

MAPPING THE INTANGIBLE:  
THE RE-SEMANTICISATION OF THE URBAN  
LANDSCAPES THROUGH DIFFERENT SPACES OF  
PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the contemporary crisis in urban landscape from a phenomenological point of view, presenting new research perspectives and analytical challenges for urban and landscape studies. This crisis in urban landscape is evident in the mapping of contemporary urban territories done by architects and urban scholars. These representations do not transmit desires, ideologies, or connotations.

First, it reviews the understanding of the city as a multiple and a decentered research object by analyzing the space of perception, which makes possible to discover phenomenological relation of the self with the urban environment, the self-consciousness and self-awareness, and the individual's mental engagement with the city. Second, it proposes research about the urban landscape carried by researchers from the Fine Arts field of study, a re-discovery of the urban spaces that are already known by visual empirical data. The city is discovered by individuals who take distance and "look", individuals who "name" what they see and who "represent" it.

Finally, it concludes by discussing some consequences of this examination of the city, especially looking at the qualitative parameters

of the urban space and the reassertion of the problem of complexity, especially urban landscape complexity as a point of arrival for these artistic methodologies.

**Keywords:** City as object; Complexity; Objective and perceived built environment; perception; urban design; urban planning; Landscape aesthetics; Landscape quality assessment; Social values; mapping intangible; Landscape perception paradigms

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cities, complex and ever-changing, hold secrets waiting to be unveiled. In this presentation we'll delve into the contemporary intricate layers of urban life, exploring perception, from a phenomenological point of view, and presenting the research line of our group which its main goal is analyzing phenomenological relation of the self with the urban environment, the self-consciousness and self-awareness, and the individual's mental engagement with the city.

## 2. SPACES OF PERCEPTION

The impact of diverse spaces on human perception is a fundamental issue in the design and shaping of urban environments. Urban spaces are not only functional, but also have a significant influence on how people experience and perceive the city.

From bustling streets, centres of commercial and social activity. Their design impacts the perception of vitality and energy of the city. Strategies are sought to manage pedestrian and vehicular flow, ensuring a dynamic and safe experience.

On the other hand, green spaces provide an important counterbalance - they are places of rest and connection with nature in the midst of urban bustle. It is important to plan for them in order to improve the quality of life and promote the health of residents.

City highlights are not only visually attractive, but also define urban identity. They are emblematic places that generate a sense of belonging and pride among the inhabitants.

Urban planning addresses the diversity of spaces with the aim of positively influencing the human perception of the city. To create an urban environment that not only functions efficiently, but also nurtures people's experience and emotional connection to their surroundings.

### 3. SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS AND MENTAL ENGAGEMENT.

Perceiving reality and understanding it involves understanding how our body and mind relate to the physical context we experience, the sensible world. How our mind constructs or reconstructs the image of what we perceive and how the understanding of what is perceived is produced. Heidegger used the term *Dasein* (being-in-the-world) to define the position of the human being in the world.

Perception is a valuable and necessary element for understanding the landscape that surrounds us; it is a transversal communication device in the complex mechanism of which we are a part. The human being, therefore, is not an element apart from reality, does not compete with it in action, but forms part of the machinery to the same extent as any other constituent element.

### 4. FINE ARTS IN URBAN LANDSCAPE RESEARCH.

The interference of art in the landscape has been transcendental, as it has shown that the landscape is an existential space, where there are

infinite and varied individual aesthetic experiences that are unnoticed, exceptional and ephemeral. It has been the artists who, from the conception of landscape as an aesthetic category, have contributed their critical and renovating visions of the environment that surrounds us. It may come as a surprise, but the city has been one of the most recurrent themes in the art of modernity. Art has created and recreated the city as a work of art.

The Dutch were the creators of landscape as a pictorial genre, although it was the English who abandoned painting the countryside in favour of urban views, establishing what would become the "vedutte" of their travels in Italy.

In the 19th century, Romantic painters turned landscape into the ultimate expression of the sublime, of the representation of man's drama before the magnificence and infinity of nature. The urban landscape appears as a deviation and manifestation of the modern gaze towards the city, and the latter as a cultural phenomenon of the ephemeral and superfluous. Baudelaire put it this way: "Parisian life is fertile in poetic and marvellous themes. The marvellous envelops and pervades us like the atmosphere; but we do not see it.

With the artistic avant-gardes, the city continued to be the object of reflection and representation, mainly in Italian Futurism, but it was the Dadaist Grande Saison of 1921 that would initiate direct intervention in the urban space of Paris with the proposal to organise guided tours of the most insignificant and abandoned sites in the city, as a critique of the consumption of legitimised spaces.

From this point on, the relationship between the city and art expands. The urban space went from being an artistic motif to become the paradigm from which the delocalisation of the concept of art and its place of exhibition originated. The concept of site specific appeared, unravelling a whole discourse to question not only the artistic object, but also the space in which the artistic dialogue takes place, distancing and highlighting the separation between the work of art as an autonomous and self-sufficient object and the space conquered by new

artistic proposals such as Land Art, Body Art, happenings, conceptual art, etc. in a nebula of artistic manifestations that Rosalind Krauss aptly called "expanded sculpture", as she says "an infinitely malleable category".

In contemporary art, new artistic proposals break into the public space to transform it into an artistic medium. This apparently simple artistic turn produces a profound re-semanticisation of space, as "an effective intervention in the public sphere can transform the formulas for passing through and inhabiting places".

## 5. DISTANCE, NAMING AND REPRESENTATION.

As fine art researchers, our approach involves meticulous observation of the visual details that make up the urban environment. We use tools such as photography, sketches and paintings to capture not only the surface appearance of spaces, but also the atmosphere, light and human interactions. This empirical visual data becomes the basis of our work, allowing us to explore and reinterpret the essence of familiar urban places in a unique way.

In an artistic work, the process of "naming" and "representing" involves more than simply capturing what we see. Through detailed observation, names and meanings are attributed to specific elements that may go unnoticed in daily routine. For example, a forgotten corner of a square can become the focus of our attention, and by naming it, we give it new importance. In an artistic representation, we seek to convey not only the physical appearance, but also the underlying emotions and narratives that make each space unique.

This process of "naming" and "representing" becomes an act of rediscovery, of "re-semanticisation" where the familiarity of urban environments is transformed into something new and revealing. By offering an artistic and subjective perspective, the aim is to invite viewers to reconsider and appreciate the richness and complexity of places they may take for granted in their everyday lives.

## 6. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS.

Artistic methodologies offer a unique and enriching approach to exploring and understanding the qualitative aspects of urban spaces. Through techniques such as painting, sculpture, photography and other forms of visual expression, artists can capture not only the physical appearance of a place, but also its atmosphere, its emotions, and its impact on the human experience.

By employing these methodologies, artists can:

- a) **Explore Subjectivity:** Artistic methodologies allow for a subjective exploration of urban spaces, going beyond the objectivity of quantitative data. Artists interpret and represent places from their unique perspective, highlighting elements that may go unnoticed in a more conventional analysis.
- b) **Capturing Cultural Identity:** Artistic expression can be a powerful tool for capturing the cultural identity of urban spaces. Artists can depict the traditions, stories and symbols that define a place, providing a deeper understanding of its social and cultural context.
- c) **Reflecting Social Dynamics:** Artworks can reflect the social dynamics and pulse of urban life. From portraits of human diversity to depictions of everyday events and activities, artistic methodologies provide unique insights into how people interact with their environment.
- d) **Create Emotional Connections:** Works of art have the power to evoke emotions and personal connections. By depicting the qualitative aspects of urban spaces, artists can awaken emotional responses in viewers, fostering a deeper connection to the places depicted.

In short, artistic methodologies offer a holistic and sensory approach to understanding urban spaces. Through subjective interpretation and

visual representation, artists can reveal layers of meaning that contribute to a richer and more complete understanding of the human experience in urban environments.

The city, seen through the lens of art, is a complex web of experiences, colours and emotions.

Artistic exploration enhances our understanding of the city by offering a unique and subjective perspective that goes beyond objective data. Through visual expression, artists capture qualitative, emotional, and cultural aspects of urban spaces, revealing layers of meaning that enrich our connection to the city. This artistic interpretation allows us to explore cultural identity, reflect social dynamics and create emotional connections, offering a deeper and more holistic understanding of the human experience in urban environments. Finally, we consider the city not only as a physical space, but as a canvas of human experience.

## 7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The research that has given rise to this publication has been carried out within the framework of GpIE 22-016 *Art and City* and the research project "*Expert system of intangible indicators of the urban landscape*" (ULPAES) B4-2021-04, financed by the University of Malaga Research Plan and the Training and Innovation Service of the University of Malaga.

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