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# BERLIN URBAN LANDSCAPE AS CULTURAL PRODUCT

**ABSTRACT.** The urban landscape has become one of the crucial issues of post-structural geographies. The compilation of cognitive objects and affective meanings forms the basis of cultural geography. The Berlin landscape can be perceived as a cultural laboratory and case study that has undergone many fundamental transformations. The city scenery reflects powers, needs, aspirations, as well as a glorious and tragic history, written into the symbols and signs. The Berlin landscape can be simultaneously explained both as a multi-layered text, and as an iconographical parable. Text and icon interact in an intensely stimulating combination, that relates to the post-modern, "world as an arena" metaphor.

**KEY WORDS:** cultural geography, urban landscape, cultural landscape, geography of meaning, urbanisation.

Human interest in space has a long, existential tradition. This interest grows up from the crucial need for the co-ordination of important environmental relations, and for the implementation meaning and order into the world of experiences and emotions. The person's relation to surrounding objects can be cognitive or affective, always aiming to create a certain level of equilibration between man and environment (Norberg–Schulz, 1971). The land in which we live both shapes us and is shaped by us; physically by means of cultivation and building, and imaginatively by projecting our aspirations and fantasies of wealth, refuge, well-being, awe (Robertson, Richards, 2003).

The everyday space of modern man does not compose an entire universe, as space used to be apprehended by the early civilisations. The space has been fragmented into various specialised components, used for orientation and adap-

tation. Among many diverse cognitive spaces, several psychological components can be distinguished, like the immediate space of perception and fairly stable spatial schemas. The schemas are the result of the personal accommodation of various signs along with their assimilation. The representations consist of universal elementary structures – archetypes, as well as socially or culturally conditioned configurations and personal idiosyncrasies. Together they create a picture of the surrounding space, in the appearance of a particular form of landscape, usually as an established tri- or quarto-dimension system of relations between the meaningful objects (Piaget, 1968).

## MEANING OF URBAN LANDSCAPE

The term landscape can be interpreted in a number of ways, which are not mutually exclusive, although of different emphasis. The most common concepts include landscape as a countryside, total regional environment, land use, topography or landform, a heritage or historical artefact and, probably the most commonplace usage, scenery, as the overall visual appearance. The most popular, visual, meaning of the term landscape is the fundamental concern of *Landschaftsgeographie,* based on morphology, and involving the examination of the visible phenomena of the examined region or place (Goodall, 1987). The visibility, followed by the fundamental role played by the sense of eyesight in Western civilisation, seems to be the most important factor of human perception. The conscience of the eye guides and points the perception and interpretation of the signs (Sennett, 1990).

In a study of how people see the city, the urbanist Kevin Lynch (1960) has asserted how important it is to concentrate especially on the particular visual quality. The apparent clarity of 'legibility' of the urban landscape plays a crucial role in the process of representation. Truth, like art, is in the eye of the observer; the true landscape is also in the eye of the participant or the viewer. The significance of objects, things and places is always culturally conditioned. Urban landscape is self-evidently a cultural symbol, however culture is understood. The landscape is a part of culture and expresses the needs, values and norms that shaped it in the past and maintain it at present. The morphology of the city is thus a medium through which these attributes are transmitted, an artistic production expressing past and present aesthetic values of societies that deliberately created it (Ashworth, 1998).

The significance of outward appearance of the landscape is based on the process of representation, that is composed of two procedures. The first enables us to give meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between people, objects, events, abstract ideas, places etc., and our system of conceptualisation. The conceptual map is the result of

the giving-the-meaning process. The second system depends on constructing a correspondence between the conceptual map and a set of things, arranged or organised into various languages which stand for or represent those concepts. The relation between things, concepts and signs lies at the heart of the production of meaning of urban landscape (Hall, 2002).

The meaning of landscape is a compromise between the visible and the hidden, between reason and emotion, between morphology and functions. Nowhere is this more obvious then in capital cities, the core morphologies of which exude national glory, their monumental magnificence typically accentuated by usually ambitious imaginary (Turnbridge, 1998). One of the oldest, Roman explanations of the city defines it a congregation of buildings and people, who were able to create a number of public spaces and buildings, which symbolise the common values and style of life of the city inhabitants (Bielecki, 1996). The landscape is a product of human values, meanings and symbols and the dominant culture within society. Landscapes as cultural products embody the culture of both the creators and the percipients. The setting can be represented and expressed by musical notation or literary form, can be enunciated on canvas, celluloid, or in virtual reality, but the most vivacious as well as visible form of landscape representation are buildings and architecture.

Architecture and urbanisation have been seen for ages as being among the main composers as well as vivacious transmitters of culture. Architecture was the bodily expression of the ways of thinking, the experience, and the hierarchies of values and culture of each of the group as well as of each individual. This 'true knowledge', culturally conditioned *epistemé* is always boldly visible through the forms of urban space and its organisation. Architecture is one of the main representing languages of modern society, which signify the spiritual dimension of the investors, architects and users (Czepczyński, 2002). The buildings are central to understanding the landscape in that they frame and embody economic, social and cultural processes. The aesthetic form is never neutral – the power is written into the landscape through the medium of design. The focal features of Berlin carry numerous meaningful signs and icons, to demonstrate supremacy and dominance.

Urban landscape projects and communicates the view of the dominant element of society to the remainder, through the symbols written into the setting. Landscapes, then, reveal, represent and symbolise the relationship of power and control out of which they have emerged (Robertson, Richards, 2003). The signs or text may be transcribed on many various levels, like form or architecture, use or function, meaning and representation and many others, including aesthetical, ethical, political, financial, legal, infrastructural, cultural, and social. The two key interpretations include iconographic and textual explanations, used below to characterise the Berlin urban landscape.

## ICONOGRAPHY OF BERLIN LANDSCAPE

The iconographical interpretation of landscape was highlighted by Cosgrove and Jackson (1987), where particular attention was given to the development of the study of landscape as a way of seeing or representing the world. The aesthetic view of landscape was explained as a way of conceptualising and signifying the world. Iconography, as theoretical and historical study of symbolic imaginary, is an interdisciplinary study, absorbing arts, architecture, anthropology, literature and, last but not least, cultural geography.

For decades Berlin was a European and world wide icon or symbol of specific concepts and notions. Berlin went through many of the ideological shifts of the 20th century, including authoritarian Second Empire of Wilhelm II, the socialist riots and revolution of 1918, the Weimar Republic, the totalitarian Nazism of Hitler's Third Reich, city division by the Berlin Wall, the rule of communists of the GDR and democratic *Bundesrepublik*. The changes exerted the greatest impact upon the urban landscape. The city's recent history and the frenetic pace if its contemporary redevelopment as one of Europe's youngest capitals, are permeated with issues of contested heritage (Turnbridge, 1998). The city represented the ideas and concepts of Imperialism and Pride of the early 20th century Germany, the Chaos and Decadence of the Weimer Republic, the Nazi Power and Supremacy, Freedom and Capitalism of West Berlin in addition to Social Justice as well as Totalitarism of East Berlin.

The heritage of Prussia as well as the spirit of Imperial Germany is particularly evident in the central part of Berlin, the *Mitte*. The central axis of *Unter den Linden* was developed to symbolise the military and cultural rise of the Prussian state after 1650. The Imperial Berlin extends form the historical island of Koeln, with *Dom* or Cathedral, reaches the Armoury, the Opera House, and the Humboldt University, to the Parisian Square with the triumphalist Brandenburg Gate, built at the end of the 18th century. The grand and imperial *genius loci* can be also found in many other, mostly public buildings of the 19th and early 20th century, concentrated in the *Mitte*, like the museums on Museum Island, he remaining buildings of the old Reich Ministries, the old Post Office, and many others. The imperial urban icon was usually expressed by classical architectural symbols, with columns, porticos and allegory sculptures.

The Nazist ideology brought different meaning to urban life in general that was very clearly visualised in the proud capital of the ruling nation. Berlin itself was to be renamed to become the world biggest city of *Germania*. The early modernist style was very popular among many dictatorships, including the Soviet, Italian and German. The architecture followed and exemplified the national as well as socialist dogmas of the Third Reich and was predominantly influence

by Hitler's architect Albert Speer. The dominance of straight lines, withdrawal of decoration, purity and certain ascetics were typical of the many new government building of Wilhelmstrasse, as well as the Olympic Stadium, department stores like *Karstadt* on Hermannplatz, and many others. The extensive building of the Ministry of Economy (the former Hermann Goering headquarter) of the early 1940s corresponds to the military simplicity and modernity of its times and seems to be the finest exemplification of thoughts transferred into stones.

The post-war architecture features, as in most of European cities, a very functional and constructivist approach, as well as widespread socialist and egalitarian objectives. The modern, International Style, defined by a block, dominated the construction forms in both the Western and Eastern parts of the city. The newly defined urban centres of the divided metropolis formally expressed two different systems. The socialist system, classless society, collectivism and power of people are represented by the vast and empty Alexander Square and the surrounding blocks. The Western individualism and democracy shone spectacularly in the 1970s *Europa Center*, as the focus point of the friendly and wealthy city.

Recent developments indicate the new meaning and new icons of Berlin. The newly modernised building of the Reichstag, the current constructions on Friedrichstrasse and Potsdamer Square signify the new spirit of the city – a vibrant, eclectic, dynamic and dazzling metropolis of the 21st century.

## READING BERLIN URBAN MILIEU

The metaphor of seeing landscape as a text drew upon the influential work of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who suggested that landscapes could be read as a social document, using techniques and methodologies of literary theory. The textual metaphor can be perused to illuminate the crucial relationships between landscape and ideology, by helping to identify how landscapes can transform ideologies into a concrete, visual form. Landscapes serve to naturalise asymmetrical power relations and cultural codes. The reading of urban text is aimed to penetrate 'the layers of ideological sediment', recorded and coded in the city forms and structures (Black, 2003).

The discursive process of researching the 'landscape as text' and relating 'text' to its 'context' is essential to read the multi-layer content of the urban setting. Landscape always represent and symbolise the relationship of power and control over which they have emerged and the human processes that have transformed and continue to transform them. The complexity of images written into the city can be interpreted by 'poly-visual' explanation.

Berlin *flâneur*, with historical and cultural knowledge, can read the city's historical past, written into the streets, buildings and assemblies. The economic and social context of the time can be interpreted from the layout, form, status

and preservation of the landscape. For instance the vast and empty square opposite the cathedral represents the Royal Castle destroyed by the communists as the symbol of unwanted heritage. War memorials, including the Jewish Museum and Memorial, stand for the victim – aggressor relationship of post-war times.

The historical heritage context might be developed further, and on many levels. The city's bombing and the Berlin siege on March and April 1945 transformed the urban landscape. Some districts, especially the city centre, were heavily damaged. The post-war constructions erected in Kreuzberg, Schoeneberg and Charlottenburg speak of the war-time context, goals of the Allied bombing and directions of the Red Army offensive. Some buildings still speak with the bullets marks on their walls.

The construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 transformed the urban landscape fiercely for the next three decades. The divided cites became two separated urban structures, loosely connected by certain shared infrastructures. The two Berlins had two centres, concentrated around the ZOO train station in the West and the Alexander Square station in the East. The historical heart – *Mitte,* was fairly marginalized, by the shadow of the near-by Wall. The representative axis of *Unter den Linden* turned into a dead-end street of limited importance. The Potsdamer Square, former traffic, retail and entertainment knot of the city, vanished mentally and literally from the urban landscape, in a historical punishment context.

The process of the unification of German states and moving the capital of the reunited *Bundesrepublik* to Berlin created a unique opportunity to revive and reinforce the landscape. The transformation was primarily focused on the Wall Zone, the derelict and abandoned cordon in between the existing centres. New central functions, especially the massive federal administration, featured the demand for new forms and new quality of the environment. The personal preferences and expectations of politicians, investors and decision-makers are imprinted on modern buildings and constructions.

The textual metaphor is closely connected with heritage choices and selection of identities. Decisions on what to rebuild, what to destroy and what expand always have hide a deeper meaning. The recent reconstruction of the *Adlon Hotel* and *von Stein Palace* on *Unter den Linden*, as well as the plan to rebuild the massive façade of the Royal Castle mark the demand for post-modern aspects of historical glory. The reconstruction of historical grandeur might reflect the growth of a war-guilt-free generation and acceptance of own history.

## BERLIN *LANDSCHAFT* AS PROCESS

Many methodologies of landscape interpretation include melding the phenomenological approaches of Bourdieu's *habisus* and Giddens' *structural the-*

*ory* with the *structure of feeling* articulated by Williams. The receiver, including the researcher of landscape chooses the interpretation which always comes from his or her system of values, education, background, or, shortly speaking, her or his culture (Robertson, Richards, 2003). The two major approaches, applied in this study: "landscape as text" and "iconographical landscape" are not mutually exclusive. The idea of combining the text metaphor with the visual and iconographical emphasis seems to be particularly stimulating and facilitates better understanding of the complexity of urban landscape.

Landscape however is very seldom a stable or fixed-for-ever spatial structure. Landscape is a cultural process that brings together the cultural meaning and the concrete actuality of everyday life. The dynamic and constructive nature of surrounding environment implicates cultural landscape studies as multi-vocal and multi-factor reading of the concept. The post-modern, "world as an arena" metaphor, seems to be the most appropriate attitude to understanding the urban landscape seen as a dynamic scene or theatre, an ongoing show with lush *geo-scenography*.

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