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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“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 actual- ly 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 traces evoke the set of elements and relationships that uniquely arrang- 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 histori- cal, 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].

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 me- mory, as intangible heritage, even though it may be sometimes invisible to our eyes. According to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Herita- ge, 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 our days, after a first phase aimed to the protection and separate treatment of the natural and cultural aspects, a second one dedicated to the understanding of the landscape, also to the intangible, to order its transformations and build individual scenarios, but also appropriated collective spaces.

In short, revealing the traces of the place requires the complementarity of maps, texts and images capable of expressing their complex hybrid and timeless relationships. This sets us apart from quantitative evaluation processes and approaches us necessarily to a qualitative characterization. Nevertheless, it isn’t unusual to find nowadays approach methodologies to the study of the landscape, whether it is urban, natural or rural, in which intangible values are not taken into consideration as they are linked to the world of perception, memory and hermeneutics. However, places are not something odd to the observer, but it is he himself who gives them significance, sense and value with his gaze. His interpretation implies a creative act (consciously or unconsciously) in which some believe to see a halo of subjectivity that discredits them. This matter has its importance in the practice of contemporary architecture and urbanism, as obviously, what is not recognized is just invisible.

This toponymy includes from elements of the physical environment to the evocative aspects about the spatial configuration of the Tenerife coastline.


11 This image is part of the chapter of the publication dedicated to “measures of faith” and expresses the intangible values of the American archaeological site in Cahokia located near Collinsville, on the plain of the Mississippi river, near the city of San Luis, by the relationship between geometry and order entered in the place and the sacred cemeteries of the deceased ceremonies to achieve immortality.


authors such as Rafael Mata15 described landscape character: “landscapes in which the popular naming expresses the uniqueness and interest of a place for the people”. At the same time the evolution of the landscape is reflected in the variation of the toponymy due to the fact that when uses, environment and lifestyles vary, toponyms do the same thing. These changes in toponymy (loss, density, renewal) become then indicators of the landscape, its transformations and processes, its vitality [Figs. 4a-4b-4c].

From all the Works I know in this regard there is no doubt that the most overwhelming by ambition, methodology and its implications for the spatial and urban planning, is the one directed by José Ramón Menéndez de Luarca that became, among others, in an extraordinary publication entitled “The building of the Territory. Northwest Historical Map of the Iberian Peninsula.”16 In the introductory essay of 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.”17

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 Surrealists such as the famous walkscapes. Walking as an aesthetic practice [Fig. 6] as an aesthetic practice


19 Gaudí had also used drift, not so much as a tool to make the emotional rise but as an action of hazardous and ephemeral nature.
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 2004, 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 Nold, or social network maps by Brian Holmes or Robert Horn, among others. These projects seek new relationships between man and the environment and use cartography as a collective instrument that mainly allows showing and sharing their experiences.

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 walking 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 thesituationists 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 deserted 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 or 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 of the place [Fig. 7].

This timeless and 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 “Strata” ( Artículo 10) 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), Smithson 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].

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 Waldheim emphasizes the idea of landscape, already noted by James Corner and Stan Allan 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, both 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 narrate 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 Catalunya whose methodology, based on the principles of the European Landscape Convention, incorporates values such as aesthetic, social, religious and spiritual or symbolic and of identity. Of all of them...
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 Spaces (PPS) [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 Juhani 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 aesthetic ones have definitely developed a more evocative cartography, surpassing even the practice of French landscape letters30 or landscape characterization of United Kingdom31. What is more interesting is that its elaboration allows identifying a set of objectives of landscape quality to be integrated into the plans and projects in these areas [Fig. 9].

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 values of the participatory processes, in physical elements of the territory, weighed and treated through a GIS (geographical information system). Simon Rendell32, 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 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 these values that generate a sense of ownership of the local people with
mote objects of visual seduction, architecture relates, mediates and projects mean-
ings.\textsuperscript{37} This attitude is also visible in the proposals of other architects such as
Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvar Aalto, Glenn Murcutt o Peter Zumthor. Not surprisingly
for the latter the atmosphere\textsuperscript{38}, 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
and creative that allows us to define a new agenda for the project at all levels, be-
cause this is not only the matter that composes it but is also made of the resonance
of the place [Fig. 13].

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