

From Landscape to Garden to Landscape: Traveling Through the Scales of Perception

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Since one of today's issues is to help society's regain "landscape literacy" in order to preserve a harmonious relationship between men and their environment, the question is whether and how the garden could be used as a means to heighten sensitivity and understanding of the larger landscape, and how working on the small scale of the garden can help people gain an understanding of the large scale of the landscape.

The paper discusses some of the theoretical underpinnings (landscape perception, landscape meaning) of the dialogue between landscape architectural scales.

INTRODUCTION

For most practitioners of landscape (whether landscape architects, architects, urban designers and planners, or geographers), the current working definition of landscape is that proposed by the European Landscape Convention (ELC, article 1/a), which runs thus in the two official languages:

«Paysage» désigne une partie de territoire telle que perçue par les populations, dont le caractère résulte de l'action de facteurs naturels et/ou humains et de leurs interrelations.

"Landscape" means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.

Whatever the slight difference between the two definitions, the underlying common ground is that an area (a part of the territory) becomes meaningful as landscape (for people, population) insofar as it is "perceived". What "perception" actually means is taken for granted and thus not detailed.

In what follows, I would like to raise some points that, I believe, should be dealt with (or at least acknowledged) in studies dealing with landscape and its perception.

PERCEPTION

"Perception" is in fact an extremely complex issue, which has always been one of the central questions of philosophy and the sciences. One dictionary among other - the New International Webster's Dictionary of the English Language (1995) - proposes the following definition:

To perceive: to become aware of through the senses, e.g. by hearing or seeing. // to become aware of by understanding, discern.

Perception: the act of perceiving, visual perception // the ability to perceive, esp. to understand // (philos.) the action of the mind

in referring sensations to the object that which caused them (cf. Sensation) // (psychol.) awareness through the senses of an external object.

Already here there appears the opposition of perception as (passive) awareness or (active, wilful) act. This leads to further questions, about the origin of “awareness”, or the will (free will?) involved in an “act”. One extreme interpretation of the former as the (chemical, neurological) reaction of a subject to external stimuli, promoted by environmental psychology, is very frequent in landscape research. Recent philosophical debate, however, is more interested in understanding the type of “act” involved, and the relationship between “act” and “awareness”.

The second opposition is that between the senses and understanding. This opposition has a long standing history in European thought, and appears, often with caricatural oversimplification, in discussions on “space” vs. “place”. Yet the simple juxtaposition of the two meanings of perception, one referring to the senses, the other to understanding, hints at the complexity of the matter, and questions the very distinction between these two realms of human experiences. Phenomenologists have long proposed another paradigm, based on a fine description of experience; more recently, neuroscientists showed the complex spatio-temporal integration of inputs in the brain, where the perceiver’s intention also play a role.

In the surge of interest in “landscape perception”, especially since the formulation of the European Landscape Convention, one can frequently read about the opposition of sight and the other senses. On the one hand, experimenters in laboratory setting who study reactions to photographs showing landscapes argue that vision is the main carrier of information about the environment and can be studied alone. On the other hand, those interested in defining spatial quality dismiss vision as creating the illusion of objective space. Both approaches are based on the classical and now questioned belief in the separate realms of our sensory experiences. Indeed, if sight is our biologically dominant sense, it is not separable from the totality of our many bodily senses. The expression “haptic vision” - the vision of touch - , popularised by Deleuze, is heir to a secondary, albeit long, tradition (Parret, 2009). We ‘see’ the world not only through our eyes, but synesthetically through all our senses synthesized in our motility. The world appears to us through our bodily sense of “I can / I cannot” (an expression by Husserl (1999), later used by Merleau-Ponty (Husserl, 1999; Merleau-Ponty, 1981)). Contemporary approaches, whether in philosophy, psychology and neurosciences, insist on the polysensory unity of perception as a cognitive act, inseparable from the perceiving being’s sense of self as a coherent living unity. Perception is our active involvement in the world, combining all the senses in order to grasp the world as coherent and meaningful. It is thus an act of interpretation, a meaning-giving activity, involving the perceived environment and our abilities to perceive, and fundamentally shaped by our motility (Berthoz, 2000; Fontanille, 2011; Moles and Rohmer, 1982; Szanto, 2009).

MEANING

The importance of perception, and the insistence on the role of landscape in shaping “European identity” (Preamble and

paragraph 5) presupposes, on the part of the European Landscape Convention, the existence of some form of “meaning” imbedded in the landscape itself.

Landscape scholarship on ‘meaning’ is still in large part indebted to Norbert-Schultz and his reading of Heidegger (Norbert-Schultz, 1980). Scholars were interested in Jungian landscape archetypes and cosmological meaning, studying the larger landscape (‘genius loci’, ‘topophilia’) and the garden (microcosm referring to the macrocosm). Through the approach of cultural geographers, both landscapes and gardens were also read as revealing or representing what Turri called “the drama of the relationship between culture and nature” (Turri, 1998).

The “meaning” of landscape can also be interpreted as something accessible only through the mediation of art, through pictorial or literary representation ((Berque, 1995), that is, through the process named by Roger “artialisation” (Roger, 1997). The “meaning” of a landscape becomes that of the outsider and the onlooker, shaped by the known and recognized vision of an artist – like the most famous example of the Sainte Victoire Mountain of Cézanne, or the Mount Fuji of Hokusai ; the “maker” of the landscape being denied any sense of its meaning (Roger cites Petrarch’s description of the Mont Ventoux, letters by Cézanne and others texts that depict peasants who have no word for and no inclination to look at the beauty of the surrounding landscape). The apparently very literary and theoretical posture is reflected in actual debates on the landscape and conflicts among stakeholders who use and imagine their landscape differently (Michelin, 2005). The examples described by Michelin (here and in other articles) are interesting insofar as they turn the issue around: the different interpretations (meanings) of the landscape are used as a lever to resolve conflicts between uses.

There seems to be a consensus among actors of the landscape that meaning there is, even if it is not clear (or not clear to all – which is of course something completely different). By professional training, landscape architects (as landscape professionals), are believed to have a specific competency that gives them the ability to ‘read’ the meaning of a place; thus their role could (and should?) be to reveal it through form and process.

But no form has a univocal meaning. Eco’s argument about art - a piece of art is art (can be experienced as art) insofar as it is open – “opera aperta” -, that is, it offers the possibility of several meanings, reached through different interpretations only delimited by its own form – is generally true of all physical form (Eco, 1976).

Rather than search for meaning, it might be interesting to search for ways in which meaning ‘happens’. We can here follow the lead of semioticians, who have analysed in fine detail the process of the appearance of meaning (semiosis). Semiotics explored visual meaning (a research developed by Groupe μ in Liège, 1992); sensory-motricity (Fontanille, 2011); the dynamical meaning of forms (Petitot, 2004); and the role of journey in the unfolding of spatial meaning (Szanto, 2014). Some of this work reaches back to the research on perception as a pre-predicative meaning-giving activity mentioned above.

SEEING SENSING JOURNEYING TRANSFORMING

This understanding of the complexity of perception underlines the importance, in the perception of a landscape, of complementary modes of spatial appropriation: seeing (as if from a distance), sensing (haptically), journeying (towards and across; as a pedestrian or motorised) and transforming.

All these modes of perception have been dealt with before in scholarly landscape literature, but not all together: as mentioned before, there were discussions opposing “optical” and “haptic” space, immobility and motion, landscape appreciation and landscape making. Indeed there might be a difference in applicability (especially between the last pair in relation to the previous ones), but they all interfere, in one way or another, in anyone’s perception of one’s (surrounding) landscape at a given moment in time. Each allows the emergence of meaning in the landscape according to a different modality. The articulation between these different modalities will be here only hinted at.

Seeing Sensing

‘Seeing’ has long been associated to landscape seen purely from a distance, as a panoramic view, and its importance is often being rejected by scholars in order to promote ‘perceiving’ landscape with the other senses. However, it allows the understanding of certain types of spatial information, in particular mereological relationships (between the whole and the parts) at different scales simultaneously. The sense of wholeness of what is seen (the “part of the territory”, an expression that appears in most definitions of landscape) comes from the a-temporality in which the spatial juxtaposition of the elements composing the view are seen. However, seeing is of course not a standalone sense, it is part of the polysensory and synesthetic perception of space. The “thick temporality” of spatial experience comes from ‘retention’ and ‘protension’ (Husserl), memory and expectation implied in all acts of perception, and involving all the senses, ‘seeing’ and ‘sensing’, and in particular the sense of movement which directly connects the spatial and the temporal realm.

Journeying

The temporalisation of spatial experience occurs through the experience of a journey across a space or toward a spatial goal. By adding a temporal and spatial depth to the experience of landscape, it contributes to the sense of landscape as ‘spatial meaning’ given to an “area” / “part of a territory”.

The experience recalled by the European team of the Benetton Foundation of their visit to an utterly foreign landscape in rural Africa (Tenaka Beri in Benin) is telling (Luciani, 2011). To try to understand the landscape, looking (and cartographing) was not enough; the visitors had to reach back to the most basic (fundamental) approach: walking, listening, drawing (jotting down), walking some more. They needed the humility of measuring space and time by means of steps, where physical fatigue – witness of life – became part of the measuring process and the foundation for building confidence. Indeed, steps, connecting men to men, are the mediator between the near and the distant – metaphorically speaking, between the scale of the garden and that of the landscape. The step can be thought of as the first gesture towards creating a garden and toward making the landscape one’s own (s’appropriier le paysage). Expressing human beings’ physical limitations but also their irresistible desire for discovery, it teaches humility and patience.

Transforming

Humility and patience is also the attitude towards the landscape advocated by Roland Guštavsson (Guštavsson 2009, 2010; Nielsen, 2011). The form of landscape architecture he promotes involves slow and attentive observation repeated over time, noting the fine details and the temporal evolution. As a craftsman building through lifelong practice an encyclopaedia of adaptable, appropriate gestures, landscape architects must build an encyclopaedia of ‘reference landscapes’ through physical discovery, observation mediated by drawing and creative making (bodily involvement). Transforming a space can be simple as braking a twig or planting a seed; or it can involve a long term concerted design and maintenance activities (what Guštavsson calls ‘creative management’). An action that transforms space in view of a future goal or project allows a living connection between the perceived temporality of one’s life and the objective temporality of one’s environment. It implies the double attitude of “distance and engagement” (Foxley, 2010). By offering a way of crossing temporal scales, it also brings the possibility of crossing spatial scales, and adds a living depth to the experience – and the meaning – of the landscape.

FROM LANDSCAPE TO GARDEN TO LANDSCAPE

Similar approaches are being explored throughout Europe by both professionals and teachers (Occhiuto, 2008; Foxley, 2010; Vogt, 2012; Dee, 2012; Jacobsohn, 2014). The garden – where direct involvement and human-scale experimentation is possible – offers an “aesthetically intimate” scale; it “expresses the measure and meaning of the landscape in which one is living”. By making the scale of the landscape ‘palpable’, ‘graspable’, it allows a “maturation of its perception”, so that it can be “recognized as part of our existence.” (Latini, 2010: 49).

The role of landscape architects, then, is not to reveal some pre-existing meaning, but to shape possibilities for the emergence of meaning, using all the potentialities offered by the many modes of perception, from the scale of the garden to the scale of the landscape. This is the first step toward reconnecting “people” (“populations”) to the landscape they inhabit, regaining what Spirn called “landscape literacy” (Spirn, 1998), and creating the possibility for “that quality which we call landscape” (Zagari, 2006:23).

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