

Bedsted Varden. An Essay on Waystones and Wastestones.

Stefan Darlan Boris

INTRODUCTION

The horizon has disappeared out of sight.¹ The Earth is trembling beneath our feet.² And on the threshold of a new climatic regime, the landscape has become the primary arena for the development of an ecological awareness about an unnatural nature, which, concurrently with climate change, has led to the loss of orientation.³ In this arena, we no longer fully recognize well known landscapes. We still haven't learned to navigate them. In essence, climate change makes us strangers in a strange land! And estrangement has given rise to solastalgia – the experience of homesickness even when we are in fact home.⁴

In response, Bedsted Varden introduces familiar materials in unfamiliar landscapes. It explores in 1:1 how works and words can contribute to a reorientation of ourselves in the emerging landscapes of a new climatic regime. It does so by continuing the imagination and physical work of landscape architecture master students from Studio 1F Emerging Landscapes at the Aarhus School of Architecture. In 2024 they participated in a semester assignment based on the research project UTOPIA THY.⁵ Here they erected the first prototype of a dry-stacked cairn in the declining station town Bedsted Thy in the Danish north. They called their cairn a Waystone/Wastestone.⁶ Waystone because it is a guiding landmark between the station town and emerging forest landscapes underway in its periphery. Wastestone because it is built with local waste material from demolished buildings in and around Bedsted Thy. [fig.1]

Thanks to this prototype, Waystones/Wastestones have since become an integrated part of the research project UTOPIA THY, which explores the potential synergies between two national initiatives that at first glance have nothing to do with each other. On the one hand, the extensive demolition of the built environment that follows in the footsteps of a depopulating countryside. On the other hand, the national plan of doubling the size of forest in Denmark during the 21st century. A plan that recently became more topical with the Green Tripartite and the ambition of creating 250.000 hectares new forest in the Danish countryside before 2045.⁷



Fig.1. The Waystone/Wastestone built in 2024 by students from Studio Emerging Landscapes at the Aarhus School of Architecture for UTOPIA THY. Photo by the author, 2025.

Instead of approaching the demolitions as singular and isolated events, UTOPIA THY sees them as elements in a much larger transformation that goes beyond the individual plots.⁸ Together with the creation of more forest, remnants of the built environment will contribute to an emerging and interconnected landscape in the countryside. In the coming years, Bedsted Varden – and several other cairns like it – will be erected as landmarks in this landscape using waste material from local building demolitions.

The hypothesis is threefold. Firstly, that it – *like a light house* – can assist in navigating unfamiliar landscapes. Secondly, that it – *like an observatory* – can contribute to the discovery of a new horizon. And thirdly, that it – *like an earthy elevator* – can help redirect our gaze deep into the local vernacular still present in the Earth's thousand folds.⁹ Yet, important questions remain: How can a Waystones/Wastestones like Bedsted Varden make us regain a better foothold on a trembling Earth? How can it give us a sense of orientation in otherwise unfamiliar landscapes? How can it help us to discover a new horizon?

BEDSTED THY

To answer those questions, let us take our first step and look closer at Bedsted Thy. The specific context of Bedsted Varden. Like many other station towns in the Danish countryside, Bedsted Thy is a story of development and decline. The town was established in 1880 as one of several small station towns on Thybanen. During the first half of the 20th century, it quickly developed into a thriving station town with a large connection to the surrounding world via the railroad. It was one of the new towns of industrialization!¹⁰ In its early days, the 100-hectare large now hundred-year-old Rønhede Forest was planted in the outskirts of the town. Its role was to mitigate sand drift created by the prevailing western wind. Together with public squares and lush private gardens, Bedsted Thy quickly grew a park-like character and evolved into a green town-island surrounded by farmland.

But because of the demographical development, Bedsted Thy is today experiencing a declining number of inhabitants as well as abandonment of its built environment. This makes it a natural focal point for experiments with radical transformation and emerging forest landscapes in the Danish countryside. UTOPIA THY is experimenting with new forest landscapes in which controlled ruins are turned inside out and reimagined as new public spaces. Where former private gardens emerge and are transformed into a new common ground.¹¹ And where a larger, brighter and wilder forest will extend both into the fabric of the station town and far beyond its immediate, physical boundaries.¹²

Bedsted Varden draws, among others, on the work by late Louis G. Le Roy (1924 – 2012) who in his experimental forest north of Mildam in the Netherlands erected similar cairns, platforms and water towers of sorted and stacked waste materials from demolished buildings supplied to him by the local municipality.¹³ [fig.2] Like Le Roy's stacked structures in Mildam, Bedsted Varden is built with waste material from local building demolitions. They have been supplied by Thisted Municipality who, through the national Demolition Fund, oversee handling abandoned and condemned buildings in Thy. Bedsted Varden also contains material handed over by local inhabitants, who have shared leftover building materials from their private house and garden together with personal stories about building – and dismantling – Bedsted Thy together.



Fig. 2. A cairn of carefully sorted and stacked demolition material built by late Louis G. Le Roy in the Eco-Cathedral, Mildam, Netherlands. Photo by the author, 2013.

WORDS MATTER!

As our second step let's look closer at the words themselves. Why? Because when we navigate the strange landscapes of a new climatic regime words matter! "Words act as compass; place-speech serves literally to en-charm the land – to sing it back into being, and to sing one's being back into it," writes Robert MacFarlane.¹⁴

The word 'Varde' in Bedsted Varden is the Danish word for cairn. It derives from old Norse *varði* meaning to 'ward' against something, or to be 'wary'. To show caution. In Danish we would say 'at træde varsomt'. Tread carefully! And when we would ask someone to take care of something, we would say 'tag vare på!' For a town like Bedsted Thy, experiencing abandonment and neglect, this seems like a relevant revelation: the distance between 'varde' and 'varsomt' – cairn and careful – is small indeed!

We also learn that the word 'varde' refers to 'beacon'. A type of light or fire that warns us of danger communicating to us across great distances. Not unlike the role of a lighthouse that makes seafarers able to travel safely along broken shores. For centuries, explorers have built cairns in the Arctic north under dancing aurora borealis in the polar night. For them, cairns were both landmarks and mailboxes. Navigation and communication. Beacon is phonetically close to beckon. And the relationship between beacon and beckon is rooted in their shared meaning of drawing attention to something, or someone. Beacon in Old English *bēacn* means a sign or signal, often used to guide ships or warn enemies. Its Proto-Indo-European root **b^heh₂-* suggest a link to 'shine', as in to 'shine a light' on something. Bedsted Varden is both beacon and mailbox. Inside it, the author has placed a small tobacco tin box from the Danish tobacco company C.W. Obel with notes for the next explorers of a new climatic regime. Written on the tin box cover with white letters on a golden background is the word 'PHØNIX' next to a drawing of a burning Phoenix bird rising from the ashes!

Beckon share the same root as beacon but refers "to make a mute sign, signal by a nod or gesture." We have already determined that 'varde' and 'varsomt' – cairn and careful – are related. But Bedsted Varden is also both a beacon and a beckoning. A guiding landmark signaling to us a possible course forward. It beckons us to us to stay on our guard while we tread carefully onwards. Keep our eyes open. And go gently into the emerging landscapes of a new climatic regime! This is another on point revelation, as we seem to be currently stumbling insensitive to and senselessly into them.



Fig.3. The Waystone/Wastestone from 2024 was built by students from Studio Emerging Landscapes at the Aarhus School of Architecture using former pavement from Bedsted Thy's demolished schoolyard. Photo by the author, 2025.

COMPOSING COMPASS EARTH

Maybe we are stumbling our way forward because we in our search for a new horizon fear that time is running out? What then would be our third step? Ironically, it is to slow down. And work with the materials already at hand. With our hands. On site! Bruno Latour suggests that “it is time to compose—in all the meanings of the word, including to compose with, that is to compromise, to care, to move slowly, with caution and precaution.”¹⁵ If Bedsted Varden is a composition of sorted and stacked waste material (fig.3) – in essence, decomposed buildings – it not only provides additional habitats for flora and fauna or hold narrative fragments of Bedsted Thy's young history. It also contributes to the slow emergence of a new rural geology!

Why does this matter? Because matters matter! In geology a horizon is a line in the earth's layered strata, which shows shifting earthly conditions and changing climates as they have occurred in the geologic depths of Earth's history. It is a material and visible indicator of dramatic changes on

Earth. On the face of it, the current changes in Bedsted Thy seem far less dramatic than when the asteroid Chicxulub hit the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico with 72.000 km/h 66 million years ago causing the fifth mass extinction that killed off the dinosaurs. But we are now in the middle of the sixth mass extinction. And this time we are the asteroid.¹⁶ And any counter movement to this trajectory, whatever its direction, also those deep into the Earth's thousand folds, should receive our full attention.¹⁷



Fig.4. Another cairn of carefully sorted and stacked demolition material built by late Louis G. Le Roy in the Eco-Cathedral, Mildam, Netherlands. Photo by the author, 2013.

“Beauty is a matter of history and how we deal with it,” writes J.B. Jackson.¹⁸ If he is right, then Bedsted Varden shows us that beauty is also a matter of geology and how we deal with it. Since the dawn of human time, geologic features in the landscape have played a key role in human navigation. And early compasses, some as early as 300BC, used magnetite, a naturally occurring magnetic rock also called ‘lodestone’. In Danish ‘lodestone’ would translate into ‘ledesten’. A guiding rock!¹⁹ When freely suspended on a string, a small piece of ‘lodestone’ will align itself with Earth's magnetic field. ‘Lode’ comes from the Old English ‘lād,’ which means to lead the ‘way, journey, course.’ From lode (n.) ‘a way, a course, something to be followed.’ In Danish we know it as ‘ledestjerne’, a ‘lodestar’, characterizing a star that leads or serves to guide travellers bound for unknown shores. ‘Lodestar’, it turns out, is also the old name for Polaris, the North Star, which has served as a primary celestial navigation reference for millennia, allowing navigators to determine latitude and true north.

In Old English, ‘lodestone’ meant ‘waystone.’ Coincidentally, the word ‘waystone’ is also linked to the word ‘horizon’. The word ‘horizon’ comes from the late 14c., *orisoun*, from Old French *orizon* (14c., Modern French *horizon*), earlier *orizonte* (13c.), from Latin *horizontem* (nominative *horizon*), from Greek *horizon* (*kyklos*) ‘bounding (circle),’ from *horizein* ‘bound, limit, divide, separate,’ and from *horos* ‘boundary, landmark, marking stones.’ Potter describes the relationship between stone, boundary and horizon eloquently:

*“It is at the very least interesting to consider that for ancient philosophy it was the horos, boundary and stone, that was in some sense the determining element for the linguistic experience of the world, while in modern philosophy a derivative of the same word, expanded to the edge of our vision, plays ‘the all-determining role’ in the theory of horizon-intentionality. To put it simply, you cannot take the on (the essence or ‘being’) out of the horizon, even when defining it (horos).”*²⁰

Following Potter, Bedsted Varden is not only an Earthly compass that can lead us carefully onwards on our way across boundaries into unfamiliar terrain. It is itself a horizon! [fig.4]

CONCLUSION

Bedsted Varden is both communication, composition and compass. By weaving together, the local history of Bedsted Thy – stone by stone, brick by brick – the cairn is not just a mailbox but becomes a vertical common ground. A container of the vernacular. It contains and communicates the material memory and words of those who, with heart, mind and hands have shaped Bedsted Thy's soon-to-be 150-year-old history. It also encourages us to carefully tread another course that the one we are currently on – one Waystone/Wastestone after another – into the emerging landscapes of a new climatic regime. How? By being a horizon in itself. Bedsted Varden shows us that the emerging landscapes, more than anything, need to be homely and contribute to the establishment of close relationships between each other and the Earth.



Fig.5. A glimpse of the Waystone/Wastestone from 2024 seen through a multi-stemmed ash tree (*Fraxinus excelsior*) in the corner of the Forest Stair facing the emerging forest landscapes adjacent to the garden. Photo by the author, 2025.

For now, Bedsted Varden and the other Waystones/Wastestones are nothing but a small contribution to a large task ahead shared among all of us; to learn together, by treading carefully and working with the materials at hand, how to compose the emerging landscapes of a new climatic regime. To use the work, we have already carried out as the foundation for new work. With caution. One step, one stone and one horizon at a time. [fig.5]

Notes

-
- ¹ Latour, B. (2016), *Is Geo-logy the new umbrella for all the sciences? Hints for a neo-Humboldtian university*. Lecture at Cornell University, 25th October 2016.
 - ² Schultz, N. (2023) *Land Sickness*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
 - ³ Boris, S. (2020). "Landskab 100: Mellem himmel og grund". In *Landskab 1-2020/101*. Copenhagen: Danish Architectural Press.
 - ⁴ Albrecht, G. (2007) "Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change". In *Australasian Psychiatry 2007:15 Suppl 1:S95-8*. Melbourne: The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists.
 - ⁵ UTOPIA THY is a collaboration between the Aarhus School of Architecture, National Museum of Denmark, Bedsted Byforskønnelse (an organisation for urban beautification in Bedsted), Thisted Municipality, Museum Thy, SMK (Danish Museum for Arts), the Danish Architects' Association and Emergency Architecture & Human Rights (EAHR).
 - ⁶ The prototype was proposed, built and named by landscape architecture master students on Studio 1F Emerging Landscapes at the Aarhus School of Architecture; Annabel Arens, Emilia Christiansen, Silke Lecanda Trautner, Johan Hvidtfeldt Rahbek, Theo Davies-Jones, Signe Kold Kristiansen, Elene Marie Solhaug, Karoline Mutinta Jørgensen, Emma Holm Kjær and Morten Hansen.
 - ⁷ *Aftale om et Grønt Danmark (The Green Tripartite)* (2024), Aftale mellem regeringen, Landbrug & Fødevarer, Danmarks Naturfredningsforening, Fødevareforbundet NNF, Dansk Metal, Dansk Industri og Kommunernes Landsforening, 24. juni 2024.
 - ⁸ Krag, M. og Boris, S. (forthcoming 2026) "En radikalt bevaret stationsby opløst i nye skovlandskaber". In *Antologi om kulturmiljøer i forandring*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
 - ⁹ See Latour, B. (2018). *Down to Earth. Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. London: Polity Press.
 - ¹⁰ Nielsen, T. (2023) *Byen Danmark*. Copenhagen: Danish Architectural Press. Expected publication in English in 2026.
 - ¹¹ Boris, S. (forthcoming 2026) "Composing the Rural as a Common Ground" In Stringer, B, Meeres, S, and Krag, M. (2026) *Rescaling the Rural*. Novato: ORO Editions. AR+D.
 - ¹² Boris, S. (2024) "Kommende skovlandskaber i Thy" In *Landskab 6-2024/105*. Copenhagen: Danish Architectural Press.
 - ¹³ Vollard, Piet (2002) "Time-based Architecture in Mildam. Louis Le Roy's Ecocathedral (ca. 1970-3000)" In *Le Roy, Louis G., Nature-Culture-Fusion*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers.
 - ¹⁴ MacFarlane, R. (2015) *Landmarks*. London: Hamish Hamilton Publishers.
 - ¹⁵ Latour, B. (2010) "Steps Toward the Writing of a Compositionist Manifesto" In *New Literary History, Vol. 41*, 471-490, 2010.
 - ¹⁶ Morton, T. (2016) *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press.
 - ¹⁷ Latour, B. (2021) *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
 - ¹⁸ Jackson, J.B. (1984) *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
 - ¹⁹ Boris, S. (forthcoming 2026) *Earthshine. An Essay on Watershed Imagining*. Copenhagen: Danish Architectural Press.
 - ²⁰ Potter, T. (2022) *Horos: Ancient Boundaries and the Ecology of Stone*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

Bibliography

- Aftale om et Grønt Danmark (The Green Tripartite)* (2024) Aftale mellem regeringen, Landbrug & Fødevarer, Danmarks Naturfredningsforening, Fødevareforbundet NNF, Dansk Metal, Dansk Industri og Kommunernes Landsforening, 24. juni 2024.
- Albrecht, G. (2007) "Solastalgia: The Distress Caused by Environmental Change". In *Australasian Psychiatry 2007:15 Suppl 1*:S95-8. Melbourne: The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists.
- Boris, S. (2020) "Landskab 100: Mellem himmel og grund". In *Landskab 1-2020/101*. Copenhagen: Danish Architectural Press.
- Boris, S. (forthcoming 2026) "Composing the Rural as a Common Ground", In Stringer, B, Meeres, S, and Krag, M. (2026) *Rescaling the Rural*. Novato: ORO Editions. AR+D.
- Boris, S. (forthcoming 2026) *Earthshine. An Essay on Watershed Imagining*. Copenhagen: Danish Architectural Press.
- Boris, S. "Kommende skovlandskaber i Thy" In *Landskab 6-2024/105*. Copenhagen: Danish Architectural Press.
- Jackson, J.B. (1984). *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Krag, M. og Boris, S. (forthcoming 2026) "En radikalt bevaret stationsby opløst i nye skovlandskaber". In *Antologi om kulturmiljøer i forandring*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.
- Latour, B. (2021) *After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Latour, B. (2018) *Down to Earth. Politics in the New Climatic Regime*. London: Polity Press.
- Latour, B. (2016) *Is Geo-logy the new umbrella for all the sciences? Hints for a neo-Humboldtian university*. Lecture at Cornell University, 25th October 2016.
- Latour, B. (2010). "Steps Toward the Writing of a Compositionist Manifesto" In *New Literary History, Vol. 41*, 471-490, 2010.
- MacFarlane, R. (2015) *Landmarks*. London: Hamish Hamilton Publishers.
- Morton, T. (2016) *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nielsen, T. (2023). *Byen Danmark*. Copenhagen: Danish Architectural Press. Expected publication in English in 2026.
- Potter, T. (2022) *Horos: Ancient Boundaries and the Ecology of Stone*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.
- Schultz, N. (2023) *Land Sickness*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Vollard, Piet (2002) "Time-based Architecture in Mildam. Louis Le Roy's Ecocathedral (ca. 1970-3000)" In *Le Roy, Louis G., Nature-Culture-Fusion*. Rotterdam: NAI Publishers.

BIO:

Stefan Darlan Boris is an Associate Professor, MDL, PhD, in landscape architecture at the Aarhus School of Architecture. He works in research and teaching with the landscapes of a new climatic regime. He has a strong focus on forest landscapes in the meeting between city and countryside. In UTOPIA Thy he is particularly interested in places that experiences depopulation. He often works with physical experiments onsite and is one of the principals behind the Aarhus Landscape Laboratory and the EU-project LANDLABS.