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The poetry of the urban landscape



Émeline Bailly

The ideal of “nature in the city” is a key characteristic of many urban projects. Émeline Bailly shows that the creation of landscaped spaces in urban areas can transform not just the city’s image but also people’s relationship with their environment, and in particular their mental perception of places.

Landscaping: a new form of urban creation?

The current enthusiasm for “landscapes” is evident in urban projects under way in both France and the United States (Bailly 2000). Landscape designers have become the project managers of major urban development operations, as exemplified by Alexandre Chemetoff on the Île de Nantes. A glance in the dictionary reveals that the landscape is etymologically linked to the land (i.e. a geographical and political space), defined as both the area of the earth that can be apprehended by humankind (as an *in visu* representation of the environment) and the pictorial/literary representation of the world (a poetic interpretation of the universe). The notion of “landscape” is also linked to its cultural and experiential dimension, as well as to the notion of “project” (quality, creation, management, landscape protection) as understood in the European Landscape Convention. It is therefore the expression just as much of a political, geographical, social and urban reality as of sensory perceptions and experiences of a given environment.

And yet the landscape is often reduced to its natural dimension alone. In urban projects, it is supposed to improve quality of life, in particular through measures that seek to reconcile people with their natural environment, as well as through rapid growth in the numbers of natural spaces intended to generate other urban sociabilities. Green corridors, park networks, green tracks, waterfronts and other green open spaces are supposed to structure and beautify towns and cities and enhance their “sustainable” image. The notion of landscape *per se* is even tending to replace the notion of landscaped space in the vocabulary of planners and developers. These natural spaces appear to offer a *diffuse sociability*, promoting self-segregation instead of public spaces linked to a political sphere that no longer seems able to foster citizenship (Delbaere 2011). However, landscape cannot be reduced to landscaped natural spaces alone. These spaces, often oversized (large parks, mineral esplanades with occasional vegetation, green corridors, etc.), seem primarily designed as spaces for leisure or biodiversity. The ways in which they will be appropriated and become a medium for the expression of identity and urbanity for those who live or use them are not considered or called into question.

Paris: renovation of Les Halles shopping centre and gardens	New York: reclamation of the East River waterfront
	
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This ambition to create landscapes also seems to be a means of making a stand against urban uniformity and the standardisation of the imagination denounced by Serge Latouche (2000) among others. In other words, it appears to enable a return to a plurality of worlds, universes, and urban imaginations. However, doubts might legitimately be expressed concerning its ability to produce differentiated urban representations and experiences. On the contrary, this urban reclamation through landscaping seems aimed above all at the transformation of the urban image and not of people’s relationships to places.

Image and landscape: a new means of urban beautification?

In reality, the basis (in terms of public policy) for this renewed image of the city and its landscape is far less clear-cut. The official rhetoric cannot mask the urban marketing stakes represented by landscaping practices, which are reduced to the notion of image or even gentrification objectives by offering the possibility of an urban lifestyle seen as more environmentally friendly by certain residents.

Urban “décors”, urban scenography and other streetscape projects are growing in number with the aim of changing the image of places. For example, neo-“traditional” streets are flourishing, complete with prefabricated boutiques with distinctive façades, decorated with old-fashioned signage and broken up by small areas of greenery, such as on 125th Street and the East River in New York, or in the streets of Bercy Village in Paris. As Christine Boyer points out (1992), the city becomes fiction and simulation, a *tableau vivant*, a world of entertainment, which creates a link between the past, the present and an idealised future.

Paris: Bercy Village in 2010



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Streetscape guidelines: references for the redevelopment of 125th Street in Harlem, 2007



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If the role of landscape architect or landscape designer is one that has the potential to “artialise”¹ the world (Roger 1997), it is all too often an occupation that is limited to the professionals’ cultural or aesthetic references for “beautiful landscapes” and the “beautiful city”. These codes of beauty vary by period, ranging from the “classical” landscape controlled by humans, along the lines of the “green and pleasant land”, to nostalgic visions of “picturesque” nature or representations of the “sublime” that magnify humankind’s relationship with regard to the forces of nature (Corbin 2001). At present, urban projects tend to advocate a free and spontaneous form of nature, partly controlled by the public authorities using a careful mix of planted species and perennials, differentiated management, etc. This is illustrated by the growing interest in the environment and ecosystems, whereby wild plants and imported vegetation are combined in the name of biodiversity, *laissez-faire* management is coupled with conventional garden maintenance techniques, and views are composed at the interface between the natural and the urban. Current trends in landscaping very much reflect a political vision of a concept of “controlled freedom”, which holds that people and urban spaces

¹ Translator’s note: “artialisation” is defined by Alain Roger as an artistic process that transforms and embellishes nature, either directly (*in situ*) or indirectly (*in visu*) using models.

alike are more likely to change in this new décor that is supposed to be attractive while remaining under the control of the public authorities. This is far removed from what actually constitutes the notion of landscape in all its complexity – as perceived, experienced, proven and imagined by each and every one of us.

The landscape as self-projection

The landscape is also produced by people through a series of subjective and imaginary representations, and small spatial transformations associated with flowerbeds, lighting, street furniture, the “façade-staging” of one’s home, etc. These ordinary sensibilities are also expressed through forms of spontaneous investment in natural spaces, such as beaches, mountains, or even empty fields. As Nathalie Blanc reminds us (2012), representations of the benefits of vegetation are “overvalued” by residents compared to the actual physical benefits (especially in terms of health) demonstrated by scientific knowledge. Artists themselves transform unoccupied spaces to offer different urban experiences (factories, wasteland, etc.). Multidisciplinary collectives of landscape designers, architects and artists even invent participatory conceptions of landscaped spaces, such as Rebar in San Francisco and Coloco or L’Atelier d’Architecture Autogérée in France. These collectives, working on the assumption that people can be bearers of new uses, exhibit new modes of urban appropriation while seeking to introduce a poetic dimension to the production of our cities. Similarly, the utopian workshops developed by Le Bruit du Frigo take into consideration the imaginations that reside in the design and conception of places. Such approaches, often limited to collective or natural spaces, are yet to be invented at a citywide or landscape-wide scale.

Rebar Group: landscaping using planting bags



© Rebar Group

Accordingly, the landscape results as much from urban and landscaping policies and practices as it does from the cultural or subjective interpretations of users (whether individual or collective) as their meanings vary depending on the individuals, groups of people or societies in question (Bailly 2012). It is both real and represented; composed *in situ* and perceived *in visu*. The landscape can be considered a shared *language* for the reader/receiver/designer at the junction of visions of the real and the ideal, and of political, cultural, subjective and imaginary representations. In other words, the landscape results from the interface between humans and their environment and, conversely, between places and human societies. It offers an opportunity for self-projection in the world.

Imagining landscapes as a means of experiencing the world?

The assumption here is that the composition of landscapes by multiple readers/receivers/designers is conducive to renewing the “welcomingness” of places, insofar as it reconciles the landscaped space with perceived, experienced and imagined spaces, and expresses the sense of relationships between people and places. If urban projects were able to create words – i.e. the vocabulary of an environment, conveys meanings and imaginings – it would be possible for everyone to use these words to design their own landscape and continually enhance it. From these landscapes, each of us could forge our own identity and sense of belonging to the world, to a society, to a human group or to a particular place. It is only in this complex context of individual and collective interpretations and compositions that a space may be invested with meaning, inhabited, projected and imagined.

In this sense, the transformation of the physical image alone of an urban space is not enough to fully take on board its meaning and imaginary or mythical visions. It is therefore the forms of poetic language relating to the landscape in the city that would need to be invented in order to create other, more poetic and metaphysical, human relationships and attitudes to the land. Merleau-Ponty (1945) had already highlighted the existence of a form of porosity of self in relation to the world, through experiences that open the way to sensory information and the language of places. In this way, wanderers may make the landscape appear between themselves and the world, and from it fashion a subjective life on the edge of reality.

Space is humanised and “poeticised” by the practices and projections of the imaginings that humans make of it. Uses appear to load the city with symbols and myths of creation, which, in turn, seem to form poetic images able to express, according to Bachelard (1957), human values and the depths of the soul and the infinite cosmos. These values and depths make “another poetic and mythical spatiality” possible (de Certeau 1990). In other words, this language of the landscape first implies a recognition of the uniqueness of places and the people who live there, far from the major theoretical schemes that can be adapted and applied to any type of territory. Furthermore, it calls for artistic approaches that are able to symbolise the meaning of spaces, in the same way that the painters and writers of the Renaissance enabled us to view nature, and the landscape, in its poetic and metaphysical dimension. Finally, the theories and projects that seek to understand what it is in the landscape that produces signs, markers, emotions, imaginings, encounters with others or loneliness on one’s own are still to be explored in greater depth. Kevin Lynch (1998) has already identified elements of this urban language by considering the forms likely to generate the inhabitability of an environment, and which will enable us to take ownership of, and find one’s bearings within, a given space. Thinking about the cityscape in this way could give new life to urban design as a possible means of imagining and experiencing the world.

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