Key words:
Locus amoenus/topophilie/landscape/architectural experience/environmental aesthetics

Abstract:

The perception and aesthetic experience of places concerns the appreciation of what is recognised as a *site*. It presupposes *readability*. A place is *here*, surrounded by other, similar places, that are *there*. Beyond, elsewhere, there is always a *hinterland*: beyond my world, is the World. One can only imagine the World, but the World can *announce* itself here, as an aspect or element of what we effectively perceive, such as a view onto a distance or the horizon. A (meaningful) environment acquires, more over, an *aesthetic* quality when the successful structuring of the interplay of Place and World suggests an *image* to the aesthetic view: when the site is recognized as exemplifying the 'topos' of a 'lovely place', or a *locus amoenus*: an enclosed, secret garden ('paradise'), or a 'House before the Distant'.

Loci Aemoni: The Meaning and Aesthetics of Sites

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Wer du auch seist: am Abend tritt hinaus
Aus deiner Stube, drin du alles weisst;
Als letztes vor der Ferne liegt dein Haus:
Wer du auch seist.
—Rainer Maria Rilke, "Eingang" (1900), *Das Buch der Bilder*

We know that a building or a work of architecture can be beautiful or ugly. But how can a first, immediate appearance of an *environment* please, disappoint or disturb, so that one can find it banal, ugly or beautiful, enjoy it, and even be moved by what one sees—somewhat like the Creator on the seventh day, look at the world "and see that it is good"? There are numerous and diverse factors at play in *topophilia* and the aesthetic appreciation of places, many of them very coincidental and depending on all kinds of circumstances. Individual preferences, personal opinions and memories, as well as cultural differences, each have a role. In addition, a place lasts and transforms in and over time; the position and condition of the observer changes constantly, just as weather conditions and atmosphere can interfere with what one sees in or thinks about an environment. Moreover, no one always agrees with themselves in these matters. Further, an environment can never be precisely delineated, which

means it is not easy to know exactly *what* we are talking about. Where does a place end? How big is it? All that said, there is nevertheless broad agreement about what constitutes a beautiful *view*. These views have been described and drawn in classical literature and the visual arts as *loci aemoni*; they are depicted as *vedute* and reproduced on postcards; they appear on the cover of tourist brochures and in the reportage of *Readers Digest* and the *Discovery Channel*; they are used as lockscreens.[1]

That is to say: there is a reasonable consensus about what the world looks like at its best. This means that we may be able to preserve and protect that beauty, but, strangely enough, does not imply that we know if and how we can design and create beautiful places. Objectivizing aesthetic qualities, regulating and standardising the visual conditions of a city or a landscape, or arranging the environment and the world with a model in mind, almost necessarily fail. Reproducing good examples—if at all possible—is counterproductive and results in kitsch. It goes without saying that the way we organize and build space does, in part, determine the appearance of places, but that does not mean that one can plan and manufacture the world in the way one designs and builds a building. Indeed, the decisions made by architects, landscape architects and urban planners more often than not have an indirect and delayed impact on environments. They *can* be decisive, but that is because they intervene on a level that does not in itself guarantee the aesthetic quality of an environment, but rather underlies and supports it. A *banal* environment cannot be beautiful.

The perception and aesthetic experience of places is not about beauty or ugliness ~~experience~~ as such—not just about the first and immediate appearence of things, disregarding their value, meaning or usefulness—but also concerns the appreciation of what is recognised as a *site*. Aesthetic quality belongs to a location and is experienced and judged in relation to it. It is the site (the view, the city, the region or the landscape) that is ugly, banal or, on the contrary, beautiful. Aesthetic quality is *adjective*. The experience of beauty is not a naive, uninformed sensation; it presupposes the grasping of meaning—beneath "seeing" lies a form of "reading." Aesthetic appreciation presupposes *readability*. It assumes and affirms that it is effectively possible to see and name a place as a "site," as a "region," or as a "landscape." The expectation of or desire for the readability of places is linked, anthropologically speaking, to more fundamental, pre-aesthetic layers of human existence—in particular, the desire or need *to know (and to see) where one is*. Being able to situate and orient oneself requires that one grasps the relationship between *here* (the place where the body is and from which it sees) and all the rest (the Whole), or, between *this Place* and *the World*. It presupposes that in what one perceives around oneself, one recognizes the *Gestalt* of a relationship between what can be seen "here" and (all) that is not here, that is elsewhere, absent and imperceptible, and thus which one can only *imagine*.

Every human being is a walking center. We thus divide and name our field of action with reference to three clearly distinct zones, which are registered in language: *here, there*, and *elsewhere*. Dwelling—being "at home" somewhere or connecting to a place—means that the walking body does not wander and feels ~~or feel, but that means something else~~ lost, but "clicks into" a meaningful place. Sites are strong, marked and circumscribed places, which create a "middle ground," something like an "inside," and they bear a name. On the open sea, in the endless desert, or in the air, one can certainly determine positions with measuring systems, but there are no sites. One cannot be "somewhere" there. Nature itself offers beginnings, which can be named and marked and turned into sites, and then, just because they seem natural, feel essential: hilltops, riverbanks, caves, isolated trees, a clearing in the forest, oases, springs, etc. These are the places where gods, demons and nymphs reside. They are the

places where walkers choose to rest or have a picnic. But in most environments space is structured, centered and delimited, and given meaning, architecturally, by monuments and buildings: towers, bridges, gates, walls, tombs, squares, houses, and so on.

A place is *here*, surrounded by other, similar places, that are *there*. All that surrounds "here" is "there": neighboring, familiar places, which for me and those who share my life were recently or will soon become a "here." All that is "here" and "there" together forms my field of action. It is my environment, my world, or our world. But then, further away, beyond, elsewhere, there is always a *hinterland*, which one can only reach by leaving here, by travelling. Over there, beyond *my* world, is *the* World. That World is out of reach: the senses of taste, smell and touch—sensations scan the "here," but not the World. Sometimes we can hear sounds coming from "there," although we no longer, or do not yet, understand exactly what they convey. But from the World beyond, only rumours and stories reach us. We can, however, *see* that World *from here*. We indeed look much further than we can feel and hear, far beyond our field of action, even to the stars. Yes, the World appears within our field of vision as *the distant*. We cannot taste or feel the World, but we can *see* it looming somewhere in the hinterland, the white-blue horizon, and the sky. Great Aristotle rightly calls sight the most contemplative, the most detached, and therefore the most noble sense. It is true that we no longer believe, as did the ancients, that what we see is real, and so, for instance, do not, or no longer, believe that the earth is actually flat and has edges, or that the sun really rises and sets, or that the days really have a beginning and an end. Still, against our better scientific knowledge, it remains that we live it as we see it; we do not consider and experience the sunrise as a misleading optical effect but effectively as the beginning of a new day, and the vague blue on the horizon as a promise of Faraway Lands.

(*The Past is a Foreign Country*; remembering is traveling in time. What the beyond or elsewhere is for space, and what distance does to a site, "depth" does to time. A "here-and-now," a "present" (*presence*) is situated and acquires meaning when one notices traces of the past or is confronted with memorials in the "here-and-now"—even more, when one perceives behind and beneath the historical past the natural duration of Time (the time of the stone and the ruin). A monument or a ruin is not a dwelling; they create a site and make a view.

A site is at the same time a "here"—a circumscribed centre or an "inside," and therefore a place to stay—with a view on (and thus: a relation to) The World (and Time). One can therefore agree with Hölderlin and Heidegger that "man lives poetically." Dwelling—choosing and connecting with a place in which to live—not only involves a shaping, structuring work, but requires *imagination*. A site is created by naming, marking, building, and inserting (symbolically) what is designed and built as a Whole, so that the field of action, in which lives take place, is framed and situated in a World. The World, within which everything takes place, is evidently (as Immanuel Kant argued) an Idea, not an empirical fact. One can only *imagine* the World, and that is what all cultures do. But the World, which by definition is more and something other than the "here *and* there" where lives happen, which is always more than what we see, can *announce* itself here, as an aspect or element of what we effectively perceive: a river, for instance, or a view between buildings, a view onto a distance, the horizon, or the sky. These can, poetically transformed, open up a site, present an Elsewhere, and stand for the whole.

A site is not nature but culture; the World is not a given, but an idea by means of which we think together all that exists and all that we know. A site is a "construction" and an image. All cultures have developed views of the World, just as they have imagined Time. In the West, the map is one of them: Anaximander is said to have been the first man who dared to make a

survey of the world as seen from a divine perspective. Many religions use the threefold division of reality in the underworld, earth, and heavens. Globes were a kind of scale model, until the satellite photograph and the first *earthrise* photographs of Apollo 8 likewise came to portray the earth in this way. In the (Western) art tradition, the formats of the landscape view and the *veduta* have been developed, from the Renaissance "world landscapes" to the sublime, romantic natural landscape, so that one can, now, portray all places. Each of these representational schemes (*pars pro toto*, models, views, or combinations thereof), represent more than can actually be observed. Each model, scheme or sight is, in any case, understood as a symbol or seen as a visualisation of the Whole. The informative content and cognitive value of each of these types of representations differ. Many are outmoded and scientifically obsolete. But it turns out that even old and outdated modes of representation like the classical city *veduta* or the *landscape view*, which are hardly usable today in a cognitive sense, remain existentially meaningful, and persistently function as a "world representation" that structures experience.[2]

A place becomes a site when it is a marked and described "here," and at the same time embodies a relationship to the World, that is, when it simultaneously detaches itself from the World *and* connects to it, indicating links, passages and intermediate zones. Sites are places where one is simultaneously *here* and at the same time sees (a relation between) "here" and the World. From the ancient cultures to the Western bourgeois era, both dwellings and public, monumental buildings can symbolize the cosmos *en miniature* and indicate the place of man in the world. The symbolizing this involves ranges from the use of the square and the rectangle which differentiate directions and provide orientation, to distinguishing the floor from the walls and the ceiling or the roof to indicate dimensions, accentuating building elements such as doors, stairs, or fireplaces and chimneys, to painting walls with views, to decorating interiors with symbols and images, decorating interiors with objects and images and antiques from all over the world. Until the television and then the smartphone took over from the bourgeois, eclectic interior as a kind of a 'world exhibition' and a means to open up the homely 'here' and connect it to the world. Which raises the question whether the smartphone, as the portable pocket version of a centre or "address," which gives the body a virtual "place" and offers the World at the same time, still constitutes a *site*. It seems as if it connects directly—on the screen—between the place where one is and the world, but without the place becoming a site, in such a way that the world and the place collide without an apparent connection or intermedium. The Universe then appears as a chaotic juxtaposition, with no distance, and—to speak with Walter Benjamin—without *aura*.

One can thus easily imagine failed, oppressive, even sickening places or environments: places that do not "centre" space—places with no name, where there is nothing, or where everything is the same—and which do not open on to an *elsewhere*. Places without an exit, places where one feels locked in. Rooms without a view or daylight, windows facing a wall, or glass cages in which one is completely exposed, are instruments of torture. The endless proliferation of the same, where each "here" is interchangeable with each "there," uniformity without end, is likewise torture. See the isolation cell, the labyrinth, the *Carceri*, the housing complexes or suburbs—all with the same building blocks. They make urban and rural spaces without meaning: neither centered nor defined, not articulated, without difference—they do not refer to the World. It is not the unknown or danger that threatens there, but *banality*, that is, that there is nothing there to read, and no way out.

One can also easily indicate that which both supports and obstructs the poetic structuring of an environment and hence the readability of space. Such natural elements as relief, the

shore, a tree or a river can make a village or a city. An obelisk, a fountain, a simple step or a row of façades can make a square, a bridge or a cathedral or a bell tower can make a town. And, fortunately, there is (almost) always a piece of sky. The elderly René Magritte spoke in an interview, after Baudelaire, about the importance of those white clouds as a basic element of his poetic universe: "Oui, les nuages ... On peut s'imaginer la vie de quelqu'un qui n'a jamais vu le ciel … ("Yes, the clouds ... You can imagine the life of someone who has never seen the sky ...") [like those residents who spend their lives in the immense interior of the skyscrapers of Rem Koolhaas's Downtown Athletic Club] mais c'est mieux de ne pas y penser! (but it is better not to think about it")[3] And there is also, sometimes, a distant view, the horizon. Writes Cyprianus: "oblectante prospectu oculos amoenamus ..." ("our eyes enjoyed the marvelous view…").[4] The distant is certainly just one of the ways, if the most important among them, in which we can *see* the World—where what we see is what "World" stands for. The distant is certainly a (deceptive) optical effect: things are not really as small as they seem from afar, nor do they actually lose their contours and fade there. But that loss of contour, that vagueness and the indeterminacy of things seen from afar does aptly represent what "World" *means*. The poetic transformation of a place into a site and the opening of a site onto the World is hindered, though, by an excess of signals and signs (road signs, illuminated advertising, logos …). They occupy our attention and perception in such a way that the environment—which is always thus experienced as a "background"—becomes virtually invisible. Above all, however, it is the ubiquitous repetition of local, changing combinations of standardized and uniform elements, or components of global systems like the infrastructure of networks, that creates generic, banal environments. They produce a homogeneity and banalization that even good design or artistic interventions—think of sculptures on roundabouts or airport art—cannot remediate.

The aesthetic appreciation of architecture or of buildings differs fundamentally from the appreciation of a built environment or of landscapes. The modalities of experience are very different: the perception and experience of an object differs entirely from the perception and experience of a space or of an environment. The nature of the interest and the presuppositions with which they are considered differ: a building, artifact or art installation is conceived and made, as opposed to an environment and landscape, which is certainly (partly) "man-made," but is not a "piece of work," and has no author.

The readable interplay or balance between the attraction of a centre and the World that opens a "here," between that which attracts and fixes and that which opens and sets in movement, is a necessary condition for the aesthetic success of an environment, but it is not sufficient on its own. Strong meaning does not by itself or of necessity produce beautiful views. Places and things can be very meaningful, and particularly important for people, without being beautiful. Appreciation and care do not necessarily go hand in hand with attention and appreciation of the first appearance of things. It is an old saying that country people do not see the landscape in which they live. A traditional family can continue to honour the tomb or the temple of their ancestors and maintain it with special care, while being at the same time completely indifferent to how that temple fits into the streetscape, or to what exactly is built behind it or alongside it. In another register: a traditional interior can be the result of what a couple bought and the presents they received at their wedding, of heirlooms, souvenirs, utensils, and gifts that have been added in the course of a life. Each thing then has its reason and a story, but the whole is neither designed nor composed, the interior is conceived neither as a whole nor as an image. What may (aesthetically) be depreciated as clutter is not seen and experienced as such: the interior may not be an aesthetic issue. (And

indeed, *vice versa*: things that are together only because they match can make a very weak and uninteresting ensemble ~~yes, my daughter-in-law's interior that looks like a showroom of a fancy shop).~~

The meaning and value of aesthetic experience can certainly shift, and the power of basic images—like the landscape image, which is (always also) about the distant—certainly lies in the fact that, as Gaston Bachelard writes, it can hold very different and even opposite meanings, and is therefore inexhaustible. The distant can, indeed, very humanistically, attract and promise a wider and richer life, but it can also mark the boundary of what is familiar and safe, and evoke the awe and threat inspired by that which goes beyond the human scale, and indicates that we are not at home in the world, and have to look elsewhere for a suitable dwelling.

Crucial for contemporary aesthetics, however, is that we distinguish between the categories of the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful and the sublime differ, but still connect in a complex way. The proximity and the spectacle of that which is greater in scale and/or nature than man, which threatens with indifference and makes us feel the insignificance of being human, but without being immediately dangerous, in such a way that one can pleasantly shudder, is sublime. In the twentieth century, "beauty" has been devalued, and the sublime has been philosophically or theoretically upgraded and even elevated to a quasi-truth. At the same time, an inflation has occurred in everyday speech: everything that used to be merely beautiful or stunning is now quickly called "sublime." However, Edmond Burke, who gave the first modern philosophical definition of the term, already indicated that it is difficult for objects—and thus for buildings or architecture—to evoke an idea of infinity and that they therefore can hardly become "sublime" in any faithful sense of the term. Landscapes, on the other hand—and certainly *images* of built environments, such as pyramids in the desert—can Post-structuralist aesthetics and late-twentieth-century art has argued that not only are the starry sky, the canyon, the natural disaster landscape of the high mountains, or the ocean—or, with Kant, man, who discovers himself as the source of the moral law—"sublime," but so too are urban chaos and a forest of skyscrapers, and indeed all other aggregations besides, which are states of the real that approach to the limits of language and meaning and representation: the formless, the vague, the abject, the void, the nameless, the material, the haptic, *le reel* ... As it turns out, not even beauty is always pleasant and attractive as when it characterizes beautiful human bodies, since it can announce (perhaps even then) the terrible, the inhuman ...: "Denn das Schöne ist nichts/ als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir nog grade ertragen…" ("For beauty really is nothing but the beginning of terror we are only just able to bear …)"[5] The classical format of the landscape thus survives not only in its rather humanistic variant, in which man is fitted into the world, but above all in its romantic, sublime variant in which man is offset by wild nature. In both variants, though, the distant undoubtedly remains, along with all that evokes depth in time—if not the only one, then this is at least the most important factor in completing the "here" and making it a site.

A (meaningful) environment acquires an aesthetic quality when the successful structuring of the interplay of Place and World is, furthermore, *bildfähig* or *pictorial*: when it suggests or offers an *image* to the aesthetic view.[6] The aesthetic gaze, being the focused attention that isolates and values the immediate appearance of things as such, is then not focused on abstract beauty but on concrete beauty—on the beauty *of a site*. When aesthetic quality is supported in this way by meaning, and when that meaning is not just grasped or experienced but apparent and evident, and is appreciated as such, the question is one of which environments are entitled to such "figurativity," which arouse the imagination, and which can see a site as a "secret

garden" or a "landscape," as a *veduta* or as a sublime urban panorama. And one can ask what design and planning decisions contribute to this effect.

What provides a site with "image-value"? An image is not a registration, nor a parasitic duplication of what exists, but—formulated in terms of medieval image theory—*mediates* between the visible and the invisible. It connects what is "here" to what one can only imagine. A site becomes "pictorially" beautiful the moment it exemplifies a specific *topos* in a specific place, which informs perception. The image imagines. Imagining is, first, formally, a matter of *framing*—of enclosing and opening a (visual) space. There are indeed many architectural and landscape design tools that can be used to structure space, and to indicate passages and views: to make outdoor "rooms," "doors" and "windows." Imagining is, contentwise, a matter of inbedding the site in a *topos*—a familiar and recognizable *basic image*, coloured with desire, of what is (for us) a strong or "lovely site." After all, there are many ways in which places can become meaningful and be identified as such, and be given names accordingly. But how and why these sites deserve to be described or represented is an entirely different matter. The spectrum of basic images or types of sites *that deserve an image*, and are, in fact, represented and thus aesthetically appreciated, appears to be limited and specific. It has been formed over a long history, from antiquity to Romanticism and on, to early twentieth-century modernism.

The basic features of the classical *locus aemonus* are grass, trees, water, a cave and shade ... The topology of *loci aemoni* is varied but dominated by two basic images—by "forces psychiques premières (sont) plus fortes que les idées, plus fortes que les expériences réelles." ("primary psychic forces, stronger than ideas, stronger than real experiences ») [7] There is, on the one hand, the site, which is so idealised that it does not need the complement of an "elsewhere"—*the secret or enclosed garden*, a valley, an island, and of course houses or domains that bear names such as "Mon Repos," "Our Dream," etc ... or: the representation of Paradise. A house in (that is: surrounded by) a garden is therefore a very strong *topos*, and a basic image of desire. The house on its own domain is a "here" surrounded by a defined, enclosed "there" which does not expand the inside and/or the field of action, but completes it. (A house in a fenced garden is home + non-home = a world.) And, different from the "dream garden" and the memory (and anticipation) of Paradise, there is the "lovely site" in front of the landscape: a "here" that directly touches (a variant of) a distant elsewhere, such as an oasis in the desert, a house on the waterfront or a dwelling on the edge of the forest. The topos of the protected place opposite the World—ranging from the rustic world (the cultivated rural *rus*) to the sublime space such as the mountain hut, the lighthouse, the oasis, the cave of Saint Antony on the edge of the wilderness. "And at the foot of the mountain there was an extremely clear, sweet and very refreshing well. At the margin of the plain there were also a few abandoned palm trees. And Antony, who was as if guided by god, liked the place."[8] Both types are places where occur variations of the *otio religiosa*, the meditative rest, sometimes meant for isolation and concentration, sometimes for friendly togetherness. One yearns for places, not to *do* something there, but to *be* there: the appreciation is connected with forms of rest. The corner of the painting from which the eremite looks out on The World, Camus' *Maison devant le monde*, Rilke's house in front of the 'Distant' and the unknown ...

It is certainly true that the quality of architecture is not only related to how a building is designed and realised, or to how smart, efficient or sustainable it is. Her most important quality is not how she is made and works on her own, but how she stands in the world and what she adds to the world. The aesthetics of places is not strictly visual, but poetical. After all, what counts is what one sees when one looks outside or goes out, and what this *evokes*

about where one is and the World. The aesthetic appreciation of places is always about where one wants to be and wants to stay—about happiness. Seeing is permeated by imagination and longing.

~~Extremely subtle, deep, illuminating.~~
~~A text that stays after reading one never looks at a place I the same way.~~

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[Add author bio note of around 120 words]

Notes

[1] Petra Hass, *Der* locus amoenus *in der antiken Literatur* (Bamberg: Bamberg Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1998); Dagmar Thoss, *Studien zum* locus amoenus *im Mittelalter* (Vienna: Wilhelm Braumuller, 1972); Klaus Garber, *Der locus amoenus und der locus terribilis: Bild und Funktion der Natur in der deutschen Schäfer- und Landlebendichtung des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1974).

[2] I recall, here, a few passages from Bart Verschaffel, "The World of the Landscape," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 14, no. 3 (2012), https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2036; and "Rome Pictured as a World: On the Function and Meaning of the Staffage in Giovanni Battista Piranesi's Vedute," in *Aspects of Piranesi. Essays on History, Criticism and Invention*, ed. Dirk De Meyer, Bart Verschaffel and Pieter-Jan Cierkens (Ghent: A&S/books, 2015), 118-41.

[3] Interview Magritte with Jacques Goossens 01 28 1966 in : René Magritte, *Ecrits Complets*, Flammarion, Paris, 1979, p.627.

[4] Karin Schlapbach quotes Sint Cyprianus in "The Pleasance, Solitude, and Literary Production: The Transformation of the *locus amoenus* in Late Antiquity," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 50 (2007): 34-50, 48.

[5] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duineser Elegien, Erste Elegie*, in: R. M. Rilke, Sämtliche Werke 2 (Insel Werkausgabe), Frankfurt a.M., 1955, 685. (MANY EDITIONS)

[6] I rely here on Georg Simmel's essay on the landscape. Simmel argues that the landscape as "bounded infinity" is isolated by a pre-artistic active perception that is then—afterwards—expressed and recorded in the landscape image. I believe, though, that this "perception" is less immediate and pre-artistic than Simmel thinks and, always informed by an image tradition, first of all recognizes a "basic scheme" that guarantees (symbolic) positioning, and then judges aesthetically its individual variations. It is the chord between what is perceptible and the "scheme" that produces the *Stimmung* that Simmel sees as the "unity" of the landscape. See Georg Simmel, "Philosophie der Landschaft," in *Jenseits der Schönheit. Schriften zur Aesthetiek und Kunstphilosophie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 42-51.

[7] Gaston Bachelard, *La Terre et les rêveries de repos* (Paris: Josée Corti, 1948), 27.

[8] Athanasius van Antiochië, quoted in Schlapbach, “The Pleasance, Solitude, and Literary Production,” 43.

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Illustration:

Maerten de Vos, Epiphanius, Solitudo Sive Vitae Patrum Eremicolarum, 1585-86
The Elisha Whittelsey Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York