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On Landscape and Open Spaces

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1. Introduction

Lately the notion of 'open space' is often used in conjunction with the notion of 'landscape'. This may be related to the new ecological awareness and the restructuring of our post-industrial societies. Here, 'landscape' includes both natural and artificial (built) environments as well as their formal relationships. The whole issue emerges at a moment when there is a need to deal systematically with the 'design of open spaces'. The need comes from the re-urbanisation of the cities in the last decade. Therefore, it seems necessary to focus on the genealogy of this open space design, to trace, in other words, the legacies which define this specific tradition.

2. The Legacy of the Modern Movement and the CIAMs

In a seminal text entitled 'In Search of the Modern Landscape', Kenneth Frampton claims that "the avant-garde architects of the early modern movement would not so much cultivate nature as they would cradle their buildings within it"(Frampton, 1992, 42), as seen in the emblematic image of Le Corbusier's, *'Ville Contemporaine'*. Frampton accepts Colin Rowe's hypothesis that the projected modern city may be seen as a transitional piece, a proposal which eventually may lead to the re-establishment of an unadulterated natural setting. Yet, in the late '20s, "a sensitively inflected approach toward the placement of the building in its site: one that synthesises the sometimes conflicting demands of access, orientation, landfall, water table, prevailing wind, ecological imperatives, and so on, without having immediate resource to picturesque aesthetic effects" (Frampton, 1992, 42) is evident in the projects of the Soviet avant-garde, the functionalists of the Weimar Republic and the Swedish Welfare State.

Although any reference to public or open spaces is simply missing, the positions of the Soviet avant-garde merit a profound re-evaluation since the restructuring of life styles is expressed in their theoretical views and projects. However, the stress here should be the polemic of the avant-garde towards the 'garden-city' model, considered as a liberal aesthetic (utopian) ideal, in as much as any form of 'de-urbanisation' was evidently incompatible with the capitalistic order. On this basis, emphasis was put by urbanists on technological modernisation of the public services. On the other hand, the 'de-urbanists' claimed that the most important duty was to confront and eliminate the huge split between the existing city and the countryside.

From this perspective, we should try to re-examine the legacy of the Modern Movement, which has, rightly but also reductively, been dismissed as simply functionalistic. Following the suggestion of Bernardo Secchi, the time has come for a possible re-interpretation of this legacy, especially the effort to understand "the way the space 'between the things' was designed, filled with functions, roles and meanings" (Secchi, 1993, 5).

If we do so, then we will find that CIAM congresses evolve from a biological conception of the landscape and the public or open space to a more phenomenological one, as expressed in the theses of the famous *Athens Charter* (Le Corbusier, 1943), the outcome of CIAM IV (1933), and the results of the following CIAM V (1937) based on the relationship between *Logis et Loisirs (1938).* This is expressed in the post-war CIAMs. It is clearly marked from CIAM VI (1946) onwards and epitomised in CIAM 8 (1951), which had a symbolic title: *The Heart of the City*, and a very meaningful subtitle: *Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life.* From this perspective, it is significant to undertake a comparative analysis of different notions such as landscape, recreation and open space. We will then perceive the displacement that occurs from "les prolongements de l'habitation" (1934) to the urgent creation of the "centrales de santé" and the "repos hebdomadaire" as a consequence of the loss of contact with nature in the big cities (1937). It is accompanied by the astonishing assumption that "the landscape of the Core is essentially a *civic landscape.* It is a place where the civic expression of the town finds its highest point. This civic landscape is a product of man as opposed to a natural landscape, and in some cases natural elements - even trees - would be out of place" (1951).

It was, however, following the horror of war desertification and the urge for a humane reconstruction (human scale, assertion of the right of the individual, community scale), that the post-war generation of CIAMs discovers the resistance of history. More appropriately it discovered the resistance of certain urban types such as the Greek *agora,* the Roman forum, the mediaeval market place, the arcaded street. To prove this 'change' one has to scrutinize carefully the CIAM discussions and highlight some passages in the summary: an emotional experience that can reawaken people's apparently lost powers of spontaneity is needed today to transform them from passive spectators to active participants. But for this to express itself, places must be created, open spaces under the heavens are undisturbed by any wheeled traffic as in olden times... "there was general agreement that the Core is an artifact, a man-made construction and should not be confused with a landscape garden in which the buildings are lost in space". (Giedion, 1952, 161)

It is important to remember three crucial arguments. First, community centres are not only the meeting places for the local people but also balconies from which they can watch the whole world. Second, the plans for the physical heart of the community, that is the community's Core, should be a clear expression of separation between pedestrians and automobiles, where landscaping plays a very important rôle. And third, such places of public gathering demand an integration of the arts. These arguments, expressed in 1951, are extremely topical today, although they have a different connotation.

It is in the CIAMs trajectory, and more precisely within the *problèmatique* developed by the so-called TEAM 10, that we do find a shift of interest from the four

primary functions considered inadequate for contemporary city life to the inter-relationships among the four functions. This paves the way for a different perception of the intermediate spaces (thresholds, clusters, etc.), with an impact also on open spaces. For this reason we have to be sceptical about certain interpretations and criticisms of the Modern Movement ideas on urbanism. We can argue, no doubt, that for the Modern Movement, 'space' is an isotropic concept never defined. Yet, it is an exaggeration to maintain (with André Corboz, 1993, 20) that the CIAM generation "implicitly believes that space is 'empty', or all that which is found between what is 'full'". Walter Gropius certainly had a different position. He states explicitly: "the most important factor in building a Core is the relation between the building masses and the enclosed open spaces"(1952, 53).

3. The Legacy of Art

In the latter half of the 60s restoration of landscape turned up in the work of artists, in particular, the minimalists. According to John Beardsley "they would find their antidote to the commodity status of art in environmental projects, now commonly known as earthworks, in which art and site were inextricably linked. Landscape was not simply the subject of this art, but also its locus and raw material"(1991, 110). The suggestion that art could derive aspects of its form, material and content from the topographical and cultural context in which it is made contributed to the emergence of a phenomenon known as sited or site-specific sculpture. "These artists, exploring different combinations, case by case - *landscape/non-landscape*, *architecture/non-architecture* - have invaded precisely the 'space', or the 'non-site' traditionally occupied by landscape architects. Their works, which render the comprehension of a site precarious, perform its traditional job: the expression/representation of a cultural rapport between man and the site, man and nature, the constructed and the non-constructed", suggests Alessandra Ponte, in reference to the expansion of the field and the erosion of the boundaries between arts. The question is that site-generated art, "sometimes looking like a cross between sculpture and architecture, sometimes a hybrid of sculpture and landscape architecture, plays an increasingly prominent role in the contemporary public space"(1993, 102).

This is a crucial point. This sensibility will be transferred from art to architecture and urbanism, much later, with the theories on 'dirty realism' and the 'new narrative' of the post-industrial city (in reviews like *Quaderns:* 1988/177, 1992/193), and it will be assumed as a guideline for contemporary architectural and urban projects, which will give strong emphasis to the urban voids and public or open spaces. We should probably notice here the coincidence between the earthwork movement and the publication of Vittorio Gregotti's book on the *Territorio dell' architettura* (1966), although a note should also be made of the significant role of the neo-rationalist tendencies which re-evaluated the foundations of architecture in relationship to the city's fabric.

4. The Legacy of the Urban Park and the Transposed Arcadia

Prompted by the suggestions of John B. Jackson, we know that the urban park is a newcomer to the landscape. As he writes, mediaeval towns had, of course, a number of public spaces, "but no open space in the town was ever set aside - let alone designed - for such a vague purpose as recreation" (1991, 129). In fact, to our knowledge, the dominant types of public space are the Greek temenos, the agora, the mediaeval piazza, etc.. However, it was in the last decades of the eighteenth century that, in city after city, the picturesque park emerges, open to the public and, together with it, the popular garden or resort. Here a spectacle of interaction between work and play, between private and public realms, between producer and consumer, between urban and rural ways of life took place. These are the two predecessors, the legacy to the 20th century, although it should be recognised that over the last two centuries it is the large public park that has gained a major role and has helped accomplish three objectives: "the park is a source of health and pleasure, it is a work of art, and it has had a powerful influence on the evolution of the city". In this process, the role of the landscape architect F.L. Olmsted is important, especially his theories about the wilderness of the urban park and its civilising duty. He is often criticised for his inherent individualistic and solitary overtones.

It is in this light that we should understand the re-emergence of the park in the late '70s, and the discussion about 'artificial nature', both prerequisites for the new approach towards 'open spaces'. The most emblematic and programmatic statement of this approach is the OMA project for the Parc de la Villette competition (L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui, 1985), an exceptionally large open space in Paris. The international competition organised to appoint the working group for the design of the Park de la Villette represented a unique opportunity to access the relationship between landscape and architecture at the time (early '80s), after a period of relative insistence on the typological constituents of urban architecture (street, square and block). The park of the twenty-first century had to be a cultural entity that broke the 'green deserts' tradition of the previous few decades. Indeed the OMA project proposed a definition of a new artificial landscape, probably a new model: the park as a public space in which other things besides nature, culture for example, are consumed. OMA understood La Villette as a typical European urban condition - a vacant lot separating the historical city from the plankton of the suburbs. Their project offered the first exploitation of metropolitan density without architecture: a culture of 'invisible congestion'. In the La Villette Project we indeed find the ideas of artificial nature and 'inverted Arcadia' as a metaphor for the subordination of nature to 'civilising' transformation long before its 'discovery' by art.

5. The Legacy of the Metropolitan 'Uncanny'

During the '80s a new sensibility arose with the belief that the gamble which our cities have taken as the end of the century approaches is being played out in the 'zones of disturbance', the 'intersticial spaces', the surrounding 'urban voids', and in the 'obsolete areas'. These are sites on which the efforts of municipalities and other competent agencies are mostly concentrated. Developers and construction companies are focusing on such sites: the gamble involves commitment to innovative and bold design programmes that stem from social needs for improving the urban landscape

and are based on the concepts of feasibility and effectiveness. This appears to be the main approach to cope with the crisis of the cities. This line of thought is founded on a re-assessment of the existing city, with a design strategy based on transformation and not on the constant expansion of the city. Accepting the views of financial experts, the existing city is developing new urban activities in the sectors of commerce, the service industry and the tourism and leisure sector. It is also developing certain types of housing in areas which have been classified as 'derelict' or 'abandoned' and whose manufacturing or other activities have been moved elsewhere or have fallen into disuse. At the same time extension of the city in the territory makes evident that it is no longer only an image of culture but a network of infrastructures.

These areas are usually located between the historic centre and the modern periphery, and they are suitable now for significant development intervention, (usually) in the form of mixed function programmes. Such intervention requires new ways of approaching the city, new design strategies and, obviously enough, new town planning management instruments - features which all have in common a diagnosis of the crisis in 'urban design'. However, if we assume that the strategies of the previous decade have reached a point of no return, with the sole exception of Vittorio Gregotti's views concerning "the critical modification of the topography and the site", what are these new strategies for intervention in the city ? One could say that these strategies are being formulated by the generation of architects, aged 40 to 50 today, who have shifted their activities from teaching to the field of professional practice. The moves here are more spasmodic as the 'terrae incognitae' of the contemporary urban and non-urban landscape are traced out. A new need for the definition of public or open spaces is the result of these processes.

Examining 'post-urbanism', Anthony Vidler describes a culture "where suburb, strip, and urban center have merged indistingushably into a series of states of mind" (1992, 167). The human body moves "surprised but not shocked (this will be the difference from the modern metropolis) by the continuous repetition of the same, the continuous movement across already vanished thresholds that leave only traces of their former status as places". Yet, this is exactly the critical turning-point. One cannot deny, however much of a critical distance one may wish to maintain, that the concept of urban periphery and the design of urban structures are subject to acceleration and displacement. For many critics and theorists, peripheral sites are mainly perceived through rapid means of transport, while in connection with the centre, the configurations of the intersection and junction emerge as important. It is in precisely these places that a cinematographic effect appears in design. It is governed by the relationships of observation and perception between reality and the observer. Some, like Richard Ingersoll, would describe this as 'jumpcut urbanism' (1993, 52). Related to this, following Virilio and the gimmickry of virtual reality, is the phenomenon of the 'pycnolepsy' which is typical of our rapid displacements through the urban landscape. These are displacements where the observed reality leaves no trace in memory, thus causing a loss of perceptible points of reference and the disappearance of visual signs, despite the futile claims made by the advocates of 'postmodernism'. This seems to be a *sine qua non* condition of the contemporary environment, yet one that fully deserves fresh attention.

For many it is the empty space, "the place where the city is seen and used", that gives form to the city. Through the undisputable influence of cinema, contem-

porary architects claim that "an open space in the city today need not necessarily be a green park". Indeed, it is in the projects and the positions of architects such as E. Bru, responsible for the Vall d'Hebron Park in Barcelona, that a different approach to 'open space' is outlined, perhaps a model different from the square and the park. There can be no doubt that many contemporary projects seem to be liberated from conservative perseverance. They advance in a more conceptual and expressive direction. Architects like Rem Koolhaas, Jean Nouvel, Hans Kollhoff, Josep Lluis Mateo, Herzog de Meuron, and others, seem to be working within the field of what Ignasi de Sola Morales proposes as the "logic of the limit", which is a new foundation of architecture based on the data of experience. Young architects appear to be in search more of the possible ways in which design gestures could manifest themselves in the amorphous structure of the modern city than of some metaphysical truth in the crystallised historical centres of those cities.

This is where the problem lies. The earlier generation of architects, politicians and managers is extremely reserved - not to say critical - towards these moves, which are often accompanied by impulsive spontaneity. In many respects they seem to be right, since the traditional concept of 'urban design' seemed to be motivated by aesthetic or pragmatic considerations and to lack a structural view of problems. Vidler is correct in arguing that "now a sceptical fin-de-siècle has invented the category of 'dirty realism' to domesticate what cannot be idealized: the margins, the wastelands, and the zones of ruined technotopias are celebrated in film, science fiction and now in deconstructivist architecture that emulates the rusting detritus it sees as its context"(1992, 167). For some, it seems obvious, architecture has assumed the task of filling these 'voids', these 'empty spaces'. Nevertheless, this is not a task shared by others. "I don't believe anyone will ever be able to make any city council understand that from an urbanistic point of view, the most attractive parts of the city are precisely those areas where nobody has ever done anything. I believe a city, by definition, wants to have something done in those areas. That is the tragedy." In this apocalyptic statement Wim Wenders (1988, 44) conveys the profound quality of the 'open or public spaces' in our contemporary world: a desert panorama or spot, a landscape from which we must be able to perceive the horizon of urban life.

The urge to do something, to fill these voids with architecture, and the need to do nothing - ultimately, this is the paradox of our metropolitan 'uncanny' condition, a paradox displaced in the specificity of the project, in the ideas which are implemented in it, each time.

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