant), and Sonia Curnier (planning phase only).
15. “International Transdisciplinary Conference 2019,” *Mistra Urban Futures* - <https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/en/event/international-transdisciplinarity-conference>, accessed January 23, 2023.
16. Organizing team: Sonia Curnier, Andrea Kahn, Per-Johan Dahl, Andrew Gallagher (SLU), Ida Sandström (LU), and Hanna Weiber-Post (SLU – communication).
17. Organizing team: Per-Johan Dahl, Ida Sandström, Johan Rahm (LU), Sonia Curnier, Andrea Kahn, Lisa Diedrich, and Hanna Weiber-Post.
18. As the urban forum was an experimental initiative, the organizers were eager to collect testimonies and feedback from participants to adapt the format to the needs and constraints of the practice and the academic realms. This was done through surveys at the end of each forum, through more in-depth interviews conducted by Andrea Kahn with a selection of participants, and by inviting another group of participants to discuss the forum format during a panel discussion “RT-9.7: Reflecting back on the Urban Forum – Practice meets Academia” at the International Transdisciplinary Conference 2021 “Creating Spaces and Cultivating Mindsets for Learning and Experimentation.”
19. Bojana Banyasz and Donatella Cusma, architects, co-founders of Claret-Cup, Los Angeles, online feedback.
20. Victoria Rospond, architect and co-founder of CDR Studio Architects, New York, interview with Andrea Kahn. YouTube video accessible at: <https://www.slu.se/en/Collaborative-Centres-and-Projects/slu-urban-future/projects/urban-forum/>.
21. The two themes were “Responsibility of Design” and “Time and Design.”
22. Nils Björling, Senior Lecturer in urban design, Chalmers University, Gothenburg, panel discussion at the International Transdisciplinary 2021 Conference.
23. Rospond, interview with Andrea Kahn.
24. Amos Rapoport, *Culture, Architecture and Design* (Chicago: Locke Science Publishing Company, 2005), 11.
25. Tobias Buser, ITD expert, discussing the urban forum during the panel discussions at the International Transdisciplinary 2021 Conference.
26. Sunniva Viking, architect, urban designer, and co-founder of a studio.space, Cape Town, interview with Andrea Kahn. YouTube video accessible at: <https://www.slu.se/en/Collaborative-Centres-and-Projects/slu-urban-future/projects/urban-forum/>.
27. Tomà Berlanda, architect and co-founder of a studio.space and Professor of Architecture at the University of Cape Town, interview with Andrea Kahn. YouTube video accessible at: <https://www.slu.se/en/Collaborative-Centres-and-Projects/slu-urban-future/projects/urban-forum/>.
28. Bernard Huet, “Les enjeux de la critique,” *Le visiteur* 1 (1995): 88–97; Ashraf Salama, *Spatial Design Education* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 92–94.
29. Berlanda, interview with Andrea Kahn.
30. Jessica Christoph, Haus Bräutigam e.V., Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, interview with Andrea Kahn. YouTube video accessible at: <https://www.slu.se/en/Collaborative-Centres-and-Projects/slu-urban-future/projects/urban-forum/>.
31. Judith Brett, “Competition and Collegiality,” *The Australian Universities Review* 40, no. 2 (1997): 19–22; Lewis Elton, “Collegiality and Complexity: Humboldt’s Relevance to British Universities Today,” *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62 (2008): 224–36.
32. On competitiveness between architects, see Robert Gutman, *Architectural Practice: A Critical View* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), 70–77.
33. Daniel Berg, architect and co-founder of Daniel Berg Arkitekter AB, Malmö, online feedback.

34. Gertrude Hirsch Hadorn, et al., *Handbook of Transdisciplinary Research*. (Heidelberg, Ger.: Springer, 2008); Isabelle Doucet and Nel Janssens, eds., *Transdisciplinary Knowledge Production in Architecture and Urbanism*, Urban Land 11 (Dordrecht, The Neth.: Springer, 2011).
35. Viking, interview with Andrea Kahn.
36. Petra Jennings, architect, partner at FOJAB Arkitekter, Malmö, panel discussion at the International Transdisciplinary 2021 Conference.
37. Christoph, interview with Andrea Kahn.
38. Jennings, panel discussion at ITD 2021 Conference.
39. Björling, panel discussion at ITD 2021 Conference.
40. Rospond, interview with Andrea Kahn.
41. 48 projects presented and circa 70 active participants in total.
42. Per-Johan Dahl, "Towards Experimental Architecture," in *Re: Waterfront: A Sustainable Architectural Approach*, eds. Per-Johan Dahl, Riccardo Pollo, Francesca Thiébat, Carlo Micono, and Guido Zanzottera (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2019), 22–35.
43. Maria Frölich-Kulik, Haus Bräutigam e.V., Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, interview with Andrea Kahn - <https://www.slu.se/en/Collaborative-Centres-and-Projects/slu-urban-future/projects/urban-forum/>.
44. Ibid.

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Multiple authors statement

All authors have been involved in the conception and implementation of the Urban Forum and in the subsequent writing of this article. Lisa Diedrich and Per-Johan Dahl have driven the idea into the format described in this article and, together with Sonia Curnier and Andrea Kahn, they have arranged, prepared, moderated, administrated, and evaluated the events in alternating presence and roles. For the precise involvement of the different authors in the different events, see endnotes.

Credits

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