

The perception of urban space as landscape: from site to space and scape

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Introduction

In the context of the World Heritage Convention we have moved from the point in time to the line of time; from built icons to urban themes; from building to context; from place to space. These transformations represent the new challenge for urbanism where growth and change need to be understood and managed.

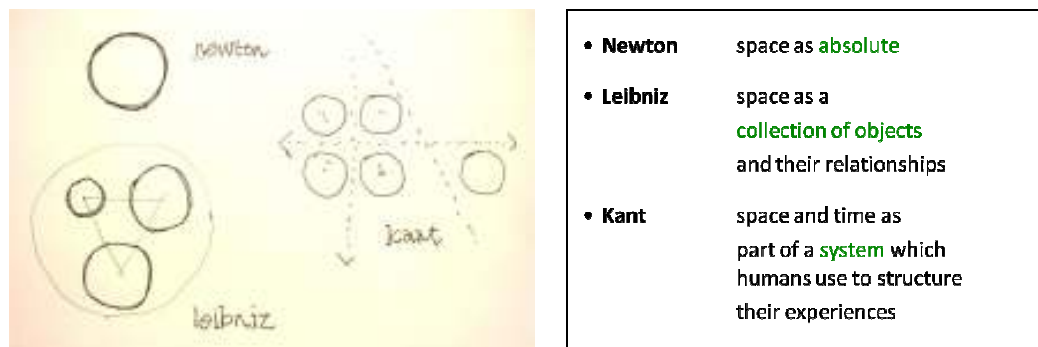
Time, space and place

Space is that boundless, three-dimensional extent in which objects and events occur and have relative position and direction. It is often conceived in three linear dimensions, although with time, it is to be part of the four-dimensional continuum known as space-time. The concept of space is considered to be of fundamental importance to an understanding of the physical universe although disagreement continues between the philosophers over whether it is itself an entity, a relationship between entities, or part of a conceptual framework.

It is this very disagreement which is inherent in the historic urban landscape, where history represents 'time' and landscape represents the 'space' of the city – the place.

Many of the philosophical questions arose in the seventeenth century, during the early development of classical mechanics. In Isaac Newton's view, space was absolute – in the sense that it existed permanently and independently of whether there was any matter in the space. Others such as Gottfried Leibniz considered that space was a collection of relations between objects, given by their distance and direction from one another. In the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant described space and time as elements of a systematic framework which humans use to structure their experiences.

Figure 1: Philosophers' concepts of space and time.



The urban landscape can be viewed both as a series of structures and edifices more or less organized by human action and as a panorama of social and cultural histories framing our present and inscribing our past. Seen in this way,

... the conurbation becomes one huge archaeological site as the city reveals its inner self through a continuous process of urban renewal and revitalisation in which the very innards of the landscape are exposed and delayered like a vast anatomical dissection (McCormick, 1998).

The urban landscape

The urban landscape comprises the sum total of the unbuilt land within and around our towns and cities. Indeed urban buildings and structures themselves can also be thought of as part of the urban landscape, in that their form and distribution defines the matrix of public and private open spaces of the urban landscape, as well as providing its backdrop. The urban landscape is the sum of all these parts, but it also needs to be understood as a whole which is greater than their sum.¹

Jeremy Whitehand (1993) expanding on the German morphogenetic traditions of M.R.G.Conzen sees that urban landscapes are an important part of our daily lives. Buildings, streets, gardens and parks are a fundamental means by which we orientate ourselves within cities, and contribute significantly to our daily levels of efficiency and well-being.

Yet despite the controversy surrounding a few special places, the people and forces responsible for shaping ordinary town and city landscapes have rarely been systematically investigated and are poorly understood. By viewing urban landscapes in relation to the individuals and organizations responsible for their creation, Whitehand provides a crucial missing dimension to urban landscape history and a sharp insight into the dynamics of contemporary urban change.

Although the urban landscape is where the vast majority of people live and work, it appears to be strangely invisible to many people, in particular to many urban policy-makers. Despite calls for an integrated approach, the only oblique reference to the subject was in relation to biodiversity, which is hardly the main justification for the importance of the urban landscape although we humans are an integral part of this biodiversity. The debate on the UNESCO 'historic urban landscape approach' recommendation, to which Whitehand was party, is long overdue.

One of the main reasons for the invisible nature of the urban landscape is that we are not used to perceiving it in its totality. We need aerial photographs to understand the layout of Haussmann's Paris, and fish-eye lens images of the wrap-around views of Pushkin's Saint Petersburg. We walk in the street carrying the mental image of the city. Walker (1998) notes that in the cityscapes of George Grosz and Otto Dix, the geography of the city resembles the infernal regions of Hieronymous Bosch, where each individual is consigned to a particular torment and compelled to replicate mechanically a specific and pointless task in utter isolation from the swarming multitudes on all sides. Once again the invisible city viewed in parts through the rooms of place.

Academic research

Central to the goals of the European Urban Landscape Partnership² are the aims of the European Landscape Convention: 'to promote landscape protection, management and planning and to organise European cooperation on landscape issues'. The Convention not only raises the landscape to a matter of European cultural and environmental policy, but for the first time places urban and peri-urban landscapes on an equal footing with natural and rural landscapes.

¹ The European Urban Landscape Partnership seeks to further a holistic and integrated understanding of this landscape.

² http://www.urban-landscape.net/contst_public/urban_landscape.php

The integrated approach opens the door to concepts developed within the framework of UNESCO urban biospheres as urban ecosystems are the cities, towns and urban strips constructed by humans. This is the growth in the urban population and the supporting built infrastructure has impacted on both urban environments and also on areas that surround urban areas.

Urban ecosystem research is currently focused on:

- Understanding how cities work as ecological systems;
- Developing sustainable approaches to development of city fringe areas that reduce negative impact on surrounding environments;
- Developing approaches to urban design that provide for health and opportunity for citizens.

In addition to this body of knowledge, we bring to the table three university laboratories that observe the city, TUDelft (the Netherlands), Columbia (New York), and Bartlett School of Architecture (University College London).

Urban landscapes at TUDelft³ investigate the evolving urban landscape and its typologies, landscape architectural-based urban development in the Netherlands and abroad, and the design of urban spaces, urban fabrics and urban regions within the framework of the architecture of landscape. The social, economic and technological development of society demands a fundamental reassessment of the design and the planning of our landscapes. At the same time, landscape plays an increasingly important role in understanding and conceptualizing public spaces in compact urban environments. In this approach landscape is seen as that which lies underneath, the site or substratum which is the point of departure for all urban design and planning. The Urban Landscape Lab⁴ is an interdisciplinary applied research group at Columbia University in the City of New York. Here the focus is on the role of design in the analysis and transformation of the joint built/natural environment, and study of ecological processes and urban systems as hybrid phenomena through targeted pilot projects, practical strategies and experiments. This landscape/ecology-based approach to urbanism brings together a wide range of disciplines to focus on specific environment and development issues as they relate to built form. The teaching and research interests share common objectives: to effect positive change in the urban landscape in terms of biodiversity, climate change, water quality and access, waste and sanitation. The focus is on the physical design of infrastructures, landscapes and dense urban fabrics as change agents in a collaborative, interdisciplinary working model that involves feedback, exchange and monitoring efforts with scientists and engineers.

The Space Syntax laboratory at the UCL's Bartlett School of Architecture brings together disciplines to reintegrate the city into its urban fabric by a configurational approach in understanding the structure and functioning of cities. Space syntax is a theory of space and a set of analytical, quantitative and descriptive tools for analysing the layout of space in buildings and cities. The theoretical work in the Space Syntax Laboratory is taught in the Graduate School and also takes advantage of a close working relationship with Space Syntax Limited, a UCL spin-off consulting company. The company has also contributed important results on crime and spatial design with new research presented at International Space Syntax conferences.

³ Delft University of Technology: <http://www.tudelft.nl/>

⁴ Janette Kim, Director; Katherine Orff, Founder and Director, Columbia University.

But these islands of research provide us with nuts and bolts, and are not part of the experience of the historic urban landscape. The experience is understood through the subject and the object or the observer and participant.

The theatre of space

My eldest granddaughter has completed her baccalaureate in theatre, studying and acting the plays of Brecht. The excitement of returning with her to Brecht and rereading his poems of the impact of the cities in Germany between the years 1925-1928 (Brecht, 1976⁵) has added a dimension for the reflection on the historic urban landscape. The subject of expressionism is discussed by Walker (1998) and emanates its strongest contours when cast against the background of the modern urban landscape. In the midst of the most developed concentration of the forces of technological achievement and civilized social organization, the isolated and alienated character of the modern subject comes most prominently to the surface.

In the *Jungle of Cities*, Brecht's arrangements of scenes recall the *stationendrama* model of expressionist theatre. Certain scenes are arranged as a series of vignettes from isolated stage areas where self-sufficient minidramas are enacted. Scene 5 alternates between the separate dramas played out in a dirty bedroom, a hallway and a gin mill type saloon. This use of the stage is a paradigm of the city where the destruction of the family from the prairie lands takes place in the great city jungle.

Extending this idea, Silvija Jestrovic (2005)⁶ introduces the notion of spatial inter-performativity to discuss theatre's relationship to actual political and cultural spaces. She examines how theatrical and political spaces refer to and transform one another.

But for the literary base, it is Richard Lehan (1998) that has provided the most extensive encounter with the Western idea of the city moving from the early novel in England to the apocalyptic cityscapes of Thomas Pynchon. Along the way, he gathers a rich entourage that includes Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Emile Zola, Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Raymond Chandler. The European city is read against the decline of feudalism and the rise of empire and totalitarianism; the American city against the phenomenon of the wilderness, the frontier, and the rise of the megalopolis and the decentred, discontinuous city that followed.

Lehan charts a narrative continuum full of constructs that 'represent' a cycle of hope and despair, moving from myth to mastery and mystery. He summarises the urban paradigms of the past and future helping in the conceptualization of the city as a product of the literary imagination. Nevertheless, he adds the caveat that textualizing the city creates its own reality, but cannot substitute for the physical city. 'Literary texts and cultural paradigms help us to focus and to arrest the flux of time.'

Street culture

The space and place of the city as perceived from the street in each generation and the art of walking has generated an culturally indigenous terminology. This has been translated through semiotics into the fields of architecture and design, theatre and

⁵ Ed. Willett, J and Manheim, R; Bertolt Brecht – Poems 1913-1956, Methuen, 1976

⁶ Silvija Jestrovic was a SSHRC postdoctoral fellow at York University in Toronto, and has recently taken up an appointment in the School of Theatre Studies at the University of Warwick (UK). She is currently working on a book-length project entitled *Avant-Garde and the City*.

choeography. While the walk and talk in the Greek polis of Socrates continues in the academic quad, it is the street culture that bonds the spaces together as a landscape. The cultural language of the city has given us the experiences of the Italian *liston(e)*, the German *spazieren*, the French *flâneur* and the Israeli *Dizengoff*. It was only the English that strolled aimlessly, loitered, sauntered and developed the constitutional.

Figure 2: The experiences of space.

- **walk and talk**
- ***liston(e)***
- ***spazieren***
- ***flâneur***
- **Dizengoff**

- **stroll, loiter, saunter**
- **constitutional**

Eighteenth-century depictions of life in Venice clearly focus on the diverse activity of the street. Every day at the Listone in Piazza San Marco, Venetians gathered for their evening stroll.

Each evening there was the *liston*, or promenade, in the piazza, crowded with masqueraders, whose gaiety and wit diverted the ladies and gentlemen seated under the porticoes of the Procuratie, while at the further end, by the sockets of the three standards and in the darker corners, was the rendezvous of harlots, pimps, and pathics (Pompeo Molmenti, 1761).



Figure 3 Interior of the Galeries Lafayette, redefining the public sphere in Haussmann's Paris.



Figure 4 Venice- Piazza di San Marco and the Colonnade of the Procuratie Nuove, c.1756, a painting by Canaletto



Figure 5:



Figure 6: Dizengoff Street, Tel Aviv

Walter Benjamin in his review of Franz Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin* [1929, *On Foot in Berlin*], makes the distinction between studying [*studieren*] and learning [*lernen*]. 'A whole world separates these words. Anyone can study, but learning is something that you can only do if you are there for the duration.' To study a city is to take it as an object to be analysed and otherwise accounted for. To learn, on the contrary, would be to become transformed by experience (not *Erlebnis* – the experience of a remarkable event – but *Erfahrung* – which would be more like an *ethos* or way of being).

Lauster (2007) observes that 'Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin* contains motifs that are central to Benjamin's idea of the *flâneur*. These include, on the one hand, delight in immersing oneself in the crowd, the object of observation, and on the other hand, being viewed with suspicion since the keen 'reading' of urban physiognomies shows an affinity with the business of criminals and detectives. The first-person observer of Hessel's Berlin sketches should be closely related to the third-person *flâneur* depicted in Benjamin's later work.'

Flâneur

But it is the *flâneur* that has captured the imagination of the urban designer. The texts at the end of the Victorian decadence and the flamboyance of the writers in the wake of urban change in the twentieth century are now being incorporated as a social commitment. The term *flâneur* comes from the French masculine noun *flâneur*—which has the basic meanings of 'stroller', 'lounger', 'saunterer', 'loafer' – which itself comes from the French verb *flâner*, which means 'to stroll'.⁷ Charles Baudelaire developed a derived meaning of *flâneur*—that of 'a person who walks the city in order to experience it'. Because of the term's usage and theorization by Baudelaire and numerous thinkers in economic, cultural, literary and historical fields, the idea of the *flâneur* has accumulated significant meaning as a referent for understanding urban phenomena and modernity. In French Canada, *flâner* is rarely used to describe strolling and often has a negative connotation as the term's most common usage refers to loitering, an English influence. While there is no English equivalent for the French word *flâneur*, just as there is no Anglo-Saxon counterpart of that essentially Gallic individual, the deliberately aimless pedestrian, unencumbered by any obligation or sense of urgency, who, being French and therefore frugal, wastes nothing, including his time which he spends with the leisurely discrimination of a gourmet, savouring the multiple flavours of his city (Skinner, 1962). The English could, at the most, consider their 'constitutional' which might include taking the dog for a walk.

⁷ From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

Benjamin's two motifs that of cultural memory and that of the *flâneur* are critical for the interpretation of urban space as landscape. In their underdeveloped state these motifs remain provocative if perhaps somewhat idealistic. Hessel learns his city, Berlin, by walking its streets, *spazieren*, and remaining open to the city's random stimulations, the serendipity and the involuntary associations. The resident's memory, which conjures the senses of change and transformation as well as the relative permanence and impermanence of people and places, can determine which remain, while others are often surprisingly lost to some principle of renewal or decay. And it is this alternative temporality of cultural memory, Benjamin suggests, that informs the dweller's understanding of his dwelling environment. In this way, the landscape becomes the evidence of the past, both tangible and intangible.

His essay written in 1939 *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* in *Illuminations* (1999a), harnesses a range of key texts and arguments concerning memory, historicity, modernity and urbanism, and creates what is now one of the single most influential studies of the modern city providing the polemics for the urban landscape.

A sociological reading of Walter Benjamin's 'Arcades Project' or *Passagen-werk* is provided by Joseph D. Lewandowski. Specifically, the essay demonstrates how Benjamin's city can both be an administratively constructed objective site with a reflexively structured subjective space responding to the street life. The distinctive street culture that characterizes this account as the 'dialectic of urbanism', recalls that 'the city ruins of the collective way of life of the past are never simply past, dead, or lost to progressive demolitions and architectural plans of urban administration'. (Lewandowski, 2005).

His analysis of urban experience is based on what he calls the method of historical materialism linking to the definitions of *correspondence* of Baudelaire. He coins this the 'data of remembrance' with the murmur of the past being heard. Benjamin acknowledges a historical privilege to particular works, for their ability to register the shocks or anxieties of their time or place and 'the techniques based on the use of the camera...extending the range of the *mémoire volontaire*.'

Photography

Benjamin (1999a p.182) quoting Baudelaire remarks that 'photography should be free to stake out a claim for ephemeral things, those that have a right to a place in the archives of our memory.' The comparison with the discipline of photography is helpful as the image is perceived within the realms of street photography and urban landscape photography. For Benjamin it is more than a medium, it becomes the essence of understanding the dialectic city. Peter Marshall defines urban landscape photography as

- in some way describing a town or city;
- representing an attempt to understand our experience of the city;
- showing a dedication to the subject, expressed through a body of work rather than isolated images;
- concentrating on structures or processes rather than on people.

Together with Mike Seaborne, both London based photographers who work in the urban landscape, they have developed a website⁸ called *Urban Landscapes* that is

⁸ <http://www.urbanlandscape.org.uk/>

dedicated to the exploration of urban landscape photography. 'Street photography' looks mainly at urban experience largely through a study of the people who live it. Urban landscape photographs often include people, but they are clearly situated and existing in the structures of the town or city

The challenge for urban landscape photography is not only to record the physical manifestations of this relentless process, but also to make visible the underlying social and cultural forces which ultimately determine their form and meaning.

The enduring power of photography lies in the acceptance of its images as credible documentary records with enduring archival validity. The apparent transparency of the photographic image promotes the idea of comparing photographs of the same subject taken at different times. Through photography, therefore, the urban landscape as it appears today may be compared directly with what it looked like in the past, so providing a new context in which both historical and contemporary images may be viewed and interpreted. Our understanding of history can be divided into two periods: the time before photography and the period following its invention (Seaborne, 2003).

This comparison is ideally applied to the architecture of the city.

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been, comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. (Benjamin, 1999b, p. 462).

Benjamin argues for the great consequences that the camera and the photograph have had on both memory and culture. In a startling analogy, rich with the metonymic vocabulary of photography, Bergson's work becomes in Benjamin's description the snapshot of his age:

In shutting out this experience the eye perceives an experience of a complementary nature in the form of its spontaneous after image, as it were. Bergson's philosophy represents an attempt to give the details of this afterimage and to fix it as a permanent record. (Benjamin, 1999a, p. 154).

Just as the photograph provides a permanent record of a transient moment, the philosophy of the time fixes on a contingent image of memory and renders it essential. Experience has, then, perhaps become blind to the conditions out of which it arises. Benjamin (1999c, p.265) observes in his review of Hessel that, 'Baudelaire is the source of the cruel *aperçu* that the city changes faster than a human heart'.

Benjamin's method is simultaneously historical and aesthetic but the notions of history and aesthetics are transformed in the process. Parker (2004) poses the question that underlies Benjamin's text as follows: how and to what extent is urban experience determined by historical conditions? The main answer that his readings provide would be that, under the conditions of modern urbanism, the ways in which history determines experience do not become matters of conscious awareness. Indeed the dialectical image provides a dynamic relationship between the site, space and scape encompassing the historic urban landscape and provides the seal of authenticity. The requisite base for assessing all aspects of authenticity is the ability to understand all sources of information, in relation to original and subsequent characteristics of the cultural heritage and their meaning⁹.

⁹ Paragraph 80 of the Operational Guidelines for the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, 1972.

Experiences of space

Contexts – urban life

While Baudelaire characterized the *flâneur* as a ‘gentleman stroller of city streets’, he saw the *flâneur* as having a key role in understanding, participating in and portraying the city. A *flâneur* thus played a double role in city life and in theory, that is, while remaining a detached observer. This stance, simultaneously part of and apart from, combines sociological, anthropological, literary and historical notions of the relationship between the individual and the greater populace. Social and economic changes brought by industrialization demanded that the artist immerse himself in the metropolis and become, in Baudelaire’s phrase, ‘a botanist of the sidewalk’.

Because he used the word to refer to Parisians, the *flâneur* (the one who strolls) and *flânerie* (the act of strolling) are associated with Paris. However, the critical stance of *flânerie* is now applied more generally to any pedestrian environment that accommodates leisurely exploration of city streets – in particular commercial avenues where inhabitants of different classes mix.

The observer-participant dialectic is evidenced while such acts exemplify a *flâneur*’s active participation in and fascination with street life while displaying a critical attitude towards the uniformity, speed and anonymity of modern life in the city.

The notion of the *flâneur* is important in academic discussions of the phenomenon of modernity. While Baudelaire’s aesthetic and critical visions helped to open up the modern city as a space for investigation, theorists, such as Georg Simmel, began to codify the urban experience in more sociological and psychological terms. In his 1903 essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, (Frisby & Featherstone, 1998) Simmel theorizes that the complexities of the modern city create new social bonds and new attitudes towards others. The modern city was transforming humans, giving them a new relationship to time and space, inculcating in them a ‘blasé attitude’, and altering fundamental notions of freedom and being.

The urban landscape

The *flâneur* has also become meaningful in architecture and urban planning describing those who are indirectly and unintentionally affected by a particular design they experience only in passing. Walter Benjamin adopted the concept of the urban observer both as an analytical tool and as a lifestyle. From his Marxist standpoint, Benjamin describes the *flâneur* as a product of modern life and the Industrial Revolution without precedent, a parallel to the advent of the tourist. His *flâneur* is an uninvolved but highly perceptive bourgeois dilettante. Benjamin became his own prime example, making social and aesthetic observations during long walks through Paris. Even the title of his unfinished *Arcades Project* comes from his affection for covered shopping streets.

Lauster (2007) challenges the substance of what is accepted as a critical key to nineteenth-century urban experience by implying that Benjamin’s concept is based on incorrect readings of Baudelaire and Poe, and is conceived in opposition to earlier, journalistic depictions in which the *flâneur* features as an empirically observed and observing stroller within a whole spectrum of metropolitan types.

In the context of the historic urban landscape, designing for *flâneurs* is one way to approach issues of the psychological aspects of the built environment. Architect Jon Jerde, for example, designed his Horton Plaza and Universal CityWalk projects around the idea of providing surprises, distractions and sequences of events for pedestrians.

Mike Savage (2000) considers how Benjamin examined the relationship between history, experience, memory and the built environment. This integrative approach which is critical in attempting to resolve the conflicts of conservation and development opens up the understanding that memories are lodged in specific places where people have been placing the past and present in a dialectic relationship. He argues that Benjamin's concept of 'aura' can be used to place his interest in cities and urbanism in context. 'Cultural treasures', as the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde, being contemplated with 'horror', left in an urban context lose their meaning to the passers-by. Savage summarizes that the processes of perception themselves are historically specific and with the mechanically reproduced cities, the aura which Benjamin detected in the urban realm has disappeared. He concludes that 'the contemporary *flâneur* might still speculate that the consumer-centred postmodern city is based on unstable foundations.' This to no doubt is the challenge for the design of cities.

As a postscript, it should be noted that Benjamin's work seems to have had little impact on the study of religion, despite his importance as a central figure in much of what is called cultural analysis today. Perhaps this is a result of the perception of Benjamin as a Marxist. Over the past few years a seminar on Fantasy, Imagination, and Walter Benjamin's 'Profane Illumination' given by Richard D. Hecht, professor at UC Berkeley has taken up a number of twentieth-century Jewish thinkers whose work has been of great significance for the study of religion and cultural analysis. The correspondence between Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem (1992) is evidence to the dichotomy in their friendship. For Scholem, Benjamin was a figure driven by religious impulses. He notes that while one can argue that Scholem's effort to locate Benjamin in the religious sphere was an extension of the debate they had since their first meeting in 1915 about the nature of Judaism, it underscores that religion was a significant category in his thought. Hannah Arendt in her introduction (Benjamin 1999a) records that Benjamin gave up his 'theological background but not the theory and not the method of drilling to obtain the essential in the form of quotations'. This is perhaps obscured by a backward reading of contributions as 'Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (Benjamin, 1999a. pp 211-235).

Assuming the work of Walter Benjamin, we reflect on his interpretations of matter, memory, and the transformations of urban space. The *flâneur*, representing the diachronic cosmopolitan walker in these material and urban places became the model for his philosophy of the future and his understanding of experience. Benjamin understood that the *flâneur* is the paradigm for the new interpretation that he hoped to accomplish in his work, a reading of material images in all their multiple forms. He described this 'reading' as a 'profane illumination' which for Benjamin had two central dynamics – fantasy and imagination.

Our urban landscape needs the fantasy and imagination to transcend the understanding of place and enrich the depth of focus that the dialectic memory recalls in the space of the city. It requires an innovative integrative approach of mutual respect between peoples, their generations and their environment; a Kantian redefinition where new life-styles and experiences interact with their land and timescape.

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