

The child, the shaman and the sense of the place

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Abstract

Whenever we are going to analyze and evaluate an environment, a site, a territory, we must free our minds from preconceptions and preclusions, trying to face them with an uncorrupted spirit, proposing to find conclusions only after systematizing data and information about the morphology of the place, its current state and its historical happenings that have changed it over time. Observers must have the shaman’s “educated” attitude and the child’s “naïve” one, at the same time, contemplating the possibility of observing not only what is visible, but also the soul of the place, that vital pulsation that we perceive with difficulty because overwhelmed by the deafening din of a semantic “Babel”. Thus, considering the emotional sphere of the user can help to understand the nature of places and to plan their transformation in an appropriate way.

Key words: landscape, architecture, technology, environment, place, territory.

“... once you begin to realize that we are not superior to the rest of the cosmos, but that we are simply a part of it, this creates a more compassionate and ethical orientation. If you know that the material reality is not the only one existing, you can leave your interest in getting everything that you can in this reality before dying.”¹

1. Introduction

The title of this paper intends to be evocative of an unusual approach to the landscape analysis, but as it could lead to some misunderstanding, it is clarified immediately that it does not prelude to the formulation of a dreamlike or, even worse, an esoteric approach to the study of the territory and landscape. Much simpler, it is an attempt to combine the numerous and rigorous studies on the issue with some considerations, based on emotional intelligence, which are rarely considered within the scientific field. In fact, one of the objectives in the field of architectural technology is to rationalize the design process; for this reason, at the meta-design stage, a series of topics to be addressed in anticipation of the final choices are established. Among the requirements to be considered before formalizing the technical and compositional choices of the final project, those relating to the emotional sphere of users are still little investigated so here we intend to help fill this void, referring to the indications from environmental psychology and pedagogical studies on child learning. That is why we hope in the reader's attention for ideas that, hopefully, can open to new readings and different approaches to design, on both an urban and a landscape scale.

The reference to the child, whose ability to analyze and understand the space for recreational and knowledge purposes is considered, and, on the other hand, the reference to the shaman, whose emotional adhesion to the phenomena of nature is appreciated, makes us go along unusual paths to interpret those complex realities that are shown before us as landscape, territory or urban environment, time after time.

The deep characteristics of territory and city involve our affective sphere and depend on the emotional bond that links man with his environment. For operational purposes, it consists in reading the invisible that pervades the territory, which is made up of history, dreams, aspirations and objects, too, inextricably bound together, considering that such aspects, in their whole, are not always considered for design purposes.

2. Listening to the place

Whenever we are going to analyze and evaluate an environment, a site, a territory, we must free our minds from preconceptions and preclusions, trying to face them with an uncorrupted spirit, proposing to find conclusions only after systematizing data and information about the morphology of the place, its current state and its historical

happenings that have changed it over time. Observers must have the shaman's "educated" attitude and the child's "naïve" one, at the same time, contemplating the possibility of observing not only what is visible, but also the soul of the place, that vital pulsation that we perceive with difficulty because overwhelmed by the deafening din of a semantic "Babel" (Pinto de Faria et al, 2013).

The skill to separate the intense signs from the mute and misleading ones depends on the depth of the analysis and the ability to put the acquired information in the right relationship. Inevitably, the character of the place (its "genius loci")² is not uniquely determinable as a plural, and differently perceived by the numerous subjects involved. The external observer (the critic, the scholar, the scientist), the resident (the one who lives in the place, with more or less firm roots), the fluctuating visitor (who knows the place and attends it for work or leisure, but who has no roots there) and the new citizen (the migrant for work or necessity, who struggles to identify him/herself with a space that is stranger to him).(Norberg-Schulz C., 2007)

Each one of these subjects tends to create a different image and define a specific knowledge of the place where he/she is, suggested by different needs, memories and backgrounds often in contrast one against the other.(Lynch K., 1981).

If the purpose of the analysis is the urban space design, then the synthesis between reasoning and needs can be achieved only through design, which must be respectful and "determined" at the same time. That is why the various sensitivities and actors must be put into operation, including economic, business and administrative stakeholders. (Cirafici et al, 2017).



Fig.1 - the character of the place (its "genius loci") is not uniquely determinable as a plural, and differently perceived by the numerous subjects involved

3. The disinterested approach from the child

The broader look that a child may have of a place perhaps does not overcome the size of the courtyard where he/she plays, yet he/she perceives every little detail of that courtyard; what is not perceived by the “distracted” look from the adult, is perceived by the patient and analytical look from the child. His/her innocent and “disinterested” vision captures aspects that are invisible to adults because the symbiosis between children and space contemplates an animistic relationship destined to disappear over time. For the child the relationship with things goes beyond the border of vigilant consciousness, establishing a singular and deep empathy with them. The stone, the leaf and the insect appear bigger and more vivid than they actually are, as if they were emphasized by a sort of mental “macro-photograph”. The young developing mind captures material, tactile and chromatic aspects that can be perceived by adults only through hyper - aware analytical methods. The child is, instead, a sort of involuntary scientist who, by virtue of his/her extraordinary learning skills, can perceive aspects of the world that are invisible to us. (Piaget J., 1973)

The child observes tangible things driven by an innate curiosity that makes him/her overcome every fear and hesitation in order to acquire knowledge. Most of images and judgments related to space and environment depend, therefore, largely on the data and sensations developed by each of us in the first years of life.



Fig. 2 - The child observes tangible things driven by an innate curiosity that makes him/her overcome every fear and hesitation in order to acquire knowledge.

I think, as well as Piaget does, that the children's mind is not a tabula rasa on which adults and educators are the only ones able to deposit knowledge and skills. (Piaget J., 1966) Every little man has got, however, his own creative capacity of knowledge and is able to create and independently verify his own theories of the world. In adulthood, we will have relationships with the others, according to happy or traumatic experiences, lived with the adults during our childhood, as well as we will have relationships with the environment, assessing its aspects, according to a variety of information acquired and elaborated when we were children.³

On the base of what said above, we can identify, at least, two aspects of childish learning that can be usefully applied in environmental and landscape research. First of all, we must carefully evaluate the curious but, at the same time, light and disinterested attitude that the child shows in observing the space around him/herself, considering that in childhood the curiosity for “things” is incomparably more developed than in adults, not only for the need to learn, but also by virtue of an animistic relationship that the child establishes with the world around him/her (animals and things are sentient beings in all respects for the child). It must be considered, then, the meticulous and analytical look with which the child instinctively “captures” things images, even the smallest ones, to enrich his/her memory, a store from which he/she will draw later not always and not necessarily only for utilitarian purposes, but also just to support particular emotional conditions (Bosco A., 2011).

According to our reasoning, the scholar must, therefore, try to implement in his/her studies and observations of design sites, during preliminary investigations, but also in decision-making, this freedom of attitude because this is the only way to observe reality without any preconceived ideas or interpretative hypotheses previously elaborated. In fact, it would be appropriate for every professional “observer” to be able to mitigate the rigidity of the technical look on the territory with the empathy, typical of the child playing in his/her courtyard.

4. The transcendental approach from the shaman

The shaman is a figure, now disappeared in the "technological" contemporary society, who was considered by the members of a tribe able to get in touch with the hidden forces of nature, through an initiatory path (descent to the underworld and cathartic revival). In the ancient communities, the shaman was, therefore, the privileged depositary of the mysteries of the unknown, that transcended the visible and the knowable, but which ineluctably influenced men's life. It was the link between the earthly and supernatural world, able to heal from the evils and show the right way of living in the world in harmony with the primordial forces of nature, without offending or contradicting them. He was a spiritual master and a guide to adopt the wisest choices in everyday behaviors.

Today, according to the criteria already outlined, the scholar should therefore retrieve the attitude of the shaman towards the environment, considering and understanding its deepest valences, thereby exacerbating his/her ability to get in harmony with the elements and the environmental dynamics. Each specialist may thus prefigure the behaviors that stakeholders must adopt to preserve the territory and defend it from inappropriate interventions.

Going on with the metaphor, we can underline how the study of the altered states of consciousness, closely linked with that one of a shamanic culture, quite always results ambiguously charming for many of us. Similarly, each of us puts into effect severe mechanisms of setting aside these conjectures of a transcendental character, as they are deeply in contrast with our deep-rooted rational culture. The Oriental people seem to have less hesitation in considering the coexistence of immanent and transcendent in the real world, without denying in advance the possible presence of magical and irrational in everyday life. In other cultures, therefore, the difference between rational and irrational is sometimes so subtle that it completely disappears when we must explain behaviors and potentialities of the man and his own mind.

As we have already said, it is precisely the infantile trait of our Western way of thinking that must be nurtured to deal fully with the question of the spirit of the places. Therefore, the shamanic way of reading the diseases of the body and human soul, opportunely transposed, can help us to experience a non-banal reading of places meant as an extension of our inner world.

We put all our skills in territories, when the man inhabits a territory; it becomes integral part of his inner and outer life, ineluctably. That is why only a pragmatic and technical analysis of the territory is limited in comparison with the complexity of the interactions established between the place and the man who lives there. It becomes important to read everything that goes beyond the physical appearance of places, starting from history and memory to get to the myth, art and symbolic meanings of anthropic spaces and artifacts.



Fig. 3 - When the man inhabits a territory, it becomes integral part of his inner and outer life, ineluctably

The reading of a territory that does not consider the "effectiveness" of the intangible meanings will always be incomplete and inadequate to support any kind of decision, both if they aim at preserving the state of things as long as possible and if they aim at creating transformations that meet new needs (Bosco A. et al, 2012).

Finally, we can borrow the open attitude towards the intangible values of the places from the shaman, that are not immediately perceptible, but that can be perceived only through an initiation process of identification with their deep aspects.



Fig.4 - It becomes important to read everything that goes beyond the physical appearance of places...

Obviously admitting of not being able to put into action initiatory paths of any kind by a professional, we can alternatively consider some analytical and rational practices that lead us to investigate the spirit of the place through the comparative study of history, culture, art and social phenomena, which have characterized the examined site over time. (Violano Perez, 2018)

We can understand the man's character and feelings through the careful observation of his behavior, as well as we can understand the places through the analysis of morphological and environmental aspects immediately perceptible showing the holistic nature of the system of spaces and relationships of the place at the same time.

5. Conclusions

What has been exposed in this article, even if with obvious omissions and inevitable synthesis, intends to be a contribution to the definition of new paradigms for the bio-cultural landscapes design that involves our country, both for the huge diffusion of territories with beautiful landscapes, and for the remarkable and now sadly established fragility of the territories themselves. For these and other reasons, this issue is

increasingly taking a central position in the philosophical-cultural debate that currently involves the technological design of architecture and landscape.

The technological culture of the design has freed itself from the narrow disciplinary links, imposed by the commitment mono-oriented to analysis and innovation in the field of building elements and systems. The scientific community of architecture technologists has felt the need to make it explicit, with greater and greater commitment, the deep relationships that link the building and technological choices in construction with the destinations of landscape and territory that are more extensive and delicate. (Bosco A. et al, 2017). That's why the disciplinary boundaries have been expanded up to include issues and sensitivities typical of other knowledge fields, never forgetting the fundamental status of Technology of Architecture, which is represented by the essential need to give practical substance to theoretical assumptions. The achievements in the theoretical field are, in fact, for architecture technologists, always functional to the creation of new analytical and/or operative instruments useful to designers and operators in their daily activities of transformation and maintenance of the territory.

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¹ Interview with Michael Harner, published originally in *Higher Wisdom: Eminent Elders Explore the Continuing Impact of Psychedelics*, Roger Walsh and Charles S. Grob (editors), pp. 159-177, 2005. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY. Translation coming from www.studisciamanici.it website (Jan 2007).

²Speaking of places, we cannot avoid mentioning Christian Norberg-Schulz and his "Genius loci", especially for those who are profoundly indebted to his illuminating analyses and insights into the history and character of the city, as the writer is.

³See Jean Piaget's studies on the psychological development of the child.