

Sensory Deprivation: Globalisation & the Phenomenology of Landscape Architecture

Jacky Bowring
Landscape Architecture Group
Environment, Society and Design Division
Lincoln University, New Zealand

Globalisation is elided with Westernisation

A pervasive perspective on globalisation is that the West's needs and wants have come to represent the core of ideals that generate dominant aspirations worldwide. This is seen in some circles as a 'gift' to the globe. Anthony Giddens (Giddens, 2000), for example, explained the ways in which globalisation, westernisation and modernisation are tightly intertwined. However, critics like Amartya Sen, the 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economic Science, remind us that it is naïve to simply align globalisation and westernisation, since much of the history of ideas which became spread world wide came from the East. (Sen, 2002)

Bearing such critique in mind, the influence of the West as a dominant voice remains difficult to ignore wherever there is a drive for development, and the rise of capitalism as a *modus operandi*. All of Western colonialism is visual colonialism, creating 'scopic regimes' that gave led to the rupture of many ligatures between indigenous peoples and their lands. This Western dominance becomes significant in influencing the perception and design of landscape, as it brings centuries-old baggage of particular attitudes toward the relation between subject and object, between people and place.

Western culture is dominated by the visual

Ocularcentrism, or the hegemony of the eye, dominates the Western paradigm of engagement with the world since the Renaissance. Through globalisation's colonisation of time and space, the tyranny of the eye has become one of the most insidious and pervasive influences upon landscape worldwide. Both Martin Jay and David Michael Levin have written extensively on ocularcentrism, and the ongoing intersection with ideas of knowledge and those of sight (see for example, Jay, 1994; Levin, 1988). While the dominance of the eye can be traced back to the Greeks, it was primarily through developments such as perspective and the picturesque, and the rise of viewing-based practices such as museums, zoos and tourism, that sight became elevated to the position of the pre-eminent sense. The eye's dominion over sensory experience extends through to Modernism, where Marcel Duchamp rejected much of Modernism as "retinal art", or art purely about visuality, or 'opticality,' rather than about ideas. Ocularcentrism extends to the here and now, with contemporary Western culture emphatically visual, illustrated in the term 'visual culture' which encapsulates the breadth of practices associated with the eye, the gaze, and the operations of contemporary culture – everything from the digital, to cinema, to photography, and the consumption of all things visual. Visuality's association with the West also has connotations of a fear of the 'other', as expressed in Horkheimer and Adorno's warning that "When we see we remain what we are; but when we smell we are taken over by otherness. Hence the sense of smell is considered a disgrace in civilization, the sign of a lower social strata, lesser races and base animals." (in Classen, 1998, p.58)

The dominance of the visual is a two-headed sword. On one side, visuality is aligned with knowledge, and there is a plethora of figures of speech in the English language which connect understanding with sight, "I see" being one of the most obvious. On the other side, however,

pure opticality can also be interpreted as a failure to fully engage, an ‘overlooking’ of the richness of ideas that might be within what one beholds. The alignment of the ‘eye’ and the ‘I’ emphasises the distancing of the subject from the object, the ‘disembodied eye’ (Jay, 1994, p.81), or in landscape terms, a detachment of the self from place.

Place is inherently multi-sensory

Meaningful engagement of self with place is derived from knowing, understanding and remembering, and an authentic sense of ‘aesthetics’ – which in its original sense referred to far more than mere visuality. Memory, in particular, creates the framework for existential depth, for authentic connections to places and people. Ironically, given the dominance of the visual, it is the least efficient of the senses in the retention of memory. Place is inherently a collective, as well as individual, construction, meaning that attachment to particular places defines both culture and identity. One of the most poetic evocations of the connections of memory to the senses is the passage in Marcel Proust’s *The Remembrance of Things Past*, when ‘Marcel’ tasting a madeleine dipped in tea, which acted as kind of hyperlink into memories of his childhood remarks, “But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after all the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, but with more vitality, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.” (Proust, 2002 [1913], p. 39) To impoverish the experience of place, through, for example, the sensory deprivation of ocularcentrism, is thus to rupture the very cultures and identities that reside there.

A counter to the one-eyed focus of ocularcentrism is the recognition of *senses* of place that is found in the philosophy of phenomenology. While a field of great breadth, phenomenology is in general terms concerned with experience and existence, and subsequently with the multi-sensory and metaphysical dimensions of ‘being’. It is no coincidence that phenomenology is strongly associated with French philosophy, since “a great deal of recent French thought [is] imbued with a profound suspicion of vision and its hegemonic role in the modern era.” (Jay, 1994, p.14) Swimming against the tide of Western ocularcentrism, the French antiocularcentrist critique of Cartesian visuality infuses the work of phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]), Gaston Bachelard (1969), and Emmanuel Levinas (Critchley & Bernasconi, 2002), and through to the ‘theological turn’ of contemporary French phenomenology in the work of Michel Henry, Jean-Louis Chrétien and Jean-Luc Marion. (Janicaud et al, 2000). Phenomenology has been described as *the* philosophy of the twentieth century, and it holds the key to a twenty-first century reclamation of the multi-sensory nature of place.

Landscape architecture is about place

Starved of phenomenal connectivity, the Western tradition casts the subject as dislocated, such that “landscape begins with a notion, however vague or confused, of distancing and of loss of sight for both the physical eye and the eye of the mind” (Nancy, 2005, p.53) and becomes “the space of strangeness and estrangement and of the disappearance of the gods.” (Nancy, 2005, p.60) At landscape architecture’s very foundation, therefore, is the cleaving of the landscape and the self, and the elimination of the metaphysical. Added to this paradigm of detachment is landscape architecture’s operation as a design discipline, operating within the image-hungry domain of ‘visual culture’, where much of the exchange of ideas, and the inculcation of consumerist desires, is via visual sources such as magazines and television. The often temporary or ephemeral nature of fashion-driven imagery is also at odds with landscape architecture, since the evolution of design takes time in the landscape, it is not instant. Furthermore, design

professions have embraced digital media, reinforcing the already dominant visual aspect of the environment. The scission between sight and the other senses, save for perhaps the aural, is thus emphasised through the dominance of electronic media and information technology. A single-minded focus on tools such as visualising and drafting software has tended to hasten the dominance of visuality.

The connectivity of landscape architecture and the local, of the phenomena of place, are vulnerable to the distancing legacy of Western ocularcentrism and the voracious consumption of images which serves to exacerbate sensory deprivation. Consumers crave ‘looks’ or ‘images’, cycles of fashion and fetishisation drive landscape architects to produce endless swathes of eye candy. These designs tend to be shallow, superficial and placeless. They offer no food for the mind, no homes for the gods, no places for the soul.

Turning to the few examples which strive for phenomenal connection illustrates the ways in which maintaining senses of place need not be naïve or introspective. Resistance to the homogenising forces of globalisation is found in those examples which seek to enhance sensory experience, to develop the richness of place cues, at the same time as maintaining a global connection. Such tuning into phenomena, the amplification of place, is found in the works of Steven Holl, Alvar Aalto and Peter Zumthor. Through the use of materiality, sound, touch and the shaping of forms in response to light and landform, these designs intuit the phenomenology of design. The intertwining of place and form is found also in such works as Peter Eisenman’s Santiago de Compostela and Toyo Ito’s Tower of the Winds. Works such as these, although designed by architects, are also arguably landscape architectural, as each explores an integration of landscape and tectonic intervention.

Against the few examples which manifest sensitivity to phenomenology’s fugitive qualities are the vast waves of homogenised, superficial, and sensorially limited landscapes which deprive their users of existential richness. While it is naïve to ignore the forces of globalisation, it is perilous to simply buy into all that is on offer. Information technology, visual media, and the general baggage of capitalism are pernicious influences upon the particularity of place, reminding designers of their responsibility toward the construction of meaningful environments that are the foundation of culture and identity.

References

Bachelard, Gaston. (1969). *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Classen, C. (1998). *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender, and the Aesthetic Imagination*. New York: Routledge.

Critchley, S. and Bernasconi, R., Eds. (2002). *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Giddens, Anthony (2000). *Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping Our Lives*. London: Profile Books.

Janicaud, Dominique, et al. (2000). *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Jay, Martin. (1994). *Downcast Eyes: the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Levin, David Michael (1988). *The Opening of Vision*. New York: Routledge.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (2002). *The Phenomenology of Perception*. (Originally published in French in 1945 as *Phénoménologie de la Perception*). London: Routledge.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. (2005). "Uncanny Landscape." *The Ground of the Image*. (Trans. Jeff Fort). New York: Fordham University Press.

Proust, Marcel. (2002 [1913]) *Swann's Way* (Vol 1 of *The Remembrance of Things Past*). Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

Sen, Amartya (2002) How to judge globalism: global links have spread knowledge and raised average living standards. But the present version of globalism needlessly harms the worlds poorest. *The American Prospect* 13.1 (Jan 1, 2002): pA2(5).