THE VIRTUAL MUSEUM AS THE ACTIVATION AND REWRITING OF THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

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INTRODUCTION: URBAN LANDSCAPES

Urban landscapes contain a complex web of narratives created by territories' different actors. They belong to local or translocal communities and are to a great deal dependent on people's experiences, narratives and sense of ownership. Through these means they perpetuate themselves in our memories and become part of a collective heritage.

Those narratives or those different ways of interpreting and perceiving landscapes coexist in a more or less harmonious way depending on various focal articulation levels or territorial tensions not only with regard to environmental issues, but also with regard to economic, social and cultural dimensions.

So, when we set out to investigate populations' perceptions of an urban landscape, partly constructed by people's multiple narratives and gazes, we are mainly investigating how it is possible to reach a sustainable space of cultural activity and public reflexivity expression. Furthermore, we are engaging a whole community to evaluate those spaces or cooperate with needed changes to enhance their intrinsic potential.

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Under these circumstances, putting information and communication technologies at the service of social and cultural sustainability of landscapes (either natural landscapes, organically evolved landscapes, or simply man-made landscapes) requires people's involvement and creativity to come to terms with problems stemming from mismanagement or other forms of neglect.

Bearing in mind that in landscapes, Nature, identity, one's history and lived culture are enmeshed, we very much advocate a dialogical approach to deal with urban landscapes based on a digital «participatory architecture» oriented towards collective intelligence, creative processes and emotional memories.

PUBLIC *VERSUS* PRIVATE, COLLECTIVE *VERSUS* INDIVIDUAL, COMMON *VERSUS* PARTICULAR

Let us now for the time being, since we are investigating urban landscapes and we want to provide collaborative answers to specific challenges, placemaking or heritage preservation, draw a distinction between the terms «public» *versus* «private», «collective» *versus* «individual» and «common» *versus* «particular».

It used to be relatively easy to separate the concept of «public» from the concept of «private». Public was associated with the State and citizenship as a whole. It was opposed to private, which referred to single individuals or a group of individuals organized in businesses and households. The contrast oscillated between what was accessible, open, revealed and, on the other hand, what was hidden; between what was collective or affecting the interests of a collectivity of individuals and what was personal or belonged only to an individual (where private meant particular).

> *The basis for using the term «public» to describe the actions and agents of the state (so that public/private = state/nonstate) lies in the state's claim to be responsible for the general interests and affairs of a politically organized collectivity* [...] *as opposed to «private» — that is, merely particular — interests*[1].

Nowadays, the concept of «public» reemerges in different forms. These new forms involve public practice[2]. We cannot assume that the activities associated with the State and citizens are themselves public, instead it is important to ascertain to what extent these actions express matters of common interest. Social actors are driven by collective ideas, i.e., individual action is conceived as being driven by collective ideas.

The emergence of the public is enshrined in the assumption that all human actions have necessarily an element that is public. «The essential point is that "public" in this

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[1] WEINTRAUB, 1997: 5.
[2] PORTER, 2014.

sense has nothing to do, necessarily, with collective decision making. […] The key to it is not solidarity or obligation, but sociability»[3].

The analysis of sociability is central to the debate on public life and the spatial organization of participative citizenry. «Its character and possibilities are influenced by the ways that the configurations of physical space facilitate, channel and block the flow of everyday movement and activity»[4]. However, the public space of sociability stems from a complex set of issues of spatial and social order.

It is from this dynamics that a sense of common ownership emerges, and so landscapes — the topic we are dealing with in this paper — can be seen as a place of cultural exchange and advanced sociability. Therefore the success or failure of societies to enhance the importance of landscapes requires a set of actions that combine both public and private realms. Public space by itself does not generate or maintain a community capable of actions and collective decisions. If it is true that the public implies that some kind of authority must be exercised to ensure the vitality of the public world as a form of acknowledged legitimacy and uncontested terrain, it is no less true that the public must partake of the insights of the private to gain a larger approval and commitment on the part of citizenry.

HEALTHY LANDSCAPES AND SUSTAINABILITY

Drawing upon modernist theoretical thinking, urban landscapes are environments mostly woven by architectural forms, echoing different layers of time: past, present and the anticipation of future needs. It brings together «navigation» movements and experiences in an interesting web of private and public living spaces within a changing digital urban mediation culture.

Yet, according to Prinz[5], the intensification of intermetropolitan urban flows (i.e., intensive daily commuting and suburban dwelling) may drive away from cities the «fullness of life», endangering the sustainability of urban landscape. Thus the concept of landscape can also be analysed through a new perspective: healthy versus sick landscapes.

A healthy landscape should be understood as something alive and balanced, a body bustling with life, with regard to the interaction between human beings and territory, all globally evolving in a positive and sustainable way. By contrast, a sick landscape is one that is doomed to become inert and lifeless, either by neglect or exhaustion as a result of abandonment or careless use.

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[3] WEINTRAUB, 1997: 18.
[4] WEINTRAUB, 1997: 23.
[5] PRINZ, 1980.

«A country where its landscape dies is a country where culture disappears», argues the architect Ribeiro Teles. From his point of view, the aesthetic and biological degradation of landscape is the accurate diagnosis of the malaise of its community[6].

Therefore the acknowledgement of landscape as a natural and cultural heritage asset requires societies' increasing awareness of the intrinsic value of landscape, as well as of the potentialities of associative dynamism, namely the intervention of various social actors, willing to provide answers to the problems related to landscape's health issues.

Both the identification of landscapes' material diversity and the analysis of the pressures they are subjected to contribute to the creation of a promising context to conduct research and develop tools oriented towards sustainability and populations' wellbeing.

It is in this sense that a virtual museum dedicated to landscape proposes itself to revitalize the public world, the «Lifeworld», the concept advanced by Edmund Husserl, with which he sought to account for «the immediately familiar ground» and «unquestionably right»[7]. If «the territory has always been a place for individual and collective enquiry and reflection»[8], a virtual museum dedicated to landscape will promote the experience of the territory and will underscore a generalized sense of common ownership and participatory citizenship.

Devising a virtual landscape museum seeks therefore to encourage civic engagement towards deep mapping as «the product of interrelationships, coexistence and process, always changing and always in the state of becoming»[9]. In other words, it is an alternative museum, reflecting a participatory culture favoring shared individual experiences.

It is worth quoting Sara Barriga's words on the dialectics of the public: «Public are communities, ephemeral and contingent, formed by a discourse call and a reflexive appropriation of sense. Communities, however, despite fluid, are based on the possibility of adding worlds to the Lifeworld»[10].

In a nutshell, this is the vision that should inform a virtual museum: to add worlds and creative insights, to publicize and promote a shared experience of patrimony.

THE MEDIATION OF URBAN LANDSCAPE

When considering different forms of mediation, we should start by highlighting cultural and artistic practices based on digital platforms.

The concept of «landscape» is crucial in contemporary artistic practices and perceptions. It is increasingly understood as a form of experiencing places, a form of lived

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[6] TELES, 1997: 38.
[7] HABERMAS, 2002.
[8] FARIA, 2016: 16.
[9] BODENHAMER, 2015: 22.
[10] BARRIGA & SILVA, 2007: 5.

cultural expression and representation made by individuals. Landscape is in this sense produced by people's gazes and interactions with the observed reality.

The art historian Catarina Rosendo, in her text about the work of the sculptor Alberto Carneiro, entitled *Uma Ideia de Paisagem através da Obra de Alberto Carneiro*, proposes the concepts of «médiance» and «trajectif», drawing from the notion of landscape presented in *Les Raisons du Paysage* (1995) written by the geographer Augustin Berque. Thus, in her own words, «médiance» describes the «reciprocity between a society and its physical environment, an elaborate reciprocity on the physical, phenomenal, ecological, factual, or sensitive levels, and the landscape is one of its manifestations»[11]. In turn, «trajectif» relates to how the landscape «is defined by a process that, in historical time and in geographical space, simultaneously conditions and participates in the interaction between society and its environment»[12]. This interaction entails a multilayered network of experiences and memories, which is developed when subjects perceive and recognize landscape as something of which they are part of.

The mediation of urban landscapes by digital platforms that allow overlapping and multidirectional modes of place making — e.g., visualising and narrating places from different perspectives — has been on the rise. In fact, with the development of systems such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) as well as the proliferation of cell phones and wireless technologies, the artistic and activist practices associated with locative media have become more prominent within the contemporary cultural and artistic scene thus giving rise to what is known as «locational humanism»[13] and «spatial humanities».

The activation and «allegorization» of the urban landscape brought about by artistic practices associated with locative media creates a «hybrid space»[14]. Strikingly its hybridity is marked by a conflation of presence and distance and the emergence of blurred boundaries between intimacy and publicness, contributing to reimagine our experience in the contemporary networked spatiality.

On the other hand, the experience of urban landscapes, increasingly mediated by digital platforms, activates the regimes of tactile and optical perceptions. It is worth noting that at the beginning of the 20th century, Walter Benjamin[15] had already identified in artistic movements, such as Dadaism, as well as in the development of photography and film, a predominance of the tactile («haptic») regime and modes of expression that valued a much closer relationship with the object. For Benjamin, the «haptic» perception mobilized the various senses into a distracted reception, characterized by the

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[11] ROSENDO, 2006.
[12] ROSENDO, 2006.
[13] HOLMES, 2003.
[14] KLUITENBERG, 2010.
[15] BENJAMIM, 1936.

engagement of the body with the art work in the perspective of its use, placing the object more «at hand», thus depriving it of its auratic distance[16].

In *Web Aesthetics: How Digital Media Affect Culture and Society* (2010), Vito Campanelli notes that, in digital media, optical and haptic features are parts of a dialectical logic. Seen in this light, digital media are meta-optic and meta-haptic. Campanelli advances the concept of «tactile experiences» stressing those in which the user touches the interface. Sight has an ancillary function providing the information necessary for touching and further tactile explorations. As he observes, «regardless of whether one is touching an interface such as a mouse or a keyboard, the defining feature of this form of experience is that tactility is the mode of exploration, rather than simply being used to provide feedback»[17].

By comparison, «optical experiences» are those in which sight is the predominant sense involved and the eye leads the experience while the hand plays the role of a tool that enables the succession of images[18].

The experience of the Web and digital media switches permanently between these perceptive modes and it has become so pervasive that this perceptive attitude also characterizes contemporary society as a whole[19]. As Campanelli puts it: «the present age is characterized by a perceptive style capable of going beyond the optical/ /haptic antinomy»[20].

DIGITAL MEDIATION PLATFORM

The creation of a digital mediation platform between urban landscapes and the people of a territory represents an innovative project in the reconfiguration of contemporary spatiality. This platform will be a dialogical aggregator tool, presenting multiple ways of seeing and living in contemporary cities. As a relational platform, it contributes to enhance citizens' multifarious experiences bestowing upon them an educational edge which helps raise social actors' responsibility and foster landscapes' sustainability.

Landscape ends up mirroring the way a territory has been used over the years. In some places, territorial natural resources' misuse have brought about serious problems related to the preservation of raw materials, the maintenance of biodiversity and existing ecosystems.

Creating the interface between a population and the observed landscape is a process of reflection on the experience of place. Therefore raising individuals' awareness about the impact of human action on territories should be seen as a decisive factor to

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[16] CARVALHO, 2014: 145.
[17] CAMPANELLI, 2010: 135.
[18] CARVALHO, 2014: 145-146.
[19] CARVALHO, 2014: 146.
[20] CAMPANELLI, 2010: 141.

make people more responsible and hold them accountable for their actions regarding the protection and sustainable management of natural resources.

Sometimes, most populations, when faced with commoner or non-classified landscapes, which are part of their daily routines, don't realize their cultural value. That is why it is so important to raise a collective awareness about the intrinsic value of landscapes.

All landscape layers frame important identity, integration and interaction relations and signal cultural flows. The perception of the relationship between urban, rural and transition landscapes and their respective actors is essential to construct a sense of collective belonging, without which it is difficult to build inclusive and reflective societies.

Developing a digital mediation platform will awaken people's perceptions to the meanings and historicity of multilayered landscapes and the role of their manifold actors in shaping, managing and transforming them. At the same time, it will further contribute to the dissemination of memories and the experiences of place through storytelling and other digital forms of experience sharing.

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