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AUTHOR INTERVIEWS

## Through the Lens of Color: An Interview with Gareth Doherty, Author of *Paradoxes of Green: Landscapes of a City-State*

Gareth Doherty, interviewed by Mark Tirpak

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### Abstract

This interview with Gareth Doherty of Harvard University Graduate School of Design, focuses on his *Paradoxes of Green: Landscapes of a City-State* (University of California Press, 2017). With *Paradoxes of Green* (2017) and via the interview, Doherty recounts some of the findings of his ethnographic fieldwork in the Kingdom of Bahrain and describes tensions arising from differing conceptions of what 'green' means or signifies within this growing and predominantly arid region. An argument that Doherty makes in *Paradoxes of Green* (2017) is that color and form are interlinked, and that color deserves deeper consideration by policy-makers and other formal shapers of cities. The interview draws from *Paradoxes of Green* (2017) to discuss some of Doherty's findings as well as his latest work on the intersections between landscape architecture and anthropology.

### Keywords:

**Bahrain, Green, Desert, Date Palm, Landscape, Architecture, Place-Making, Sustainability, Ecology, Urban, Design, Cities, Anthropology, Ethnography, Colors, Hues, Arabian Peninsula, Persian Gulf.**

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## Interview

*TIRPAK: Your research and teaching at Harvard University Graduate School of Design is described as focused on the intersections between landscape architecture and anthropology. What have you found working at or focusing on these particular intersections?*

DOHERTY: On one level, a very rich area between two established disciplines. And yet I see it as more than an interdisciplinary space—people and their relationships are so integral to landscape that I'm not sure it's helpful to consider them separately. Instead, I prefer to consider landscape architecture as [an] extension of anthropology. Anthropology works with some of the raw elements of landscape, materials, people and space (Doherty 2017: 77).

*TIRPAK: With Paradoxes of Green, you argue for 'thicker' understandings of colour and landscape by urban policy-makers in Bahrain and elsewhere—or consideration of the economic, environmental, political, symbolic and other significances of different landscape elements (such as date palms) and their 'urban' or network characteristics. You suggest that landscape is a possible if not key generator of urbanization, which you refer to as landscape urbanism or the urbanism of landscape. Could you share more about these ideas?*

DOHERTY: In fact, I began by studying the urbanism of landscape in Bahrain, which I understand as the hard and soft infrastructures that are necessary for the provision of urban landscape. By hard landscapes, I am referring to water and irrigation, for example, and by soft, I'm referring to the social and cultural conditions that drive that landscape. At the time I was motivated by 'landscape urbanism,' an argument that landscape is a primary driver of urbanization. I came to realize, however, that people in Bahrain had different understandings of the word landscape to me. They often imagined luscious verdant gardens when I talked about 'landscape.' But I was interested in landscape as a horizontal surface that might include city, and desert as much as greenery. In order to communicate better with my interlocutors, I began to focus on green, because it became clear that they understood landscape as the contrast of constructed green with the indigenous beige desert. My fieldwork confirmed that green was definitely a driver of urbanization. For example, advertising for new residential developments were dominated by the greenness of the constructed landscapes rather than the buildings (Doherty 2017: 192).

*TIRPAK: In Paradoxes of Green, you describe Bahrain to be the 'smallest, densest, and greenest' Arabian Peninsula State (p. 6)—an island defined by the 'grey-greenery' of date palm groves (p. 8), but also increasingly by the 'monochrome' green of lawns, parks and roadside landscaping (p. 9), as well as by arid conditions and other prominent colors such as desert beiges and the distinct red and white of Bahrain's national flag. You depict Bahrain as being slightly 'larger than Singapore but smaller than London or New York' (p. 10), and having a population of approximately 1.4 million in 2016. You also note that there is a high rate of per capita water use in Bahrain and that urban land costs are arguably comparable with those of downtown Chicago. Are there any easy urban comparisons that can be made for those who (like me) are not familiar with Bahrain?*

DOHERTY: Exactly that Bahrain is approximate in area to Singapore yet with a smaller population and, importantly, a very arid climate as opposed to a luscious tropical climate. In fact, Bahrainis often have that comparison in mind too, especially for urban planning. I recall many references to the comparison with Singapore in the various government ministries, yet the climate issue is critical. The extreme aridity of the climate in Bahrain is something that always surprises people. When I had friends come to visit me there, it was the climate that they always remarked on. Dust storms were especially prevalent during the year I spent there, sometimes lasting two to three days at a time. The air turns beige and it's best to stay

indoors during that weather. For me, the spatial comparisons with other territories... such as Singapore, London and New York [are important]. I grew up on a peninsula in Ireland, which is exactly the same area as Bahrain too, and I always had that spatial comparison in mind when I was walking through the island (Doherty 2017: 175).

*TIRPAK: I was drawn to your descriptions of everyday interactions with the landscape that you observed in Bahrain. For example, you note the informal farming of some decorative roadside date palms by foreign workers—I am an urban harvester or forager myself in the US, grabbing neglected citrus where I can pick it. You also describe cases where date palm groves have likely been poisoned with diesel in Bahrain, as part of attempts by residents to try to outmaneuver certain religious statutes and legal requirements that are viewed by some as hindrances to use of land and advancement. You highlight some of the everyday politics of water and water use in Bahrain—such as frequent car and building washing by the local elite and opinions about the use of groundwater, Treated Sewage Effluent (TSE) water and desalinated water. Furthermore, you describe the stratified access to coastline that exists in Bahrain. Could you share more about these urban factors?*

DOHERTY: Just as blue mixed with yellow gives green, so water and greenery are interrelated in an arid desert environment. There's a wonderful Arabic phrase—translated as 'Three things take away sadness: water, greenery and a beautiful face'—which indicates that these are all anyone could want. As a consequence of the difficulties posed by green, and by its relative scarcity, green becomes the realm of the elites. Historically, we can see how people bought date palm gardens in Bahrain, not for the financial return on investment, but for the social status the greenery would bring to the owner. In the same way, access to the sea is something in Bahrain that is reserved for the elites. Having said that, there has not been the trend of beach-going as there is in other countries.

*TIRPAK: Your depiction of the Ashura festival or mourning ritual in Bahrain also struck me as quite vivid, and I note that contrasting colors but also textures and materials (specifically human blood from self-afflicted and superficial head wounds mixing with sweat and water and absorbed by the white cloth worn by observers) marked the event that you witnessed. I was surprised and moved by your descriptions of landscapes generally speaking through color—as shaped by relationships with other colors but also time of day and season as well as by qualities of light, water, heat, humidity and even sand or dust and manmade pollutants in the air. Overall, you argue for breaking any binary that might exist between 'desert' (associated with poverty in Bahrain, apparently) and urban in contrast with notions of 'green.' Could you share more about these experiences and understandings?*

DOHERTY: I've an aversion to binaries. Why is everything black or white? Can't we be open to all the colors of the rainbow? One of the main issues I confronted with my study of green was the fact that you can't really come to understand green unless you also consider its contrast with other colors. There's a wonderful greeting in the Arabian Peninsula, *Shlawnak?*, which literally means 'What's your color?' It's an all-pervasive greeting in the peninsula yet no one ever answers with the color the question asks for. Instead the reply is, in Arabic, 'Praise be to God.' Of course, it would be great if we could answer with a color.

Part of the point I am making is that color and form are interlinked, yet we rarely discuss the importance of color. Same when it comes to sustainability which is too often linked with green. But isolating green from other colors is not helpful. Sustainable cities are blue, green, red and in-between. Green is too often conflated with sustainability, yet there is a wider spectrum to consider; green is insufficient by itself (Doherty 2017: 186).

*TIRPAK: You were raised and studied in Ireland and also studied and work in the USA, adding to scholarship about aspects of Bahrain's landscape and urban culture, as well as to knowledge about*

*The Bahamas and other regions. What can you say about multidisciplinary international studies? Where do you think you or the field will head next?*

DOHERTY: In addition to working in the Arabian Peninsula and The Bahamas, I've also been working in Brazil and West Africa, as well as in the region between Ireland and Northern Ireland, where I'm from. What I find most intriguing is how studying in one region can affect your understanding of the other. I'm especially interested in concepts of landscape in countries and societies where there isn't a formal landscape architecture discipline. For instance, there's no precise translation of the word 'landscape' in Arabic. This is one of the things that attracted me to the Arabic-speaking world. Through my fieldwork for *Paradoxes of Green*, I came to understand that landscape in Bahrain, and by extension the Arabian Peninsula, is understood as the contrast of constructed green with an indigenous arid, beige, desert environment. So, landscape is understood and defined through the lens of color. Meanwhile, color and color theory is not something we teach in design schools, despite everything we design having a color. Likewise, in Ireland, where I was born, we don't have a word for landscape in the Irish (Gaelic) language. Irish understandings of landscape were much more rooted in the cultural and agricultural practice than in a pictorial aesthetic. I say, 'were' because now we mostly speak English in Ireland and this confuses, but not totally changes, our understandings of landscape. The Irish understandings of landscape became clearer to me when we did collective fieldwork there in the spring of 2019 (Carr 2019). I am Principal Investigator on a project where we were studying the impacts of Brexit on the border region between Ireland and Northern Ireland and the potential to understand the border as a region rather than as a line (Doherty 2017: 282).

TIRPAK: *In the preface to Paradoxes of Green you mention teaching in Australia prior to your first journey to The Kingdom of Bahrain and later doctoral studies (Doctor of Design, 2010) at Harvard—which led to your fieldwork in Bahrain. Australia in especially the 2000s has faced extreme drought conditions, which prompted responses that continue to shape urban practices there and further afield. For example, I noticed during my doctoral fieldwork in Texas that Australian manufactured water-conserving dual-flush toilets have been installed in San Antonio as part of municipal efforts to conserve water (Ramirez 2012). Could you share more about your Australian experiences—or how Australian practices, sensibilities or scholarship might relate to what you found in Bahrain?*

DOHERTY: I've spent a couple of extended periods in Australia, first in Brisbane where I taught at Queensland University of Technology [QUT], and I really loved it there. Later, I taught a landscape architecture studio at RMIT University in Melbourne, and on the same trip I was briefly a Visiting Scholar at the University of Sydney. While I lived in Australia I was confronted for the first time in my life with extreme drought. Not to mention extremes of temperatures, and scale. I recall going on one 6-hour long drive inland and yet it was barely perceptible on the map of Australia. My main memories from Australia are that sheer scale of the continent but also the scale and magnitude of urban challenges that are linked to climate. Bahrain is a very different scale, but [has] similar climate challenges, and water shortages. One of the things that attracted me to Bahrain was its smaller, manageable, scale, the opposite of Australia! But the problems and opportunities in Bahrain are not always particular to Bahrain but applicable to different regions all over the world including Australia.

TIRPAK: *Out of curiosity, is your work in any way influenced by Nancy D. Munn's ethnographic studies of Australian Aboriginal societies and spatial practices that include walking? I was introduced to Munn's (1996) research via Ben Chappell's Lowrider Space (2013)—in which Chappell uses ethnographic methods that include riding along with car customizers in their vehicles to explore*

*Mexican American custom car culture and policing in Austin, Texas. I ask, as I am struck by your descriptions and use of walking to study different urban conditions in Bahrain.*

DOHERTY: I'm not as familiar with Nancy D. Munn and Ben Chappell's work as I should be. When I first arrived in Bahrain, I was not expecting walking to be as central to my method as it later became. I don't drive, and public transport in Bahrain was not something my upper middle class friends knew anything about or encouraged me to know about at first. So, I ended up walking everywhere and enjoyed it. I realized my walks always led to interesting encounters. People would stop me and say hello and ask if I was okay. So, I met lots of people I would not otherwise have met, including some people who became my friends and interlocutors.

*TIRPAK: I'm also curious if you encountered any hostilities or problems related to your research or approach? Simply for comparison, I noticed and sometimes was caught up in relatively aggressive anti-homeless policing in sections of downtown San Antonio, Texas, as part of my doctoral fieldwork and daytime urban wanders there (Tirpak 2018).*

DOHERTY: I'm happy to say that my walks through Bahrain were never problematic. I can't recall any unpleasant encounters during my walks apart from the frustration of not being able to cross some of the highways ... The island of Bahrain today is not constructed for walking, so roads sometimes act as walls. There were some examples, which I mention in the book, where this becomes a form of exclusion. By building a shopping mall that no one can walk to, you create an exclusive space ... With very few exceptions, people were open to my presence and welcoming. The only issues I faced came after my fieldwork was ended. I returned shortly after the political and social unrest of 2011 and was struck by the change in atmosphere and the militarization of the landscape (Taylor 2015). People tell me I could not do today what I did ten years ago. My presence walking around the island could be viewed with suspicion.

*TIRPAK: Do you have a sense for how Paradoxes of Green (2017) has been received in Bahrain or the wider region?*

DOHERTY: In terms of the book's reception in Bahrain, I haven't been back since its publication in 2017, but I plan to return later this year. The manuscript was read by several Bahrainis before publication. I tried to present a balanced view of a complex and delicate political situation. I hope people can see that the book is full of love for Bahrain. I hear it has been received positively in Bahrain, and I haven't heard anything to the contrary.

*TIRPAK: How has publishing Paradoxes of Green changed or shaped your writing?*

DOHERTY: There's a general rule of thumb that for every hour one spends in the field, one should spend four hours actually writing about it. It is through the act of writing that we think about and interpret the experiences from the field. I tried to write up my field notes as frequently as I could, and kept re-reading them every day when I was in the field. It definitely makes me consider the writing process as an important part of the interpretation of field research. It is something one needs to keep plugging at. It is not something I can sit down and do, but there are many stages and layers to writing.

*TIRPAK: Is there anything that you left out of Paradoxes of Green (2017) that you wish now you had included?*

DOHERTY: One of the challenges of fieldwork is in the tension between your interlocutors and your research. There were several aspects my fieldwork which I deliberately chose not to include. Some of these were political, others dealt with sensitive and personal information that might compromise the identities of my friends and interlocutors. I have no

regrets about leaving anything out of *Paradoxes of Green* that I deliberately chose to leave out. For instance, writing about politics was very hard. Because I wanted to give a balanced view and at the same time, the book is about green and not about politics. But I hope I have shown how green is central to the political life of Bahrain.

One of the biggest, and unintentional, omissions only became apparent to me when the book was going to press. As I sent the final artwork to the publisher it dawned on me for the first time that all my photographs were taken during the day—meanwhile most of my fieldwork was done at night. I had to do my fieldwork at nighttime because of the weather. Although the weather for much of the year is delightful in Bahrain, for several months of the year it is very hot. As a consequence, I could only walk after the sun went down. But nighttime was when public space would come alive, so it made sense to walk then too.

I've since become intrigued with the nighttime as a design challenge. I think it's fair to say that most public spaces are utilized at the nighttime in Bahrain, yet all the plans I've ever seen designed for the region are designed and represented for the daytime. At night, colors change, perceptions of space change, and uses change. We had a conference at Harvard on this topic as a result of this omission: *After Dark: Nocturnal Landscapes and Public Spaces in the Arabian Peninsula* (Raji 2017). This is one of my current research projects and a focus of a new design lab I am heading at Harvard Graduate School of Design, the Critical Landscapes Design Lab [<http://criticallandscapes.com/>].

*TIRPAK: Do you have any advice for doctoral students thinking about taking on international, ethnographic and multidisciplinary approaches to research? Any advice for universities in regards to structuring or supporting this type doctoral research?*

DOHERTY: I realized quite early on in my research that for practical reasons, such as the difficulties getting access to archives, that I was going to have difficulty getting the information I needed. It was clear I would only be able to gather this information from an in-depth period living in Bahrain. Before leaving for the field, I remember speaking with my advisors about methodology. They explained that I needed to do what I needed to do. I think this was very good advice because it helped me to be flexible in the field.

The primary advice I would give to students is to value chance encounters. I found the first weeks to be difficult as, in an effort to be efficient, I tried to plan most aspects of my fieldwork. Then, I realized that not alone did my fieldwork rarely work out as I planned but that the most interesting results came from the unpredicted encounters. It was then when I came to appreciate the value of chance. And I began to create the chances of chance happening. For instance, the chance of chance was greatly helped by walking. I found that many of my most interesting and valuable encounters were during chance encounters.

One of the main structural problems for universities in terms of supporting this type of research is probably financial. I was fortunate to find funding in the form of a travel fellowship I applied for. Having access to funding is important for the ability to do this sort of in depth ethnographic work.

*TIRPAK: It's a minor passage in the book, but I enjoyed your light critiquing of a LEED-certified building on a manmade island in Dubai as one example of less nuanced or more economically motivated understandings of urban 'green' or sustainable development in the region. I was also struck by your depictions of 'green deserts' in Bahrain (pp. 121–122)—such as green lawns and traffic roundabouts along what you call 'VIP roads' (p. 132). You suggest that, to some degree, such practices or politics are shaped by the perspectives of foreign expatriates and distant designers, but also by the interests of local ruling elites. Could you talk more about this?*

DOHERTY: Well this is one of the paradoxes behind the title: The paradox that to green is equated with environmentalism and to create green space in desert environments is not very green from an environmental point of view. It's not good to talk about green without knowing which hue of green. Ideas of green are very culturally specific, and there are many hues. And green is understood in terms of its relationship to other colors. So we need to consider other colors too when discussing landscape and the environment.

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