

Landscape Aesthetics – Observing and Creating Atmospheres

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Abstract

Visiting a landscape for the first time often creates a strong impression of wholeness, even uniqueness. You feel yourself drawn into a certain mood or atmosphere, to which every detail is contributing in a particular way. In this first moment one can't decide exactly if the mood is inside or outside. But paying attention to how the mood is changing while walking from one place to another, we suddenly realise: it is both at the same time.

Landscapes, as well as atmospheres of cities and places represent and reflect the consciousness and the value systems of individuals and communities and are as such readable images of subsequent phases of history. In this sense, the aesthetics of landscape becomes a key factor in landscape development as well as in developing self-responsibility for the creation of atmospheres arising out of every human action.

If the result of a planning and building process shall not damage but enhance the unique appearance of urban areas and landscapes it is crucial to harmonise the atmosphere of a place with the atmosphere of the new concept.

This approach has been applied to the landscape design of the main building at the hospital “Havelhöhe”, Berlin.

(detailed description: www.petrarca.info)

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Experiencing landscape – sensing the atmosphere of a place

Visiting a landscape for the first time often creates a strong impression of wholeness, even uniqueness. You feel yourself drawn into a certain mood or atmosphere, to which every detail is contributing in a particular way. In this first moment one can't decide exactly if the mood is inside or outside. But paying attention to how the mood is changing while walking from one place to another, we suddenly realise: it is both at the same time. This experience can be enhanced by attending to contrasts and the transformation of atmospheres, sensing the border leading from one site to the next. It is possible to draw a mood map out of memory expressing in colour and structure inner images coming up through sensorial perception.



pictures 1,2: mood maps painted in groups of 4 people after a silent walk at a bio-dynamic farm at Biederthal, Alsace, (F)

This approach can be used in the same way for urban areas, including highly industrialised zones, as well as to realise the atmosphere of architecture and city places.¹

Objective thinking and imaginative participation

On the other hand we can observe what is physically there: trees, houses, the colour of the sky we experience as objects outside. Looking after different plants, movement of the surface, the geological layers, we gain a lot of interesting details, which could be analysed even closer using scientific methods. Describing everything from outside we are taking the position of the objective observer, a necessary condition in order to develop self-consciousness as human beings. But at the same time we feel disconnected from the experience of unity and wholeness, from meeting a character we had in the first impression. How can this objective point of view, which is quite essential to find orientation in daily life, be connected to the comprehensive, but fugitive impression of the atmosphere of landscape? Each thing has a surrounding of its own

¹ Christopher Day (2003): Consensus design, Architectural Press.

and contributes to the whole picture, thus creating an atmosphere on a larger scale whose extension depends on the interested observer.



picture 3

In this picture of the lake Mjosa in Norway² there are bare granit hills with lichen and moss only in patches. In the foreground where the pansies are growing, we also see stonecrop, sheep´s sorrel, Lady´s bedstraw and hoary cinquefoil. Remarkably we see quite a variety of species in a characteristic community, but all plants have the same growth style: very small, condensed, the green foliage reduced.



picture 4



picture 5

The first site is in the background in picture four. The pansy grows in the foreground, in a community that partly consists of the same species. Again, all plants show the same growth style, this time loose, taller, with very delicate foliage in greater distances around the stem. The same may be said of the plants of the third site (picture 5). A vertical section is shown to reveal the shady space created in response to the light where the soil is fertile. All we normally see is the green cover.

Paying attention to the similarities in shape and gesture we realise different atmospheres as inner images corresponding to what we perceive. Moving further around the border of the lake we will gain a lot of additional views and images. "We are active when we walk around and make connections between the things we perceive, so that the inner "image" grows richer and fuller. It is not an image in the usual sense, however, for there is no simple term to define it. Something comes up that is like a memory and yet something entirely new: the idea or "genius" of the place."³

² Jochen Bockemühl (ed.) 1992: *Awakening to landscape*, S.109-111.

³ Ebd. S.62

Visiting the same place during the course of the year we will experience various changes in the whole mood expressed in colour and structure: in winter and early spring the trees stand out clearly against the sky and the nature of the terrain can be seen. We feel drawn to the first signs of spring, like the brilliant green and golden yellow of marsh marigolds in a pond margin. In summer the crowns of the trees become large shade-giving spheres and vegetative growth is developing, filling the open spaces with thickets of stemmy plants and flowers.⁴ “All these images, we can never see at the same time, and which may indeed be mutually exclusive, come together in a single whole in our minds, a whole to which we now turn.”⁵

Realising the atmosphere of something means to realise the inner activity and experience relating ourselves to the surrounding world. What we focus on, what we have in mind while observing with our senses, determines what appears as reality in front of our eyes. This relationship between the observer and the perceptible world can be characterised as *aesthetic*: *Aesthetics is the actual reality as experienced by the individual*. It is sensorial knowledge, contrasting the virtual reality as presented in the media.

Atmospheres as readable images of inner intentions

Landscapes, as well as atmospheres of cities and places represent and reflect the consciousness and the value systems of individuals and communities and are as such readable images of subsequent phases of history. In this sense, the aesthetics of landscape becomes a key factor in landscape development⁶ as well as in developing self-responsibility for the creation of atmospheres arising out of every human action.

Acting creatively in correspondence with the surrounding world includes perceiving the place, identifying oneself with its character as well as practical designing and building activities. The first step is wondering, taking in the first impression, before observing the physical details. Repeating this journey out of memory we can get conscious of links and relations in structure, colours and shapes. If we leave this image for the moment and reflect on the journey a second time, may be the next day, we are able to reveal gestures and characteristics of the different sites. Applying these steps repeatedly we are identifying ourselves more and more with the place allowing the “genius loci” to speak within us.⁷

For both the place study and the design concept it is important to become aware of possible guiding intentions behind. Practising this with plants, colours, structures, proportions etc. will help to connect our thinking, feeling and willing processes to the complex interactions of atmospheres. If the result of a planning and building process shall not damage but enhance the unique appearance of urban areas and landscapes it is crucial to harmonise the atmosphere of a place with the atmosphere of the new concept.

Realising the atmosphere of a place – a social event

Expressing the atmosphere of an urban settlement or a landscape, weaving in between and above all perceptible details is a creative activity of every individual person contributing to the process. While practising this as an exercise within a group of people there is happening something else:

⁴ Jochen Bockemühl (ed.) 1992: *Awakening to landscape*, S.66-69.

⁵ Ebd. S.62

⁶ PETRARCA- European Academy of Landscape Culture (2003): position paper, www.petrarca.info

⁷ Margaret Colquhoun (2006): *Reading Nature as a Text – Goethe’s Science Today, New Views*.

Listening to the images and experiences of others is a creative and active deed too. Reflecting again to our own picture we realise that the previous image has been changed.

As long as every contribution is related to sensual perception there is no difficulty to insert different points of view into my own picture. If this process is progressing well a common picture will arise out of the group activity entailing the individual perspective at the same time. This overall picture doesn't mean the lowest common denominator, but is growing out of the context and interrelations of the individual contributions.

This kind of experience can form a common ground to stand on for further design and building projects.

Hospital "Havelhöhe", Berlin(D) – a practical example

In the hospital complex "Havelhöhe" in Berlin, the central building and its surrounding is going to be transformed to incorporate the accident and emergency department. In a 16 ha landscape garden with meadows, woodland, partly old trees and flower beds on dry, sandy hilltops above the river "Havel", the hospital area consists of four huge buildings and several smaller ones built in the 1930 as a military academy. The rectangular buildings are containing two floors with the ground floor slightly elevated. They are compassing a green patio. The main building orientated in the north south axis, is located at the main road separating the building from the green courtyard with shady groups of old trees on its westside. In front of the main entrance there is just black asphalt, only little stripes of grass further aside. The opposite side to the East encloses a huge terrace plateau facing a parking space.

The following description will focus on the place study and the project intention of the terrace side of this building.



Picture 6: terrace side of the main building

From the first impression to the identity of the place

Entering the building from the east side one feels disorientated. Ascending tremendously wide steps one reaches the huge terrace embraced by two old Chinese apple-trees with fading crowns. From a height of 2,5 ft above the ground it is very pleasant to look into a wide surrounding. But the view out is blocked by a dense row of trees. The marvellous, loose crown of an acacia tree to the right and the couple of oak and maple trees at the woodland edge to the left are important view points. But where the steps of the entrance plateau are reaching the terrace one feels blocked again by huge evergreen bushes on both sides.

Looking to the south the terrace plateau is dominated by overwhelming growth: young shoots of ashes, maples and oaks are growing between old dense bushes, nice patches of flowers are glimpsing like shining eyes out of overgrowing grasses and weeds. The mood feels tired and

old. To the north everything is very formed, hard and stiff; it is quite open with a wide view to the beautiful oak and maple, but one doesn't feel welcome to enter. Some square flower beds with single shrubs are scattered like isles in the grey, uniform terrace floor. Wild roses and sea buckhorn are embracing the border to the parking place.

Stepping down from the entrance plateau one would like to walk down slowly, majestically like a king continuing into a far reaching landscape. But in contrary, the steps are ending at a blockade of three rows of parking cars with two roads in between. It is a very bare and tensioned situation like being in a desert. The strict row of young Ginkgo and cherry trees in the middle are even enhancing the feeling of being blocked.

After realising the first impression and what is physically there, we can ask ourselves what kind of image is arising out of this experience, revealing the character and identity of the site. The main building is very isolated from the surrounding landscape garden, like descended to earth directly from heaven. There are no footpaths to guide visitors safely and pleasantly to the entrance. At the south and west side it feels warm and sunny, like being in the Mediterranean, whereas the northern part at the woodland edge is half-shady and fresher.

Relating the place to the surrounding landscape all elements are present: the wide river Havel with its mild atmosphere, light and warmth at the hilltop above, getting stronger at the lifted terrace plateau. The natural terrain is smoothly waving, formed by water forces.

On the other hand the place is overformed by a hard, stiff and monotone architecture, being traumatised, because there is no dialogue possible between the building and its surrounding. There are unsolved contradictions between the sclerotic tendency in the north and the complete dissolving of form in the south, and also concerning the opposite sides of the building: the terrace side wants to be open and friendly, but there are always barriers on the way. The entrance on the other side looks refusing although it faces the attracting green courtyard.

Project Intention

The decision to transfer the main entrance to the terrace side at the east is much more fitting to the architecture. After incorporating the accident and emergency department it will be a very busy area, whereas the other side can be much more tranquil, with protecting and sheltering qualities. This means to integrate trees and flower beds into a flowing, naturally coloured pavement in order to connect the building to the green patio.

The terrace side should be clear and easy to survey with a short access (through a ramp) for ambulance vehicles and rhythmically swinging footpaths embedded in a green shelter of trees and meadows. On the other hand it needs cosy and sheltered spaces on top of the terrace for visitors and patients to wait and sit, also for co-workers to rest. It is planned to integrate groups of bushes together with rounded flower beds and wild flower patches in strong colours of yellow, orange and red to express the Mediterranean atmosphere, and plantings in white, pink, blue and violet at the more shady north side.

The space in front of the terrace will become an open piazza to meet each other in the shade of trees. Therefore parking can only be at the border, leaving out the middle part corresponding to the entrance hall.



Picture 7: Project scheme, realisation in 2009

Together with the two wings of the ramp the main access and exit ways are forming a waving movement which is able to create a gesture of its own, contrasting the strong and stiff character of the building. We have been inspired also by the previous stage of the ensemble including a water basin to harmonise the architecture with the surrounding landscape. Now, the water element will be represented by a fountain at the centre of the terrace plateau.

Despite the costs of the new concept are exceeding the budget the project scheme has been accepted because the different atmospheres of the new concept are picking up the hidden potential of the place. The experiences in various cases are showing that it is not difficult to reach consensus in planning decisions among people who have been part of a place study.

Besides this it is a strong experience of self-development learning to express inner images together with sensorial perception. It improves social relations within the group participating because each person is meeting the other one at a deeper spiritual level, thus creating real community. This approach can be applied at different places and with various design tasks. It is scientific also in the sense that the outer and inner images are expressed and documented in a way that the results are comprehensible, but with the difference that the subject is taken into account and objective thinking is complemented by imaginative participation.

The main result is, that this approach enables people to reconnect with their natural and social surrounding thus creating the fundament to act responsibly in keeping and developing its character and identity.

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