

Sensory Methods towards More-than-Human Placemaking – A Case Study of Traditional Floodplain Farming at the Tisza River

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Abstract *In the context of the climate crises, it becomes ever more urgent for designers to reconsider their practices and move beyond human-centered notions of land use. Drawing inspiration from traditional ecological practices can provide a potential avenue for reimagining land use and placemaking design. The research explores methods and approaches that facilitate the inclusion of diverse forms of knowledge that have been mostly absent in land research and land use decision-making. The case study, situated in the flood plains of the Middle-Tisza, proposes sensory ethnographic, artistic and design methods capable of capturing and describing the tacit ecological knowledge of floodplain farmers through means beyond spoken or written words.*

As a consequence of river regulations implemented during the 19th century, the Tisza River has been reduced to less than half its original length. The once 39,000 km² of flood meadows, that served as natural water storage, have been diminished to only 2300 km² (Figure 1). The drastic transformation of a once wild ‘water country’ has brought about species and habitat loss and the desiccation and salinization of extensive areas. While the reversal of river regulations is unattainable, valuable insights can be learned from the practices of floodplain farmers who have always collaborated with water and flooding.

Despite the scientifically proven value of traditional ecological practices, individuals with such tacit expertise are still rarely included in decision-making processes concerning land use. Ethnobiologists and ecologists increasingly agree that traditional ecological knowledge and its practices contribute to biodiversity and to a better understanding of complex environmental issues (Demeter et al., 2021). However, much of the knowledge that flood-meadow farmers possess lives in tacit and embodied practices. Consequently, traditional consultation methods may struggle to involve them in conventional ways, or even consider them in their expert capacity.

Drawing upon the researcher’s artistic practice, this rich and often tacit ethnographic data was captured through sound and video recording (conducted during walk-along interviews; Figure 2). The video documentation of tacit practices and sound recordings of the flood landscape contribute to a sensory landscape installation to disseminate the outcomes of the research, that could otherwise not be easily expressed in spoken or written words (Pink, 2015).

This sensory landscape installation (Figure 3) also creates a space for critical reflection and engagement.

The case study underscores the importance of an interdisciplinary sensory art, media, and ethnographic approach in capturing, describing, and disseminating tacit knowledge. This sensory approach can help reveal insights beyond verbal communication and foster a multi-dimensional understanding of the human- environment relationship.

Bibliography

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Figure 1: A 19th century map of the Tisza before river regulations, property of a research participant (Photo: Illés, 2020).



Figure 2: A flood-meadow farmer, explaining the benefit of flood forestry in managing invasive shrub species such as false indigo-bush (*Amorpha fruticosa*) (Photo: Illés, 2021).



Figure 3: 'Fermented Futures', landscape installation at TRAFÓ Budapest, with an edible Tisza flood landscape (Photo: Illés, 2023).



