

Chapter 6

Morphology as a Tool for the Articulation of the New Metropolitan Landscapes



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6.1 Introduction

In the different areas of the planet, settlement phenomena (the most recent ones and those stratified over time) appear today to be affected by such profound mutations as to impose a rethinking of the very notions of city, countryside, nature and landscape for addressing the positioning of architecture and design in relation to the transformations taking place at the scale of the city, territory and landscape. The hypothesis proposed in this essay is that in this field the concept of “New Metropolitan Landscape” assigns a new centrality to interpretative categories and operational tools developed by landscape architecture over the last two centuries.

The identification of the scope of action and the responsibilities to be addressed by landscape architecture are an issue that is currently being defined especially in relation to some indisputable urgencies, such as the security of the territories, the sustainability of the transformations that affect them, the protection of biodiversity, the protection of soil and water, and the mitigation of climate change. A landscape expert figure is emerging, torn between two opposing dimensions. On the one hand, he is called to measure himself against the complexity of phenomena between nature, technique and culture, becoming the interpreter of an integrated approach, which in some areas is declined with the adjective holistic. Unfortunately, it must be said that very often this approach tends to pose the questions not so much in transversal terms with respect to traditional disciplinary approaches but through continuous shifts towards generic and culturalist postulates, removing or postponing the need to deploy specific technical skills to address objective critical issues. On the other hand, with respect to some problems of extreme urgency and complexity,

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technical and hyper-specialist approaches prevail that address identified critical issues by applying non-negotiable tools and intervention objectives.

Symmetrically, often in the transformation processes the competences appear fragmented among a very high number of actors called upon within political systems, public administrations and technical-economic systems. This is a potentially rich condition on the political and social level, which, however, risks strongly undermining the authoritativeness and the impact of the different technical-scientific knowledge, necessary to face the issues at the highest level of competence, sometimes inducing irrationality drifts in the processes. Also at this level, therefore, there is a marked condition of fragility as uncertainty and unpredictability in the interaction.

Landscape architecture, indeed, defines an approach to design capable of observing phenomena at different scales (from the geographical of the territory to the human of architecture); to bring to synthesis multiple knowledges, in the fields of natural sciences, ecology, construction and human sciences; but above all, to deal with the processes of transformation in an adaptive way, tackling in an integrated way decision-making, implementation and management aspects. It works, therefore, along a multidimensional and dilated time line to include different cycles and natural and anthropic processes.

This approach refers to an inclusive field of research and discussion, involving nature and human sciences, architecture, engineering, planning, geography, geology, botany, agronomy, anthropology, aesthetics, ethnography, art history, ecology, landscape ecology ... Reformulating conceptual categories and operational tools derived from studies on urban morphology and building typology, it crosses research programmes open to very different languages, interpretations and description techniques, which address the issue of transformation with a renewed focus on the difficult dialectic between nature and artifice that characterises the contemporary world. It is well known how the contribution of anthropogeography and the solicitations of the French historiographic school of the 1920s represented by the magazine "Annales" was taken up in the 1960s with results of great interest by Italian architects, such as Aldo Rossi, Carlo Aymonino and Vittorio Gregotti (Marzot, 2002). This line of researches contributed to the definition of the approach to the project defined by Gregotti as "critical modification of the context" (Gregotti, 1966, 1984, 2004) which is related to the development of a territorial approach to urban and landscape design in Italy in the period between 1980s and 2000s.

The word landscape, in this approach, alludes to an infinite dimension, a larger totality that orients the project to different scales and that refers to that dense network of connections that link the elements of physical space (natural and artificial, living and mineral: soil, water, air and vegetation) with the universe of meanings and values. The reference to the landscape therefore makes it possible to address the issue of the rootedness of settlements in places not only from an environmental ecological point of view, but also as a definition of the modes of cultural relations between the local and global dimensions, and, at the same time, a search for the appropriateness of new realizations, fundamental to define their value and meaning for the inhabitants. On this theme, the landscape disciplines have introduced the

concept of “mediance”. According to Augustin Berque (Berque, 1995), landscape is something common, mediated by words and images, interpreted by cultural archetypes; it should not be regarded as a thing, but as a relationship. Seen from this angle, the question of identity is also understood not as a subjectively recognized sense of belonging, but as the set of principles that have guided society’s co-evolutive relationship with its environment throughout history. What is the subject (between individual and community) and the practices that realize this semantization, what relationship is established between technical knowledge and local knowledge, what skills are called in the field, are all still open questions, with respect to which responsibilities and role of the project in the face of the new challenges of globalization must be redefined.

6.2 The Morphological Approach Within Landscape Disciplines

From the point of view of the landscape project, the morphological approach intervenes within the conformation processes of the “New Metropolitan Landscapes” starting from three preliminary methodological assumptions:

- to read the phenomena at different scales of interactions (from the geographical one of territory to the focused one of architecture);
- to make a synthesis of multiple knowledges (among natural and earth sciences, social and economic disciplines);
- to test decision-making analytical methodologies integrating the singular inputs of the various actors involved in the processes.

On a large scale, morphological research focuses on the recognition of present and past structuring territorial figures, often superimposed on previous settlement armatures, which sometimes persist, sometimes are totally erased, sometimes are barely recognizable as few fragments survive. The element that must be investigated is the way in which the geometries of the settlement layouts take position with respect to the original site configuration: soil forms, ecological contextes and anthropogenic landscapes, with specific attention for the cultural dimension of places (identity and memory) which requires studies in the field of cultural heritage, history and archeology.

At the scale of settlement and architecture, this approach combines the study of the form and character of places with the study of memories and expectations, then of individual and collective representations and images that affect them; the dialectic of the relationship between the principle of settlement and the way of building (i.e. way of building and living); the system of necessary exceptions to the context; the relationship between architecture and the soil.

The palimpsest metaphor, introduced in the field of architecture more than 30 years ago by a well-known essay by André Corboz (Corboz, 1983), represents

today one of the most effective categories to fully understand and deepen the potential of the morphological approach as a tool for the articulation of the new Metropolitan Landscapes.

One of the reasons is undoubtedly that the word palimpsest refers to an inclusive field of research and discussion, involving natural sciences and humanities, architecture, planning, geography, geology, botany, agronomy, anthropology, aesthetics, ethnography, art history, ecology, landscape ecology ... On the one hand, the use of the palimpsest metaphor is effective in relation to the crisis condition in the mechanisms of representation of the natural world, a representation that has always proved to be influenced by the different cultural projections on the thing itself, the main cause of the polysemy of the very term landscape. On the other hand, it is effective in giving an account of the stratification of natural systems in the context of ecological processes, both along the time line of transformations and in the depth of possible sections that cross competing systems. This approach is the basis of researches aimed at investigating the temporal depth of the ecological palimpsest in which the interaction between non-anthropogenic and anthropogenic factors is today recognized as one of the main causes at the origin of some characteristic biotopes, from forests to peat bogs, for example.

But the concept of palimpsest has found a new field of investigation especially in the dialectic between ecology, which can be traced back to the field of natural sciences, on the one hand, and cultural ecology, which can be traced back to the field of ethno-anthropological sciences, on the other; a field, the latter, which investigates the relationships between the socio-cultural aspects of human groups and the environment in which they live. In this field, it has emerged that the cultural dimension is an essential aspect for the study of landscape ecology as a factor that decisively orients the transformations of the physical environment towards sustainable developments (Zapf, 2016).

On the human sciences front, the palimpsest, understood as a metaphorical device, today finds new areas of legitimation in the historiographic field, where the primacy of the chronological order is questioned by research that places the spatial and local dimension of human history (spacing history) at the centre of the investigation. A position, this one, that finds a happy synthesis in Friedrich Ratzel's famous phrase "Wir lesen im Raum die Zeit" (Ratzel, 1904) recently resumed in a volume by Karl Schlögel (Schlögel, 2003) and that can be traced back to the cultural line known as anthropogeography, which unfolded along a path all within the German geographical school of the nineteenth century, starting from the monumental work of Alexander Von Humboldt (Humboldt, 1845). It is well known that the contribution of anthropogeography was taken up with results of great interest by Vittorio Gregotti at the end of the 1960s, starting also from the solicitations of the French historiographic school of the 1920s represented by the magazine "Annales" (Gregotti, 1966) and contributed to the definition of the approach to the project defined by Gregotti himself as "critical modification of the context" (Gregotti, 1966, 1984, 2004).

For the disciplines of landscape, the palimpsest has been the banner of a series of researches in the field of the enhancement of the so-called cultural landscapes that

certainly (even if the convention does not use the term) have found a synthesis in the European Landscape Convention (Florence, 2000) and an application in relation to the UNESCO policies that, starting from the 1990s of the twentieth century, introduced a new category of heritage, that of the cultural landscape (Cosgrove, 1988, 1998).

6.3 Palimpsest Metaphor Within the Morphological Approach

Following this trajectory, which crosses different disciplinary fields, the metaphor of the palimpsest has acquired new values for reflection on the landscape, deepening some important insights that André Corboz's 1983 essay already contained, even if in that essay the word used is territory and not landscape.

First of all, the conviction that the landscape is to be read as "an incessantly shaped space", therefore in continuous transformation, as a result of natural phenomena involving an environment and the community of living people living in it, but also of intentional projects and concrete works aimed at making the human world inhabitable also and above all in relation to spontaneous processes. The accurate description of the processes calls into question the different disciplines that have competence over them, brought back to the synthesis of a "landscape" view that focuses on the morphological effects, forms and spaces of physical transformation.

Two postulates are implicit in this vision. The first states that the recognition of this dynamic between natural and anthropic allows us to shed light on the complex question of the construction of meaning and therefore of the recognition of the identities of places with respect to their physical form, overcoming the mechanicism of the classical vision whereby the landscape unfolds in the sequential relationship between the thing itself and its representation.

The second postulate states that in the continuous process of transformation of a territory, the relationship between phenomena of natural origin and anthropic action is subject to continuous reciprocal adjustments in which it is possible to recognize a design activity (collective and individual) that tends to direct the process towards set objectives, even if sometimes in conflict with each other. To use Corboz's words, "the territory is a project". But it is undeniable that the project of which Corboz speaks does not tend towards a closed and defined form; rather, it is the set of actions that trigger processes of transformation according to dynamics and geographies that are often unpredictable. Which leads us to the contemporary idea of a multi-scalar, multidisciplinary project-process aimed at a multiplicity of different actors that engages the most interesting experiences of contemporary landscape design, from James Corner-Field Operations, to Catherine Mosbach, Bas Smets, Georges Decombes and others (Fig. 6.1).



Fig. 6.1 Atelier Descombes Rampini, Renaturation of the River Aire, Geneva

These designers show an approach of great interest not only in what they come to define a real program of re-signification of structures and spaces that would otherwise be devoted to obsolescence, but also a plan of re-naturalisation that directs spontaneous processes towards the formation of an articulated system of landscape units with a strong evocative charge within an overall park design. Sometimes even transforming into ruins the residual fragments that the processes of decommissioning leave on the ground, while at the same time creating collective spaces with multiple possible uses, as in the case of the Bas Smets' Estonian National Museum Park (2008–14, architecture: DGT Architects) or in the case of Catherine Mosbach's Louvre Lens Museum Park (2003–16, Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa/SANAA) (Fig. 6.2).

These are interventions through which landscape architecture has introduced practices which can be ascribed to the paradigm of care (understood as the assumption of responsibility for the habitability of a place also terms of maintenance, reclamation, cultivation, management, control, etc.) rather than the installation of new naturalistic systems, according to a tradition of landscape architecture that has accompanied the construction of urban planning, starting from Alphand in Paris and Olmsted in U.S. cities. The now famous case of the New York Highline (James Corner – Field Operations with Diller Scofidio and Renfro and Piet Oudolf) undoubtedly represents a paradigm for this approach (Fig. 6.3).

Care as action is based, on the one hand, on the observation of the elements present in a place; on the other hand, on the choice of strategic interventions, which do



Fig. 6.2 Catherine Mosbach/MOSBACH PAYSAGISTES, Architecture: Kazuyo Sejima + Ryue Nishizawa/SANAA, Louvre Lens Museum Park

not deviate from the strict application of that principle of economy typical of traditional landscape techniques. To leave things as they are or as they might evolve as much as possible presupposes a project based on the study of reality and critical judgement with respect to the conditions and times of the transformations underway. A project capable of triggering processes that do not tend towards unattainable completeness but mark decisions (to be understood as the assumption of responsibility within an approach that is essentially of a negotiating and adaptive nature) and actions (which include the problem of construction, management and maintenance techniques) that refer to the relaxed times of the transformations of a place, between nature and culture.



Fig. 6.3 Bas Smets, Estonian National Museum Park. (Architecture: DGT Architects)

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