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THE AMBIGUOUS SURFACE: POETIC, FORMAL AND PROGRAMMATIC READING OF THE TERRITORY

Abstract

Prior to the emergence of landscape urbanism as a disciplinary discourse, a series of treatises in the late 20th century and early 2000s set out to unriddle the complex space of the territory. However, an intertextual section exposes a common descriptive problem of the space of the territory as a vast terrain of indeterminate and uncertain transformations. Adding to this ambiguity is the lack of design and form-giving discourse in the projective scope of urbanism parallel to its systematic shift from a design discipline to a social science. In the past century, the modern world has been dedicated to the city, and there is little and limited thought about the space of the territory which has substantially and inadvertently become a smeared backside that maintains the cities. Moreover, a twofold condition corroborates this notion since the late 1960s – a tug of war between the postmodern architects’ preoccupation with nostalgic, stylistic, scenic, and shallow buildings and the urbanists’ increasing concern for the city as a social problem at the cost of avoiding architectural design. At the Aspen Design Conference in 1955, architect Victor Gruen advocated that architects should expand their views beyond individual buildings and find architecture in the environment, employing architecture instrumentality, perhaps, on concepts of climate, geography, and geology. Therefore, the central idea of this paper is to explore the “terrain beyond the built” from a poetic, formal, and programmatic perspective and to question the role of the architect in the foreseeable future.

Keywords: Landscape, urbanism, territory, transformations

'Architecture today cannot concern itself only with that one set of structures that happen to stand upright and be hollow "buildings" in the conventional sense. It must concern itself with all manmade elements that form our environments: with roads and highways, with signs and posters, with outdoor spaces as created by structures, and with cityscape and landscape' (Gruen 1955).

POETIC READING OF THE TERRITORY

A formatively allusive understanding of undetermined spaces is given in the text “Terrain Vague,” 1995, written by the Spanish architect Ignasi de Sola-Morales. The author informs the reader, not of figurative or pragmatic findings but indicatively, of a metaphorical and subjective understanding of the landscape. In his introduction, Morales briefly discusses photo montaging, fragments of photographic images that do not show a real landscape or a city but steer the viewer into a specific realm of semiology. Moreover, this concept speculates a practical notion that casts light on a fundamental morphological comprehension of the landscape as a series of elements, signs, and symbols, and in this case, graphical images. Further in the text, I shall discuss these spatial presentations coinciding with Greggoti’s article “*The form of the territory.*”

Nevertheless, a poetic approach is essential to begin with because, as Morales suggests, the essence of the landscape may dissolve when it is bluntly verified with a set of already approved urban procedures. The author describes the field as an *‘empty, abandoned space in which a series of occurrences have taken place and subjugated the eye of the urban photographer. Such urban space, a terrain vague, assumes the status of fascination, the most solvent sign with which to indicate what cities are and what our experience of them is’* (Solà-Morales 1995: 119).

Morales primarily explores the etymology of the word “terrain” due to the limited connotations of the English word “land.” In contrast to the concept of land, the terrain concept is more expansive, including more spatial connotations, and moves away from the idea of an exploitation plot. “Vague”, on the other hand, confines an abundance of definitions. Firstly, the German ‘woge’ is related to the movement of seas: oscillation, instability, and fluctuation. Secondly, from the French language, the roots lay in “vacuus,” which yields connotations of vacancy, emptiness, and availability. Another meaning derives from the Latin “vagus,” closely linked to future models of “program and event” in the landscape urbanism discourse, giving indeterminate, imprecise, blurred, and uncertain sense.

The inhumane scale and lack of evident information make it easy to describe the overwhelming vastness and inhospitable openness of the terrain as uncertain and unknown, concluding that contemporary city planning cannot do justice to such space. Despite that, a terminological distinction can foster metaphorical understandings that can evolve into morphological concepts that can illustrate a comprehending of the terrain. The author suggests denoting such an ambiguous and open space as a gestalt of dual indeterminacy. He gives an example of such binary understanding of polarities, describing the common modern dweller seeking for: *‘forces instead of forms, for the incorporated instead of the distant, for the haptic instead of the optic, the rhizomatic instead of the figurative,’* assuming that architecture is *‘forever on the side of forms, of the distant, of the optical and the figurative’* (Solà-Morales 1995: 123).

When dealing with the space of the territory as a subjective ensemble of meanings and material/immaterial presentation which potentially reveal the true nature of such space, Morales (1995: 123) questions: *‘how can architecture act in the terrain vague without becoming an aggressive instrument of power and abstract reason?’*

This statement is closely related to the shortcomings of our administrative understanding

of cities as formal, rational, and static concepts which prescribe the same logic over non urbanized residual spaces. Suppose we are to avoid this predicament of orthodox urban planning. In that case, Morales (1995: 123) suggests an elastic architectural comprehension of urban continuity. He writes:

“not the continuity of the planned, efficient, and legitimized city, but of the flows, the energies, the rhythms established by the passing of time and the loss of limits... we should treat the residual city with contradictory complicity that will not shatter the elements that maintain its continuity in time and space.”

Morales imposes the fundamental question of how to approach a terrain vague when all urban planning rules become obsolete. Finally, and in relation to his question, once we develop a poetic recognition of the space of the territory, it is essential to investigate figurative and formative theories to understand the terrain as a physical concept should we attempt to design such a space.

FORMAL READING OF THE TERRITORY

In the process of clarifying the spatial ambiguity of the terrain, I will reflect on the text “The Form of The Territory,” originally published in 1981, written by Italian architect Vittorio Gregotti. The work investigates the possibilities of a formal anthropological and geographical analysis of the landscape, discarding any theoretical matter. In contrast to “terrain vague,” Gregotti explores new formal methodologies in which the geographic dimension can coincide with that of architectural formation. Gregotti explains how similar geophysical territories can differ due to their anthropogeographical origins and how history and culture can subjugate a new understanding due to “geographical” reproduction. He accentuates a need to cast away preconceived notions in order to discover new meanings.

‘This experience benefits from new points of view and dynamics of observation, from recent means of communication, from original strategies for the realization of collective and individual objectives, and also from a diversity of signifiers whose image is imbued with the new scientific hypotheses about nature, matter, and space and with artistic creation of new and diversified figurative techniques’ (Gregotti 2009: 9).

Unlike Morales, Gregotti defines four disciplinary conditions and prescribes a four-step operation to determine the space of the territory as a physical agglomeration. The first condition is to understand that the design process is no longer a linear trajectory between concept, analysis, and project. The second condition is to dissociate the building as the exclusive outcome of architecture. The third condition is to undefine the architect as a creator of forms but of functions. Finally, the fourth condition is to acknowledge that the architect can construct a landscape. Gregotti stresses the fact that the abundance and potentials of constructing a landscape are not exclusively bound to the physical realm but that the physical realm is the most revealing one. It enables recognizing the universe as the quality of matter and allows modulation if the landscape is perceived as an ensemble.

As Hashim Sarkis explains: *“Gregotti applies a duality of typo-morphologies, the field, and the ensemble, to organise and relate across scales from the architectural to the territorial’* (Sarkis 2014). Moreover, a definition of a field can be detected when *‘the sign made by man*

or nature determines a formal ensemble that can be demarcated' (Sarkis 2014). Therefore, one field can be a constituted chain of elements or a macrostructure that cohabits a series of smaller fields. However, as suggested, these demarcations are not always physical signs but metaphorical and rely on and are limited to cultural semantics, semiotics, and landscape hermeneutics. Before exploring the meaning of the signs, here are the four steps by which Gregotti (2009:14) addresses the problem of terminology (semantics) and a formal description (semiotics) of an "in situ" territory (landscape hermeneutics):

1. *Reading and classifying formal typologies and anthropogeographical structure;*
2. *Implementing cartography of the formal values of the territory from the point of view of the geographical subsoil and the intervention;*
3. *Reading and representing signs of formal transformations generated by the introduction of planning structures; and*
4. *Establishing defining criteria for the repertory of forms.'*

Now, essentially, the space of the territory has been demarcated into several fields (landscapes), each unique and itself limited. However, this limitation should transcend the factual and geomorphological boundaries if we are to discover concepts and operations unknown. If, for a moment, these geophysical dimensions shift to spheres of meanings of signs, there flickers a possibility for new curious findings. Intrinsically, man would primarily denote these fields by evoking an inventory of already known, learned, or obvious signs, which are in close relation to cultural and historical influences, and maybe this is the obstacle that we need to overcome. For example, a plot of land with fertile soil exploited for growth of vegetables would instantly be recognized as agrarian, "an unspoiled form of nature," which is recognizable in itself. This recognition is beneficial in the first steps of demarcating the terrain into fields, and however, it limits the field to a primordial function and gives no further new opportunities.

What if we change the understanding of this well-established sign into something else. What if the agricultural plot is no longer seen primarily for its land-productive feature but rather, for example, as a belt of transmission or a field connector. Perhaps this could help us escape such well-learned notions and open opportunities for writing new inventories of meanings? Could this then inspire new concepts of approaching the terrain? On the subject, Gregotti (2009:15) writes:

'The reversibility of this relation implies the identification of landscape as an autonomous form that can be remodeled with appropriate symbols that have yet to be deciphered.'

Subsequently, Gregotti (2009: 18) finds similar approaches and opportunities in other disciplines such as, for example, contemporary mythology. One exciting fact derives from this view of giving new meanings to familiar signs and elements that can create an overall figurative and semantic concept that differs from nature by which it is surrounded, empirically and "a priori." Like mythologies, establishing semantic relations with values that are later inscribed into a series of images can suffice for a formal structuring of an environment. However, some landforms radiate such a strong physical, historical, and philosophical presence that they are not prone to changes. Gregotti calls these presentations "*natural totemic elements*" or landscape formations that emanate such exceptional nature and should consistently be recognized as physical references, such as the volcanic atoll, the acropolis, or the center of a radial plane.

Moreover, the totems become initial markers, starting points of determining the field conditions of the space of the territory. These geomorphological moments across the terrain could perhaps give insight to what Morales describes as elements that maintain continuity in time and space. These pragmatic theories that constrain or decrease the ambiguity of the physical space of the territory also open doors to architectural procedures that form methodological processes and design principles that include territorial scales from biological to geological, from artificial topographies (extrusions) depressions) to fabricating terrains, from megaforms to masterprogrammes.

PROGRAMMATIC READING OF THE TERRITORY

Lastly, the third component necessary to comprehend the space of the territory is the functional perspective relating to its ecology and intrinsic programmatic concepts through landscapes. On a larger scale, the space of a territory represents a place on Earth's surface constructed of several compounds. The space of the territory can also be called a geographic space constituted of natural, social, cultural, political, and economic components. Some of these are physical and concrete, some are fluid and in processes, and some are imaginary constructs and invisible boundaries. However, the ungraspable scale and unobtainable human comprehension of such complex geographic surfaces require a scale down to organizational models that today, perhaps, with all digital tools at hand, can correspond to the disciplinary framework of architecture urbanism, and landscape. Moreover, a framework of a new architecture that parts way with postmodernism, a new urbanism that no longer avoids architecture and treats the city solely as a social problem, and new landscapes that part way with pastoral environmentalism. Related to the newness, Rem Koolhaas wrote an article "Whatever happened to urbanism?" published in the book "S, M, L, XL," 1995 in which he states:

'If there is to be a "new urbanism" it will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty; it will no longer be concerned with the arrangement of more or less permanent objects but with the irrigation of territories with potential; It will no longer aim for stable configurations but for the creation of enabling fields that accommodate processes that refuse to be crystallized into definitive form' (Koolhaas 1997: 969).

In that manner, the uncertain, irrigable, unstable and uncrystallized landscape starts to act as the ideology of urbanism; if we consider urban and spatial planning disciplines that program surfaces. Furthermore, if we agree with Stan Allen's statement that *'landscape is not only a formal model of urbanism today but perhaps more importantly, a model for process'* (Allen 2002), then we also agree that its programmatic features represent that exact processing nature. However, it is only very recently that the realm of architecture is becoming adjacent to the non-anthropocentric environment, tackling challenges and consequences caused by newly emerging climate, also known as anthropogenic climate change. While our design discipline, specific to the architecture of buildings, is waking up from what Rem Koolhaas calls the "semantic nightmare" of postmodernism, other spatial typologies have begun to evolve, conceptually and morphologically, more precisely, that of the "park." The space and

the image of the park, an instance of landscape and, therefore, a piece of territory, slowly started to act as a field operator that parted ways with what de Sola Morales described as “Terrain Vague” and viewed the territory as a space of abundant information, introducing geography to the realm of architecture. Because the park is a medium between the metropolis and the landscape, it absorbs inputs for both sides, explaining its immense design and program complexity - opening questions and spatial challenges in favor of the unfinished, aformal, imprecise, and undecided approach. Given today’s speed of our transforming urban culture and global ecology amidst a rapidly changing climate, we must ask ourselves, “what does it mean to design a park in the 21st century?” As Charles Waldheim writes in “Landscape as Urbanism” (2016), two projects in the fourth quarter of the previous century suggested a paradigm shift in the re-conception of contemporary urbanism. In these two projects, the first by Bernard Tschumi, and the second by Rem Koolhaas and OMA for the “Parc de la Villette” competition, the landscape is perceived as a spatial model capable of dealing with complex intersections between public life and public events, urban infrastructure, and flexible enough to plot future unprecedented city scenarios. The two projects did not focus on reproducing familiar public park typologies or typical city regeneration strategies. The latter demonstrates a construct of horizontal fields that would inadvertently change over time, a normed schema capable of cohabiting unpredicted circumstances in the future, invoking Koolhaas’ Delirious New York vertical juxtaposition of myriad programs superimposed in Manhattan’s skyscrapers. Subsequently, Waldheim (2016:15) writes that in these projects, the landscape became a model of urban processes carried out through the “design” of programs and events as surrogates for contemporary urbanism.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the exploration of this text suggests that the space of the territory can be recognized as a geographical, socio-cultural, and philosophical construct through aspects of poetic subjectivism, typo-morphological investigations, and programmatic inscriptions. It accentuates the differences between the three ways of reading and understanding the territory, albeit points towards their mutual codependence in comprehending the space of the territory as a coherent and meaningful whole. Moreover, it recognizes the urge for a necessary evolution and hybridization of architecture, urbanism, and landscape with other scientific disciplines and entities. Employing a multiscalar and multidisciplinary approach influences the design discourse and praxis and, thus, influences the material realities of cities, regions, and landscapes. It pushes away the focus and obsession with the city as a man made large-scale object and advocates, instead, for infra-surfaces of endless intensifications, opportunities, and diversifications. Furthermore, it stages the landscape as the emblematic space of the 21st-century design ideology, attentive to what Koolhaas (1997: 969) describe as no longer ‘... *about meticulous definition, the imposition of limits, but about expanding notions, denying boundaries, not about separating and identifying entities.*’

The different explorations suggest a disciplinary turn that does not codify the architect as the creator of forms and detaches the building as the object with which architecture is purely identified. Moreover, it credits the architect capable of constructing a landscape.

This specification does not aspire to erase the bond between architecture and buildings. However, it is necessary to delegate a different disciplinary objective that links architecture, urbanism, and landscape architecture within the context of function-defining sciences. This need becomes evident when the architect turns to other disciplines to elaborate projects outside architecture's orthodox scale. If interested to escape the predicament of uneasily justified territorial interventions, it is essential to expand the architect's inventory of tools and procedures with formal findings from other sciences and scientific systems, aiming not to discredit the current work of the architects but rather entrust them with tasks that channel and formalize a larger scope of data, functions, and space.

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