

COMPOSTING

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In a small bucket underneath the sink in my kitchen I collect valuable stuff. In there goes banana skins, potato peel, soaked tea leaves, the remains of squeezed lemons and faded flowers, overripe tomatoes, wrinkled paprika, slouching lettuce leaves, along with other leftovers and remainders, more or less decayed, moldy and putrid. Every now and then I empty the bucket on my compost heap, and mix my kitchen collection with garden wastes such as dry leaves, weeds, grass cuttings and dead plants. I should probably turn and water my compost pile more regularly in order to achieve an efficient composting process, but I usually have neither the time nor the energy to fulfill these tasks. Nevertheless, after a year or two, when I dig into the pile I might get the spade full of dark brown compost, ready to be used as a first-rate soil amendment in my garden. Quite often each spadeful also contains a number of identifiable remnants of what was once put into the pile, such as peach kernels, corncobs, eggshells and pieces of wood. In addition I might find various worms, millipedes and wood-lice, which show that the process of decomposition is not yet completed.

Besides its practical use, the compost is also good to think with. Processes of composting are present in many shapes and sites, in processes generally defined as natural as well as cultural. Decomposing is simultaneously a process of composing, creating something new out of the worn-out and left-over. As things, structures, ideas and habits become worn, out-dated, replaced, overlooked and forgotten, they often start to wither, putrefy and deteriorate, but in

the very same process there is also something new and useful created. By shifting the focus of attention from deterioration to compilation, the compost metaphor provides a tool for an alternative understanding of remains and decay.

I would like to suggest that there are at least three reasons for researchers in the humanities and social sciences to look into processes of composting. First, composting is about revival; it turns the old and deteriorated into something new and fertile. Second, complexity is a key feature of the composting process; in the compost, matter, meanings and unities such as “nature” and “culture” are mixed together and decomposed. And third, composting might offer an alternative, less linear perspective on time. In the following I will take a closer look at each of these three aspects, and give some examples of the metaphorical use of composting.

One could argue that changes, conversions and transformations matching the metaphor of composting might be identified practically anywhere in the world of matter and mind, among humans and non-humans. All material and immaterial structures, things, relations and ideas will sooner or later be reconsidered, outdated and restructured. Ideas are constantly reassessed and habits are modified. In this paper however, my focus is on processes with a clear material dimension, and particularly on the transformation of landscapes and places.

I started to consider the analytical benefits of composting while doing research on transitory landscapes at the rural-urban fringe. In semi-urban



landscapes there are places that “lie fallow” while awaiting future development and quite often such places are, for various reasons, stuck in this state of waiting for many years. This kind of desolate place could stir up feelings of disgust and repugnance in some observers, while others see potential in the indefinite landscape. Most often however, these places are simply overlooked. It is obvious that this indeterminate state attaches uncertainty to people’s understanding of the landscape. The main purpose of my research in these areas is to explore what is going on in such landscapes “in the meantime”, while awaiting urban development. Because a landscape is never static, even when left over or set aside the landscape is always in transition, through processes and activities of many kinds. As weeds, bushes, unplanned constructions and unscheduled activities get the opportunity to grow and spread in a neglected area, the place is gradually transformed, and as a result the perceptions and valuation of the place are continuously redefined. Objects and activities that are initially regarded as appalling signs of neglect can eventually become essential parts of a landscape with new values.¹

The 1970s were hard times for the greenhouse business in Sweden. At the eastern edge of Malmö in southernmost Sweden, a large establishment specialized in the cultivation of flowers had to close down after being run by the Gyllin family for about half a century. Changing conditions in the flower market along with the global energy crisis made the oil consuming greenhouse business unprofitable. Hence, the greenhouses, covering 100 000 square meters, were abandoned and demolished, and the whole area was forsaken, as there was at that time no clear strategy for its future use. In the 1980s, municipal planners determined that this abandoned area called *Gyllin’s garden* should be turned into a residential district, but for various reasons these plans were not realized. During the time of waiting for this planned but unfulfilled development, the landscape of Gyllin’s garden has changed, and so has the value of the landscape.

The abandoned greenhouse site has gradually turned into an uncontrolled verdant landscape, nowadays appreciated for its recreational and biological

qualities. A period of neglect has created a landscape that is today acknowledged as one of few “wild” places within the urban area of Malmö, frequently used by people in the neighborhood for walking, playing, picnics and school outings. For some people, Gyllin’s garden is a refuge, a possible hideout for a very temporary settlement in an old caravan, or an area for activities that do not easily fit into the urban landscape, such as paint ball games. For others it is a good place for walking and training dogs and for yet others it is a place for bird watching, skiing and even hunting. During the last decade, these changing views on and uses of the landscape in Gyllin’s garden have been acknowledged in municipal plans, which have actually been altered in accordance with the new values. The plans now say that the abandoned greenhouse industry should be preserved for future generations as a “nature park”, while the new residential areas will be built on neighboring fields.²

I would argue that Gyllin’s garden is a composted place. Through a slow conversion, involving both natural and cultural processes, remnants and leftovers of an outdated business have been turned into a landscape with entirely new value. For me, and I guess also for more qualified gardeners, a truly fascinating fact about the compost is its ability to generate something new and useful out of waste and refuse. It is convenient to be able to get rid of waste by piling it up in a corner of the garden, and then it is interesting to see how the pile shrinks once the process has started, and finally it feels good to uncover and use the earthy-smelling outcome of the process. In Gyllin’s garden the “wild nature” that is so much appreciated today has virtually grown out of the ruins a former flower industry. In the present landscape there are still many traces of the former business; trees standing in rows, heaps of dirt, broken glass and pieces of bricks are found here and there, as well as concrete foundations and rusty fences covered by high grass and hedges of lilac. Species such as cypress, forsythia and mahonia add an exotic touch to the wilderness of the garden. The impact of previous activities and the simultaneous processes of decomposing and composing are clearly identifiable in the contemporary landscape.

One theoretical virtue of the composting metaphor is its inherent complexity. The mixing of a diversity of substances is a basic feature of the composting process. Such processes naturally takes place in most terrestrial environments, but a fast and efficient composting of garden and household waste requires certain skills and techniques. Among the many actors involved in the process, psychrophilic, mesophyllic and thermophilic bacteria, fungi, invertebrates, centipedes, millipedes, beetles, and earthworms play their part along with the gardener. All of these actors are seeking and connecting allies to their networks in order to achieve their specific goals. The actions of the gardener, for example turning the compost-heap, will inevitably promote certain networks and restrain others. Composting is hence neither a cultural process, nor a natural process; rather an obvious example of “nature-culture” (Latour 1993, 2004). The analytical act of distinguishing culture from nature does not seem very useful to understand the complexity of the compost. In the compost we also see a mixing and decomposing of “nature” and “culture”, and thus composting can be a useful metaphor to approach networks involving humans and non-humans alike.

Gyllin’s garden is clearly linked to the origin of the metaphor; the sphere of gardening, but of course no such connection is required for a metaphorical composting to take place. Let us now consider what could happen if a worn-out airport is composted for a few decades. During more than 50 years, 1923–1977, *Torslanda* airport was the point of access for domestic and international flights to and from Gothenburg, the second largest city in Sweden. First established at the dawn of commercial air traffic as a modest establishment next to the mouth of the river, so planes could land on either water or land, *Torslanda* was gradually developed and extended with the increased importance and amount of air travel. New runways were constructed on former agricultural land and on new landfills along the shoreline. In the early 1970s this was the second largest airport in Sweden, with hundreds of flights every day, carrying more than one million passengers per year. Eventually however, *Torslanda* could not keep up

with constantly expanding traffic. During the second half of the 1970s the airport was abandoned for the new, larger and more up to date *Landvetter* airport, located further away from the city. Hence, all the activities connected to the airport moved away, and left behind a deserted structure of runways, hangars, terminal buildings and parking lots, and a stunning silence. Since then, the future of the former airport has been debated. Situated close to large industries, oil depots, refuse dumps and a major harbor, but also very near the attractive coastline and archipelago, *Torslanda* is caught between conflicting interests. In the meanwhile, a multitude of formal and informal activities and land uses have developed on the former airfield.

The same research project mentioned in connection with Gyllin’s garden has also studied the current uses and perceptions of the landscape at *Torslanda*. In these studies in progress, ethnologists Lennart Zintchenko, Barbro Johansson and I approach this landscape through the eyes and practices of people currently using the area for different purposes. At present, parts of the former airport have been converted to residential, industrial, commercial and recreational purposes, but there are still vast areas on the former airstrips used temporarily as storage areas for containers and brand new cars, tracks for motorcycle driving practice, and the activities of Gothenburg model airplane club. A plentitude of small businesses, industries, shops, garages, etc. reside in the airport buildings. In between the more or less well-defined places, there is room for many kinds of casual activities and active contesting of space. Among our informants are young members of the local riding club that uses a hangar as their stables and parts of the former airfield as pastures, bird watchers who are lobbying for the protection of a former ocean bay that houses a rich bird fauna despite its location in-between the former airport and an oil port, and inhabitants of a neighboring summer house colony that have for decades endured the noise within a stone’s throw of one of the runways of the airport, which is now partly covered by an expanding golf course.

Composting requires just the right combination

of factors such as temperature, moisture, supply of oxygen and a multitude of microorganisms. In the case of Torslanda, a combination of factors such as economic interests, legal regulations, natural and manmade topography and infrastructure together with human and non-human micro-actors (including, for example, animals, machines and organizations) constitute the basic circumstances for composting. A large number of networks have been co-existing, interacting and competing in the processes of decomposing and “re-composing” the former airport.

If Torslanda is to be regarded as a place that has gone through a composting process, what would be the positive outcome, the fertile “soil” produced in this compost? Could the cacophonous plenitude of more or less organized activities and land uses that have developed in the area while awaiting decisions concerning the future use of the area be a potential model of the future? What kind of values have developed in this compost? Is there, for example, social value in a space where particular groups can freely exercise particular activities? Zintchenko has noted that the flat ground has been used by for example Pakistani cricket players and blind people practicing walking. Could aesthetic values also be defined, for example in the colorful towers of stored containers, in the tire marks on the remaining runways, or maybe in the very decay of a former international airport? Within contemporary art, this kind of transitory and contradictory landscape may well be acknowledged or deliberately created.

During the last year, parts of the former airport have been converted into a new residential area called *Amhult* after a former village in the area, including single houses, apartment buildings and a new commercial centre. This project has caught a lot of attention, because in August 2005 Amhult was presented as one of the three sites of a large housing exhibition in Gothenburg. Studying the material in which the new area is presented and marketed, one could notice that the current uses of the remaining parts of the former airport are virtually overlooked. Computer animated pictures of the view from the new and exclusive houses next to the former control

tower do not include any of the container and car storage areas on old runways, or small scale businesses in old terminals. That area is simply depicted as green, maybe to match the descriptions of “fantastic views towards the river mouth, the sea, the archipelago and the golf course”. The temporary landscape that has evolved while awaiting decisions and transformations has clearly not been considered an asset in the development of the new housing. These images are fully in line with the conventions used in spatial planning, where a customary understanding of urban development basically recognizes only two stages: before and after the transformation. The values that develop during or while awaiting the process of transformation are seldom acknowledged (Qviström & Saltzman 2006).

In my own garden I quite often find myself carrying heavy plastic bags of compost from the garden shop, instead of using my own. This sometimes leaves me with a trace of bad conscience; being an environmentally conscious gardener I should use soil amendment produced in my own garden, from my own organic waste. I recognized these feelings while reading the garden essayist Michael Pollan’s thoughts about the moral imperative of the compost (Pollan 1991). So, why don’t I always use my compost, even though I appreciate the principles of composting? Maybe because the plastic bag alternative seems easier and quicker; I don’t have to dig into the heap and screen its content. I don’t have to worry about the fact that I might have put some weeds in there, whose seeds will probably spread with the compost. And I don’t have to be reminded that I really ought to turn the whole heap. So instead I put my effort and money into buying and carrying plastic bags all the way from the shop. Perhaps the same kind of awkward priorities are active in the case of Torslanda? Perhaps it seems easier and quicker to transform the landscape through values and structures brought in from somewhere else, rather than examining and working with the complex processes developing in the forsaken airport?

Composting is based on a different kind of logic than the commercial logics of contemporary society. Composting requires time, oxygen and mixing,

and the result does not appear immediately in neat, ready-made packages. In order to acknowledge the possible values of the composted airport landscape, new and different perspectives and tools would be required among those who plan the future of the area. Gyllin's garden, where the compost values were recognized and accepted by planners and where the spatial plans for the area were actually altered accordingly, has to be seen as a quite exceptional case. In Torslanda on the other hand, the possible values of the composted landscape has not – at least not yet – been officially recognized. So, who or what ought to be the gardener when a place or a landscape is composted, if we want the outcome to be as fertile and useful as possible? Would it be desirable to have, for example, spatial planners acting within the logic of a gardener, making use of locally developed networks and processes in the transformation of landscapes?

Composting offers an alternative perspective on time. The principle of composting is based on cyclic understanding of time, compared to the conventional linear view in Western societies. However, composting should not be mixed up with recycling, even though the boundary between these processes is not clear-cut. While a recycled matter (or idea) is “simply” rediscovered and reused, a composted matter (or idea) has gone through a process of fundamental decomposition and transformation. A garment from a second-hand shop is recycled when it is used again, but this reuse may be part of a composting process within the constantly transformative sphere of fashion.³ Likewise, the construction of heritage can be understood as a form of composting. Again, the ability to develop something new out of the old is characteristic of this process. As the compost offers a non-linear alternative perspective on time, it might also offer an alternative to the often used “post” prefix. The term *compostmodernism* has appeared in discussions on digital art, in connection to words such as bastard pop, mixology, open source, mash-ups and cut-ups, under the label of “remix culture” (www.horizonzero.ca) and the word *compostmodern* has been used as the title of a conference on sustainable design in San Francisco. Could it be

fruitful to explore the possibilities of other compost compounds? What would be the possibilities and liabilities of *compostcolonialism*, and could posthumanism be challenged in any constructive way by *composthumanism*?

We often think about change in terms of before and after; what used to be and what is to come. In the case of landscape transformation, as shown in this chapter, the metaphor of composting can help us to better recognize and understand what happens in-between the before and after, to analyze the quietly working microprocesses of decomposition and composition, and to provide alternative understandings of time and of mixing. Today there is a need for such alternatives in order to achieve and permit more complex explanations of phenomena that are simultaneously material, mental and nature-cultural.

Notes

- 1 The research project “Ephemeral landscapes. Exploring landscape dynamics at the urban fringe” is an interdisciplinary project, involving ethnology, landscape planning and conservation. It includes case studies concerning the urban fringes of Malmö and Gothenburg, and is financed by Formas (Swedish Research Council for Environment, Agricultural Sciences, and Spatial Planning) 2004–2008.
- 2 For a more thorough discussion concerning the interplay between everyday places and spatial planning in Gyllin's garden and neighboring areas at the inner urban fringe of Malmö, see Qviström & Saltzman (2006).
- 3 Within the “Ephemeral landscapes” project, ethnologist Magdalena Petersson is studying connections between fashion, gender and landscape in commercial landscapes at the urban fringe.

References

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