

The Idea of Landscape¹

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There are essential differences between knowing landscape construction techniques and the aesthetic intuition and sensibility underlying the art of architecture. Nevertheless, a full control over these two faculties is a prerequisite for the conceptual work of landscape planning and design. Although landscape architecture is subordinated to socio-economic programs for the use of spaces, and should fulfil its objective of utility (which also includes a functional component) this does not mean that the author's range of creativity and freedom is less far reaching than in other arts. This freedom develops within the specific conceptual discourse of landscape architecture and its own language of patterns, through which landscapes are configured and expressed.

Architecture is not a natural language, insofar as it is generated within a social context rendering it "external to the individual who, on his/her own, cannot create or modify it."² Landscape architecture is therefore not a system of pure values; it is fulfilled by linking space with purposes, by creating spaces within spaces, by qualifying them, giving them meaning through use, through expressions that suggest modes of use and appreciation, and by inducing behaviours and emotional states.

The language of landscape architecture does not impose ideas but is indispensable for expressing them and certainly influences how they are formed. Architecture does not determine the form of spaces but helps to structure them in its symbolic faculty.

The criteria determining whether a culture has a concept of landscape imply:³

- A linguistic representation of the territory referred to as landscape, not only in the visual dimension and compilation of images, but also in its substance as a physical means supporting a social body.

¹ Text included in the book *Porto City Park: Idea and Landscape* [PARDAL, S. et al. (2006). *Porto City Park: Idea and Landscape*. Municipality of Porto/ GAPEEC, Porto].

² SAUSSURE, F. DE, 1916. *Cours de Linguistique Générale*. Payot, Lausanne-Paris.

³ These concerns about criteria determining the existence of landscape are covered by Augustin Berque, in her work *Les Raisons du Paysage* (BERQUE, A., 1995. *Les Raisons du Paysage. De la Chine Antique aux Environnements de Synthèse*. Hazan, Paris [pg. 34-35]), although from a perspective not wholly coincidental with the one presented here.

- A critical evaluation of landscape's purpose and utility, including aesthetic values in that assessment.
- Producing landscape designs and projects, viewed as distinct from pictorial representations.
- Assigning an aesthetic meaning to landscape, as part of the act to transform the territory and to develop spaces adapted to social and economic uses. In this context, there is a clear switch from the indoor space and domestic outdoor space to a scale of the overall territorial space.

Landscape emerges from the available land structure through a full appropriation of all the site's aspects, where the right to fruition, as part of the fullness of being there, offers an assurance of security. A landscape without an implicit relation of belonging, that confers it a status of socially integrated space, with a defined sense of utility, becomes disturbing and unstable. "Where nature was not truly dominated, the image of its non-domination gave rise to terror. That's why, for a long period, there was a predilection for a symmetric ordering of nature."⁴

Landscape ideas are formed by building visual models of the locale's aesthetic aspects. Landscape is revealed only when observed by someone looking for an aesthetic expression in it, attainable only through sensibility and imagination. A natural landscape's expression depends on the observer's mindset. Raw *natural beauty* in nature exists only in the mind upon its discovery. Landscape is always a product of thought inspired by the contemplation of spaces, where raw nature and the *artialisé* are mixed in a broad sense. Landscape blurs the borders between the world of art and the world of raw things that the world gives us to contemplate. But this integration, through interpretation and constructive action, is transformed into art based on the idea, which may be a mere contemplative appropriation. Today, this process is threatened by the tendency to globalise tastes, by an apathetic tolerance, where there are no values or the capability for critical judgement. Landscape is

⁴ ADORNO, T. W., 1993. *Teoria Estética*. Edições 70, Lisboa (pg.111).

threatened when “everything may be art because everything may be regarded as *ready-made*.”⁵

Landscape architecture is not a free art, it is constrained by its three purposes: the outer reality, the practical and the aesthetic. Nevertheless, these constraints do not create a conflict between purposes or sacrifice one for another, since all of them are part of the essence of the landscape’s objective and of its meaning.

Architectural landscape is explained by the author’s ideas and by the array of emotions felt by its viewers, which will vary according to the circumstances influencing each person’s material subjectivity. The park has an urban meaning based on a culture and on an economy to provide free time and spiritual willingness for contemplation. The subjectivity of landscape originates in the author’s subjective ideas that materialise in the work. Since the work is exterior to the author, his or her sensibility is embodied in the landscape and turned into a locale.

Historians generally agree on how the concept of landscape originated, as it is now understood. Today’s concept of landscape is presumed to have emerged in the 16th century and was closely linked with the fondness for admiring and painting natural and rural landscapes. As such, landscape became an autonomous entity, a reality subject to an aesthetic expression. Prior to that time, works containing references to “landscape” shared the same lack of specific descriptive content of aesthetic values. Landscape was portrayed mainly from a utilitarian point of view that perceived different objects and places in much the same manner.

This lack of distinction creates vague, undefined and imprecise features, even when applied to different settings. Thus, roads, valleys, hills and hillocks were depicted as indiscriminately narrow, close, craggy, large, deep, rough....Squares and streets were large, long, spacious, narrow, small, short....Trees, villages, doors, peoples or boats could have been, all of them, thick or thin, large or small. Adjectives such as handsome and gracious were applied, indiscriminately, to any of these realities.

⁵ GIL, J., 2005. “*Sem Título*” — *Escritos sobre Arte e Artistas*. Cap. 2 Questões sobre Arte — O Desaparecer da Natureza. Relógio D’Água Editores, Lisbon (pg. 73).

When actual places were characterised, they served only as background for the action, to highlight the difficulties, dangers or discomfort to be overcome by the foreplayers. If the ocean is described as wild, turbulent and heaving, if the storms are tremendous and the nights dark, it is to emphasise the courage of the hero or of a group that had to confront them....The description is, in this sense, subordinated to the action and is not autonomous.

When navigators sailed off to discover distant lands, books were written describing their voyages and nautical charts were drawn to guide future voyagers along the same routes. Although these types of writings already made an attempt at denser descriptive references, in which the landscape takes on a pragmatic meaning, it was still far from attaining aesthetic or scientific purposes. These descriptions were deeply rooted in their utilitarian purpose and were associated to places and consumable goods.

Towns were often described according to their location, size, dimension and their streets, with references to the respective construction materials. Rivers were described as large or small, wide or narrow, navigable or not, with an abundance or lack of fish. The ocean was described as high or low, the ports as safe or dangerous. On land, it was important to describe the available food, to identify any poisonous food, point out places that provided water and its quality.

The territory's features were observed and rated according to their potential utility in relation to any direct or indirect dangers.

A transformation took place during the Renaissance that had already been proclaimed in the writings of Petrarch (1304-1374). Petrarca portrayed the territory and raw nature, not already as a stage where the action takes place or as a set of useful references, but as an object to be contemplated and as an aesthetic emotion. In his writings, the landscape contained symbolism and sublimated values; it had aesthetic and ethical connotations. References are still made to fountains, gardens, pastures, clear waters, but now as pleasurable places ideal for contemplating beauty and for communion with God. In this period, landscape gained conceptual autonomy, now conceived as an independent identity.

This transition appears frequently associated to a linguistic evolutionary process and in the concepts of images, painting and landscape. The so-said "incapability" in regards to landscape has been attributed, on one hand, to man's inability to distance himself from raw nature and, on the other hand, also attributed to a "linguistic limitation," an "atrophy of language as a mental instrument."⁶

It's true that man and the environment were so closely linked that they were almost inseparable, and this was so imposing, determinant and overwhelming that it left no room for man to distance himself from nature, to observe it as an exterior object. The environment's presence was felt and feared more than observed and studied, and that interaction was intensified according to the associated danger.

In those days, survival and, in the last analysis, happiness depended greatly on the climate and on the abundance or scarcity of food and water. It was not by chance that paradise was described as a safe and abundant place with a mild climate, where there is no night, rain, cold or excessive heat, where the waters are clear and fresh, the fruits varied and tasty.

Tranquillity and security, assuring survival and subsistence, allowed man to step out of the "landscape" and to observe it as something exterior that could be appropriated and recreated as a designed space.

The 16th century was a time of economic growth, of relative peace and prosperity, a departure from long periods of suffering, poor crops, hunger and plagues. Man could now indulge in the landscape's beauty.

The lack of psychological dissociation and the failure to perceive landscape as something exterior to man was less related with any lack of refinement in the descriptive or narrative process and more related to the type of relation that man established with his surroundings.

Likewise, man's conceptual autonomy is associated, not so much with a supposed linguist evolution as a mental instrument, but rather with man's release from a situation that subjugated, absorbed and incorporated him, to the extent that man and his

⁶ GODINHO, M. A., CHAVES, A. *Formas de Pensamento em Portugal no Séc. XV*. Livros Horizonte, Lisbon, (pg. 287).

landscape were indistinguishable. Regardless of the time or place, whenever the world became aggressive and threatening to the security of humanity, the landscape slides into the background and may even be annulled and materially destroyed.

That's why an awareness of wild nature and knowledge about it are cultural acquisitions that allow us to appropriate it and safeguard it as a landscape object. This is why raw biophysical formations are objects understood as landscapes, culturally appropriated and enjoyed as works of art.

Parks, in specific, may gain a symbolism that, in some cases, elevates them to the status of sacral spaces. This explains the emotional behaviour of populations when they choose parks as a symbol of citizenship values to be defended. In this light, we need only look back to an event revealing the will of the English people to maintain a civilised spirit above all else. In the midst of World War II, whilst under systematic bombing raids, the English questioned the British army's plan to place heavy artillery at Birkenhead Park and demanded that an alternative not prejudicial to the park be found.

Parks create a new spatiality within an urban setting. Parks give rise to new types of communication relationships between persons and contribute to a cohesive social body. The composition and condition of the landscape also reflects the culture of the people that build parks, occupy them and maintain them.

Landscape architecture, like all arts, is a practical exercise evaluated by the finished work. The work itself is a product of knowledgeable intuition influenced by an observation of other works and the study of history, techniques and architecture criticism. In any case, the act of designing should cultivate an awareness of the territorial utility and strengthen creative freedom. Comparing the view, before and after the landscape work, is essential for evaluating the results and the procedures for attaining those results.

Commissioning the design of parks has always been part of an aesthetically enlightened culture and its desire to urbanise the world, a gesture of appropriation and control over the territory. Urbanism is a culture that goes way beyond the act of planning the city; it is also a desire to embrace the whole territory. In modern society, advanced urban thinking cultivates an administration linking global, regional and

local levels. It is in this context that urbanism faces the challenge of developing knowledge and of planning the whole territory, including rustic spaces, both wild and agricultural.

Transforming and building landscapes has become an unavoidable socio-economic need in which we all participate to some extent. The greatest parks or simply a backyard or domestic garden are an expression of culture, taste and sensibility of each decision maker or builder.

Urban designers must learn how to operate with the concept of landscape. For more than a century, Europe experienced a memory gap on the History of Landscape Architecture. In fact, the revival of the very rich history of landscape architecture began only in the seventies through the publication of Norman Newton's book *Design on the Land*.⁷ Even today, there is a simplistic obscurantism in the urbanistic discourse about the so-called "green areas"⁸ applied to determine building density rates without regard for any aesthetic criteria applied to the respective urban landscape.

The city must create its public spaces through integrated urban expansion planning oriented essentially towards improving dwelling and living conditions in general. An urban park is not a basic necessity, unlike a house, school or hospital. It's a cultural value determined by the quality of its landscape. Is it worth having a park at any price, simply to comply with government land utilisation regulations, to fulfil the required "green" percentages?

The issue must follow a different type of reasoning where the functional component is part of the aesthetic value. A park may be justified only as a work of art, emotionally appropriated by the city's inhabitants in their day-to-day lives. A park can also be a failed landscaping act, and we must be aware of this risk when attempting to create a work that is successful only when it becomes part of the city's collective imaginary consciousness and acquires a powerful symbolic dimension.

⁷ NEWTON, N. T., 1971. *Design on the Land. The Development of Landscape Architecture*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London.

⁸ Jean-Pierre Le Dantec noted that "après tant d'années d'obscurantisme urbanistique où la seule attitude moderne, disait-on, consistait à parler d'«espaces verts»" (LE DANTEC, J.-P., 1996. *Jardins et Paysages. Textes Critiques de L'Antiquité à Nos Jours*. Larousse, Paris [pg. 11]).

We must determine the differences between the various types of public spaces comprising a contemporary city's urban setting. Public spaces are configured by the volume defined by surrounding buildings and contrast with the façades of these buildings, in which both are combined to form the urban setting. Public space is not empty space, the latter being understood as a vacant space without a perceptible use. Vacant space is a hiatus in the urban setting's continuity. Many green areas are empty, the result of urban design errors, merely areas filled in with "green."

Free spaces may be public or private and must always be configured, preferably according to clear urban language patterns with an open and dynamic lexicon. The most important of these patterns are the gardens, parks, alleys, avenues, squares and other outdoor spaces that have a purpose in the urban setting's composite structure.

Although there are various garden paradigms, a garden is intrinsically a meaningful space belonging to an edified whole. Where there is a garden, we instantly look for the building to which it belongs and that may be, for example, a house, a museum, a palace or neighbourhood. If we came upon a garden in the middle of a farm field or a wild area, with no link to a building, we would be perplexed since it would be void of purpose or meaning. A garden on its own would be, at the most, part of an unfinished task. The same cannot be said about a park, whose concept lends it more autonomy. Multiple-use forest parks may exist in the middle of a wild area, without any close relation with the city, houses or other urban elements. Although this autonomy is not part of the garden concept, there are various types of gardens:

- the **domestic garden**, which may include or be combined with a vegetable garden or orchard and, as a whole and in its more modest expression, forms the yard and the house's free space;
- the **representative garden**, which cultivates a monumental expression in an ostentation of power and social status. Representative gardens are somewhat perverse and frivolous. The sculptural garden is a type of representative garden and is possibly best represented at Villa Lante,⁹ also regarded as an example of the transition from the architect's garden to the sculptor's garden. This

⁹ This work is paradigmatic of the Italian Renaissance Mannerism, from 1573, whose project was attributed to Vignola (1507-1573).

interference by sculpture in the objectification of the designed space is a problem that should not, however, be mistaken for museum gardens that are especially designed to house and display sculptures;¹⁰

- the **botanical garden** and the **arboretum** are meant for educational purposes or simply for a botanical collection that may be arranged in an aesthetically pleasing layout. The Botanical Garden at Coimbra University is a notable example, built in 1772 by order of Marquês de Pombal, according to a design drafted in 1731 by Jacob de Castro Sarmiento;
- the **public urban garden**, generally larger than a square, since the 18th century has been a new element in the urban setting, with a functionality linked to leisure and socialising. There are other very interesting types, pragmatically created and designed within the context of rural culture, such as fairgrounds and churchyards, which generally contain trees and are for various uses.

The concept of informal garden, also called “landscape garden” emerged in the 17th century and has evolved into various styles and fashions with various names such as “natural” or “picturesque.” These informal gardens have given rise to somewhat confusing controversies. Informal gardens may be essentially designed to resemble large-scale gardens and applied to the overall landscape for a variety of purposes. In this manner, the traditionally enclosed garden space is transformed into an architectonic composition of landscape.

Various 17th century French authors made a philosophical analysis comparing the conceptual difference between a garden and landscape. They compared rural and wild areas, where sections of raw nature co-exist with artificially arranged areas adapted to farming, forestry and grazing activities. This landscape melange – partly artificial and a product of a pragmatic design specific to popular architecture – contrasts with the new desire to create landscapes based on a scholarly architectonic concept represented in forms of orthodox design.

¹⁰ The Timberlane Garden was a notable example of a garden museum especially designed to exhibit sculpture. Unfortunately, by order of its owner’s testament, the garden was dismantled in the mid seventies.

The philosophical discourse's praise of nature conflicted with the excellent ideas and practice of Le Nôtre, in Vaux-Le-Vicomte, that "massacred nature, subjecting everything to the precept of architecture."¹¹ The recommendation that it is necessary to design and compose landscape with reference to nature leads to misunderstandings. These misapprehensions are dissipated if we consider it wise and pertinent to use knowledge of natural sciences (geomorphology, pedology, hydrology, botany), instead of nature, through a critical observation of geomorphic features and of the dynamics of ecosystems and by learning to technically use their patterns for planning the territory and for designing new landscapes.

Nature is an indiscernible concept since it embraces everything that exists and happens in the world. Therefore, by invoking nature as a reference for art or anything else, we are turning discourse into an ideological instrument in the realm of moralist preconceptions and repressive rules. We must neither speak of imitation nor stop imitating nature. That, in effect, is not logical. This issue raises a different question: how to preserve territorial values, create new landscapes to fulfil social needs and uses and how to do it with art?

It so happens that, most people see Mother Nature as a sacred value embodied with an emotional mysticism. Within this context, public opinion is likely to be manipulated by any discourse that opportunistically invokes the "defence of nature."

¹¹ GIRARDIN, R.-L., 1992. *De la Composition des Paysages*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon. The statement was made by Gerardin and has a pejorative and unfair connotation, possibly from envy. But in fact, Nôtre brilliantly did what Gerardin accused him of doing.