Written at the place. The intangible values of the landscape

Escrito en el lugar. Los valores intangibles del paisaje

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Abstract / Resumen

Beyond the boundaries of a physical space, places, as a means where it is registered the way in which man relates to the world, contain multiple spatiotemporal realities. Its reading requires, therefore, a look that can decipher the universe of ecological, historical, perceptual, and cultural relationships that characterize them. However, at the present time, technique and reason seem to have tipped the balance on the tangible values against the intangible ones, banishing to oblivion its cultural, perceptual, emotional and phenomenological components. This article takes a brief look at a range of experiences that, from different disciplines involved with space, allow us to approach a collective and timeless readability of the place. These looks fruit of memory, the experience and creativity, show a very clear direction to serve the project from its identity. In this context, to visualize the information and bring out elements and relations forgotten or unknown, is in itself a creative act that builds again the landscape we inhabit revealing its potential. Thus, the task of uncovering the traces of the place blurs the boundaries of duality between the tangible and the intangible to serve the project at all levels.

Keywords / Palabras clave

Mapping, identity, intangibles, landscape, perception.

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[Fig. 1] Outside-inside, on the ground under the sky. Hildebrant: Göllesdorf, Chapel. Source: Christian Norberg-Schulz, Genius Loci. Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture. USA, Rizzoli International Publications, INC, 1980, p. 9.

“The work is not placed in a place; it is that place.”

Robert Smithson!

Site traces

It’s the chosen subject matter for the first issue of the magazine Zarch and it actually seems to claim a new agenda for the project at all levels, especially in the current period of economic, political, cultural, urban and why not say, also architectural crisis. These crises evoke the set of elements and relationships that uniquely arranged in a territory make it different from others. In this context, the concept of place is analogous to the landscape one and actually wider than the one of territory, since the timeless print of the bond between man and nature is inscribed in it. The Norwegian architect and historian Christian Norberg-Schulz in the pursuit of genius loci or the spirit of the place indicated that when man identifies himself with his environment, when he experiences it, he turns it into a place with its own identity. Therefore, studies based on the recognition of its physical qualities, including historical, aren’t enough to understand places because these ones are open to other dimensions. At the same time, any single action on the territory (physical or cultural) builds landscape, an issue that explains quite clearly the words of the artist Land Art Robert Smithson that head this article: “The work is not placed in a place; it is that place.” We can then say that architecture is also landscape [Fig. 1].

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It is precisely this holistic conception of the landscape that inspires its definition in the European Convention (Florence, 2000), which designates it as “any part of the territory, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the actions of natural factors and/or human ones and their interrelationships (Art. 1).” Because as noted by the geographer Joan Nogué the landscape is, “at the same time a physical reality and the representation that we make culturally of it; the external and visible appearance of a certain portion of the land and the individual and social perception that generates; a geographical tangible and its intangible interpretation (...) but they are also historical legacies, continuities, continuances, the overlapping strata of the remains of ancient landscapes.” From this point of view, all the places have this identity mark registered: the site traces, as personal and collective memory, as intangible heritage, even though it may be sometimes invisible to our eyes. According to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, this is the root of our cultural diversity and a guarantee of creativity. It is defined and not precisely in vain in its second article as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and techniques—along with the instruments, objects, ar-
In his novel “The Songlines”12 Bruce Chatwin reveals the place experience of the Australian Bushmen rescuing the legend in which his ancestors used to roam the island singing and giving name to its places and inhabitants. That song was transformed into name and it was the name that illuminated life, as a metaphor of the knowledge of the site and the gaze, setting itself a dialogue with the place. As reveals Corner10 cartography is a creative act that builds the space in which we live and reveals the potential of the places, enabling new readings that induce coherent transformations [Figs. 2-3].

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In this publication Menéndez de Luarca goes with his drawings and maps all through each significant episode of the Peninsular Northwest conformation. With them we can understand much better what the causes of the configuration of the landscapes were, or the relationship of villages and cities with their own position and name. All this happens in an evolutionary manner, like successive layers of occupation and land use throughout history, as the basis of an organizational model that also anticipates the keys of its future planning and management. The same author years later insisted on the idea that “(...) Since the territory is the common and inescapable space of past human interventions, and also present and future, it is inevitable the recovery of a common and open language across the disciplines related to the space, which allows reading the peculiarities of each place.”

The emotional and social

It is possible to establish a link between the relationship with the place and some proposals that, from other disciplines related to space, build landscape with their actions. So the fact of wandering is a kind of psychogeographical way of reading the territory comparable to that of the Australian Aborigines. Although many of these experiences are of an ephemeral nature just some of them have been recorded using maps, photographs or collages that embody that very tracing, thereby transforming this ephemeral experience into another layer of the history of the place. It is also very interesting to observe the fact that in all of them the relationship with the place triggers the activation of the project.

Among this sort of experiences we should highlight those carried out by the Situationist International for its commitment to the way of living and designing the city as their actions showed the gap between the city and its inhabitants. For this they resorted to a basic method of research and appropriation of urban space, which consisted of a drift. This method had already been tested by the surrealists a few decades earlier in the interstitial space between the countryside and the city.

What is interesting is to the object at hand of this proposal is seeking recognition of the urban landscape in elements or sensory and emotional relationships that are actually achieved by abandoning ourselves to the conditions of space and time. This way some stimuli and invisible references will be triggered when just the act of walking plays a routine route, enabling the transformation of the ordinary and, with it, the emergence of new landscapes and situations. From this perspective it was claimed both for architecture and urban space a more coherent articulation with time and space that could allow the organization of areas in which the desires of individuals were accommodated. Testimony of these proposals are the set of maps that record the emotional influence of the city over its inhabitants and where some fragments of city are reflected with a certain coherence, united by their emotional nature result of drift.

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19. Gaston had also used drift, not so much as a tool to make the emotional rise but as an action of hazardous and ephemeral nature.
The environment and the processes

Almost five decades ago a group of artists, mainly English and American, brought their achievements to the bosom of the landscape, coining a movement called Land Art, earth art or art in the earth. In the context of the above described explorations it is fairly interesting to rescue from these statements what they actually proposed; the construction of an alternative discourse and integration at the same time of the ephemeral and documentary as essential components of the pieces. They shared with the Situationist movement the claim of a different relationship between man and his environment and, like them, they recognized that the experience of wandering is constantly altered according to perceptual and emotional stimuli. For these artists the project isn’t planned as a drift or exploration, but it involves a conscious act of creating in dialogue with the environment. But if the situationists framed their actions in an everyday context, usually urban, the land artists looked for more natural environments for their creations, although not necessarily idyllic. In fact, in many instances, they got involved in abandoned or desolate landscapes, in places where the historical density is more noticeable. In any case, the place is an inseparable part of the work, is constituent of the project itself and therefore is painstakingly prepared: with visits, analyzing and making maps and photographs or helped by any other tool able to get its essence, what I call here its trace.

In some of the actions performed by these artists, as in the case of the English artist Richard Long, the repetitive motion when walking leaves a permanent mark in the landscape, an extra layer that however gets to emphasize its tangible or intangible form, representative ones. Long used to love long walks, crossing roads, touching the walls, getting very close, melt. In some occasions he said that he could feel the presence of people from ancient times, that his steps agitated and made emerge24, thus the landscape is the project and the project is, above all, the whole experience of the place [Fig. 7].

This timeless and with long lasting processes relationship is both a revelation and a constant in the work of these artists. Robert Smithson for example wrote an article titled “Strata25” (Estratos) stretching from the Precambrian to the Cretaceous time. Even, during the preparatory work for one of his most acclaimed works, Spiral Jetty (Muelle en espiral), Smithson26 commented on the need for a map to represent simultaneously the prehistoric world coinciding with the present. Thus “Spiral Jetty” is primarily a work that reveals and amplifies place processes, as it’s been recorded in the set of documents (films, maps, texts and photographs) made by Smithson during its conception and development. It is interesting to remark about this movement the dialogue between space and time with the place, the work with processes and arguments as tools enabling an alternative discourse of both current and future history [Fig. 8].

Nowadays drift remains an instrument of collective expression, recognition, ownership and demand of space, from urban to territorial, in different geographies. Many of these psychogeographical projects feed technology (video, GPS, photography, internet) to get a greater range in their proposals. Perhaps one with the biggest impact is Yellow Arrow 200420, spread over 35 countries and 380 cities in the world as an alternative way to go through cities and share their stories through the web using a geospatial and participatory cartography. Other examples of the use of technology are emotional maps, the so-called biomapping by Christian Nold21, or social network maps by Brian Holmes22 or Robert Horn23, among others. These projects seek new relationships between man and his environment and use cartography as a collective instrument that mainly allows showing and sharing their experiences.

The contemporary practice

The growing interest that the landscape has in contemporary culture is more than obvious existing a demand and an international attraction for quality landscapes. This attraction has to do partly with an increasingly formed social and ecological awareness and also the intense changes that especially, product of growth, infrastructures and tourism, are transforming our environments very fast, intensely and often indiscriminately. The effects of these disturbances have mobilized society, but also renewed the practice of a great deal of disciplines, including architecture and urbanism. This renewal has been accompanied by a conception of landscape as an instrument of knowledge but also as a project in itself. The architect Charles Waldheim27 emphasizes the idea of landscape, already noted by James Corner and Stan Allen among others, as the only space capable to respond to temporal changes and its transformations placing, therefore, the landscape in the centre of the practice of contemporary architecture and urbanism.

This set of circumstances has changed our work as architects and planners expanding the disciplinary boundaries in order to achieve an integrated view among technical, natural and cultural processes. Since the mid 60s of last century, protected and backed up by a global ecological awareness, many architects and urban planners have approached to disciplines such as geography, biology or ecology. As a matter of fact landscape architecture, urban planning and landscape planning are increasingly more common in schools of architecture. Many of these approaches contain solid fundamentals from the world of ecology, architecture and urban design. However and as pointed out earlier in this article, the approaches that integrate its humanistic and phenomenological dimension are just a few. Hence the will of this article to keep alive the interest in those experiences that share the exercise to specialize and name in different formats the emotional and cultural strata of the place. All of them, even though they use different tools and techniques, are involved in the conviction of the need to bring out elements and relations forgotten under the thick blanket of the production of contemporary landscape. This holistic knowledge and the new conception of the landscape will entail disciplinary infiltrations that will provide quality to plans and projects at all scales.

So for instance in our days there are many countries and regions in which landscape planning instruments accompany the planning ones. Such is the case in our country of the landscape catalogs of Catalonia28 whose methodology, based on the principles of the European Landscape Convention, incorporates values such as aesthetic, social, religious and spiritual or symbolic and of identity29. Of all of them
30 La Charte de Architecturale y Paysagere presents a vision that integrates the architectural and landscape values, incorporating the formal and aesthetic values.

31 Landscape Character Assessment. In the definition of a Landscape Character Area come into play aesthetic and perceptive values.


33 EUROPARC-Spain is an organization created in 1993 in which are involved the institutions in the planning and management of protected areas in Spain. It is included in the Federation EUROPARC, pan-European organization that brings together today 39 countries.

34 This Manual is No. 10 produced by EUROPARC-Spain where one can find all the essays that I wrote in the summer of 2010 in relation to the spiritual values of the pilgrimages of Costa da Morte, Galicia (2010) and its relationship with the elements of the landscape. Source: own.

In the same line in United Kingdom, the works of the Tranquility Maps developed since the early 90's are one of the few examples with a proven methodology in which emotional concepts such as landscape tranquility have been put into practice in plans related to the quality of rural environment or construction of infrastructures. The main aim of all these projects is to define the tranquility applied to the landscape through participatory processes concept and obtain a graphical representation of the same. This uses a methodology that transforms the underlying landscape values of the participatory processes, in physical elements of the territory, weighed and treated through a GIS (geographical information system). Simon Rendell,32, was the first to put forward in 1991 a cartography that reflects the tranquility of a landscape in a series of studies undertaken for the department of the British Government intended to assess the effects of a new road infrastructure, the Hertfordshire corridor - Bedfordshire, north of London. The purpose of these studies was to seek the minimum alteration of infrastructure in rural settlements nearby. After several studies in other areas of the country, in 1995 this methodology could be applied in all England in relation to major infrastructures. At present, similar methodologies are used throughout the world as a motivational tool when analyzing the suitability of the site of infrastructures or tourist resorts, among others [Fig. 10].

In the same context and within the work Program for the protected areas 2009-2013 of EUROPARC-Spain33 a manual34 has been made in order to integrate the cultural and spiritual values in the management of protected areas, following therefore the example of countries like Australia, Canada, India, Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador or Mexico. This paper represents a critique of the management carried out in recent years in most Spanish protected natural areas forgetting that it is precisely theses values that generate a sense of ownership of the local people with the natural environment. Occasionally, some of the management strategies implemented have hindered the maintenance of trades, rituals and traditions associated with their identity [Figs. 11a-11b-11c].

The question then is to what extent the contemporary practice of architecture and urbanism has stopped worrying about man’s relationship with the world. Can’t we consider many of the social movements of the appropriation of collective space generated today to claim mere emotional and plural? In this regard it is interesting the study elaborated by Project for Public Spaces35 (Proyecto de espacio público) that after evaluating thousands of public studies around the world has established a method with which to assess the success of these spaces meeting their accessibility conditions, use, image and sociability. This method has been summarized in a diagram that can be used as a tool for reflection and analysis of these spaces. In this diagram you can see the importance of the intangible values, the ludic and the performative, in the social acceptance of these spaces extending and completing the quantitative values. This confirms that space experience is inseparable from the events and situations developed in it and that the emotional, therefore, is part of the project of the place [Fig. 12].

As one can guess from this brief summary they are many and diverse the areas in which the recovery of the intangible traces of the place represent a tool for the project at all levels and of course also in the production of the architectural work. So, explicitly the Finnish architect Juhan Pallasmaa in his book, “the eyes of the skin”36 proposes a comprehensive architecture that embraces the man to the full of his being, both corporeal and spiritual. Pallasmaa and the architect Steven Holl who prefaces the book, claim to recover the sensory and phenomenological understanding of architecture, as opposed to the current visual primacy.” Instead of creating
mere objects of visual seduction, architecture relates, mediates and projects meanings. This attitude is also visible in the proposals of other architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvar Aalto, Glenn Murcutt or Peter Zumthor. Not surprisingly for the latter the atmosphere, which speaks of emotional sensitivity is also an aesthetic category that we approach from the experience of the place.

In short, the communion between space, time, perception and memory transform the intervention in the landscape, either as a project or plan, in a committed and integral action. As architects we should be trained in the art of knowledge of their natural and cultural traces, tangible or intangible. All this as a social tool, essential for the latter agenda.

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