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## PERCEIVING THE VOID AND THE LIVING BEING TO BUILD NEW ENVIRONMENT FRIENDLY URBAN SPACES

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*“If the doors of perception were cleansed,  
everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.”*

William Blake

**Abstract.** The definition of perception concerns the awareness of a reality considered external to the subject. Even before architecture and landscape, other disciplines had already dealt with perception.

In psychology, simultaneously with the discovery of the unconscious by Freud and Jung, the *Gestalt* theory was developed, with which we passed from an elementary conception of perception to its definition as the sum of interrelated actions organised between themselves, moving the perceptive act on a purely inner level.

German psychologist Kurt Zadek Lewin has shown that social behaviours are an expression of an exchange between the personal places of life and the environment. This theory was essential to deal with the phenomena of open spaces.

In the perception of the landscape, the fragmented and partial view gets overcome by the holistic concept of environment, which allows us to conceive the landscape as a whole.

The observer's topic and its perception concern the centrality of the landscape concept, as it is defined by the European Landscape Convention.

For architects, the observational notion takes on crucial importance both in the relationship between nature and artificial, both in relation to the context of the urban landscape and of the city open spaces. The analysis of Gordon Cullen and Kevin Lynch appears to be significant. Their researches on the subjective representation of the environment have shown how it is possible to distinguish between an objective and physical reality of the territory and the architectural space, and the perception of the singular environmental reality and of the personal space.

In the '50s the duality of object-observed-outer and perception-inner of the subject was examined by the writer Aldous Huxley in *The Doors of Perception*, in which he described an outer landscape that gets reflected and amplified in the inner landscape. The works of the great landscape painters are born exactly from this marriage between inner and outer.

In 1988 the aesthetic madness of Huxley found a scientific basis in the person of Gilles Deleuze, who attempted, through a metaphor, to define the evolution of perception and of the modern experience in the metaphysics of the chaos.

And it is here that Deleuze, and with him Leibniz, returns to that perceiving the outside world as a reflection of the inner world.

Nowadays the holistic concept of perception and the multiplicity of the gaze are studied and proposed by the science of geography and by a new sense of the places.

**Keywords:** perception, Deleuze, urban landscape, holistic, genius loci.

## Introduction

The perception concerned by this article is conceived as an essential action for the education of the young architect or urban planner.

The act of perceiving is a fundamental reading to interpret the environment in which it operates. Without this ability, acquired through study and research, but also

through experience and observation, the young scholar develops an awareness of the external and internal world that allows him to act and create architectures and spaces.

Especially, for the design of open urban areas, those places, such as squares, parks, gardens, streets, courtyards, etc., that characterise the quality of a city, the perceptual action must be able, as we want to demonstrate in this

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short paper, to identify and work with the emptiness and with what lives in this void.

## 1. Perceiving the void and the living

Perceiving the landscape has never meant, even in its peak of classical paintings by Poussin and Lorraine<sup>1</sup> merely contemplating the landscape. Perception, in its landscape declination, is closer to the point of view of a “gardener” such as Gilles Clément, than that one of a “naturalist”... it studies life in its biological and social aspects” (Clément, 2007), and by being humanist, it is able to grasp “the complexity, the uncertainty and the extraordinary variability of factors that” in the environment “are intimately part of the random structure of life itself” (Clément, 2007). As life, landscape perception is about movement and journey, outside and inside oneself. A wandering (Clément, 2007), or rather a “moseying”, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), offers unusual, multiple and open points of view, through even the simple gaze movements.

Therefore, perception is a complex concept to be explained intuitively. If we look for its definition on the web, we find that the act of perceiving (Treccani, 2018) concerns the awareness of a reality considered external to the subject: the sensorial stirring of the subject itself are analysed and interpreted via an intellectual synthesis process. In other words, the subject, became aware of a reality that he considers external, takes with his mind (the latin *perceptio* or *capere*, indicates the act and the effect of both taking physically, concretely, and of taking with the mind) and reworks what’s around him. So for a correct interpretation of perception in the architectural and landscape project disciplines, we must make a transdisciplinary effort and glean from art, philosophy, psychology, and visual science theories in general, which were the first ones to concern with perception.

## 2. Gestalt theories

In the field of psychology and form representation (*Gestaltpsychologie*), between the twenties and the thirties of the last century, the *Gestalt* doctrine was developed, born in Germany but soon moved to the United States because of the Nazi persecution. There, the main *Gestalt* exponents continued and refined the theory, determining in the developments of modern art.

With the consolidation of the *Gestalt*, the elementary conception of perception gave place to its definition as a sum of actions that are interrelated and organized between

themselves; thus perception is to indicate a unified vision of what appears separated.

The Gestalt study, contemporary to the discovery of the unconscious by Freud and Jung, distinguishes between physical and psychic, and moves the perceptive act on a purely internal level. Beyond the classical notion of the figure-background relationship, what derives from the settings of the *Gestalt* is a series of laws regulating perception, such as “the tendency to react not to the isolated stimulus, but to the isomorphic stimulus configurations, reacting thus to the relationship between stimulus and their structure” (Treccani, 2018). Other fundamental elements in this theory are related to the influence of the experience accumulated by the subject and to his relationship with others.

German Kurt Zadek Lewin (1890–1947), who has been a pioneer in social psychology, starting from the statements, has shown that our experience is not composed of simple isolated point elements put together, but of relationships networks, in which we can find object structures. Perception, thus, becomes a field of relationships, and this has allowed Lewin and his collaborators to study the group dynamics and the development of social organisations. His most important research, the field theory, came from his war front experience, where he was called to, even before that he could have discussed his thesis in Berlin. There, the young Kurt Lewin wrote the essay in which he anticipated the concept of “field” and explained the different perception of places and landscapes in the minds of soldiers, in relation to their proximity or distance from the front.

Lewin made it possible to analyse the aspects of social phenomena in their interrelationship: his theory can be formulated as a function where social behaviours take place in a psychological space, and they are the expression of an exchange between personal life places and environment, an indispensable concept to deal with the phenomena of open spaces, both artificial and natural, even in urban planning.

Therefore, it becomes more and more evident how perception concerns to the relationship that man has with the real and the life (what surrounds him, the place where he lives and where he moves) and investigating the “perceived” can cast light on not-only-physical aspects: “ancient and unresolved problems, such as the place of the mind in nature and the relationship between brain and consciousness” (Huxley, 2014). Grasping the relationship with reality through perception means doing an exercise of analysis and synthesis at the same time: the mind immersed in nature must select and recompose the overall image, and it can only do it by taking and leaving, according to its own categories.

This is the case in the perception of the landscape, i.e. the fragmentary and partial vision is overcome by the holistic concept of environment. Holism comes from *Whole*, the “everything”, in which there is much more than what is contained in its individual parts. Holism is a

<sup>1</sup> “The study of *après nature* was certainly essential to Poussin, it responded to an authentic need to know the landscape, the light, the shapes of the trees, but the construction of the picture arose from reflections on nature, mathematical order, geometry, that fed the philosophical speculation of his contemporaries, from Descartes to Roland Fréart, from Chambray to Galileo.” (Cavina, 2015, p. 111)

word coined in the 1920s by an author<sup>2</sup> who did not have purely scientific origins, but in those same years Ludwig von Bertalanffy, an Austrian biologist, discussed a doctoral dissertation in which *in nuce* there was the theory of systems. The holistic view allows us to conceive the landscape as a whole, borrowing from the theory of systems: “This principle was elaborated by von Bertalanffy to demonstrate how deterministic explanations were insufficient in the analysis of complex phenomena: not anymore single causalities, but entire casual complexes interrelated between themselves that determine the system evolution. The metaphor of the organism, as an autonomous totality capable of self-organizing in the pursuit of a final state characterised by a dynamic equilibrium, is a fundamental model to be used for other forms of thinking, especially for social sciences” (Portoghesi, 1999).

The human mind, and therefore its cognitive and perceptual capacity, is no longer detached from nature, but it is part of it, it is immersed in it. Paolo Portoghesi in “*Imparare dalla natura*” talks about the new scientific paradigm that influenced ecological thinking in architecture, and explains how Bertalanffy, starting from biology, extends the concept of system “from the atom to the cosmos, and underlines the fertility of an approach no longer based on analytic scission but on a global vision”. And he goes on, “The so-called ‘systemic approach’ is a highly innovative *Forma mentis* and removes the presumption and rigidity of a certain ‘science of certainties’; it implies the availability to question our own models, to realise that their validity has limits and that the observer is an integral part of the description he does of what he has observed.” The topic of the observer and his perception concerns exactly the centrality of the landscape concept, as defined by the European Landscape Convention<sup>3</sup> (European Landscape Convention, 2000, Art. 1).

### 3. Imageability and urban space

For architects and urban planners, the concept of observation takes on decisive importance, both in the relationship between nature and artificial, both in connection with the context of urban landscape and city open spaces in the mid-1900s. There is a wide theoretical literature in this field, but the analysis of Gordon Cullen and Kevin Lynch, which are close to the *Gestalt*, appear to be particularly significant. Their research on the subjective environmental representation has shown how it is possible to distinguish between objective and physical reality of territory and architectural space and perception of the singular environmental reality and personal space.

<sup>2</sup> Jan Christian Smuts was a South African officer and politician, who wrote in 1926 *Holism and Evolution*.

<sup>3</sup> European Landscape Convention, 2000, Art. 1: “Landscape” means an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.

*Townscape* by Cullen, 1961 (Cullen, 1961), presents itself as a manifest and it can be considered as the beginning of the studies on the urban perceptive analysis. Cullen’s main innovation is in the definition of *city*, that for the first time is “perceived” as a complex landscape form. By exploring the evocative potentials and the aesthetic features of the urban spaces, the book identifies the lexicon and syntax for context description and assessment, using representation techniques congruent with the priority given to the city’s visual perception and daily experience. Cullen thus develops an urban planning vision through a visual education aimed at the construction of a new urban landscape.

Kevin Lynch (Lynch, 1960) elaborates one of the most important theories on urban perception, based on the concept of objective “imageability”, which tries to separate the topic of the city’s perceived form from the subject’s interpretation. The concept of the imageability allows Lynch to develop a “cognitive theory of the city”. The objectification of the perception of the city by its inhabitants, for Lynch, originates from the relationship of personal experience with the real structure of the inhabited area.

The city becomes a hypertext that has to be deciphered by the inhabitant of the daily urban space: “living (walking, shopping, parking, etc.) is first of all a cognitive or semiotic performance, it requires deciphering the urban text in search of signals of danger, possibility, prohibition, permission, enjoyment, convenience, and so on. This competence is primarily morphological, it consists of recognising forms and attributing them a sense connected with daily practices” (Greimas, 1991).

If, therefore, the natural and urban landscape can be comprehended only as a whole, and if the observer is part of what he observes, the theorists of urban perception, through analysis of space, nodes, symbols, signals, emergencies, landmarks, try to build categories for the orientation.

However, the mental maps that emerge from it, fail to fully understand the complexity of contemporary landscape, the quality of places, and the concept of new beauty that comes from the action of perceiving. A step forward in the investigation of the duality of object-observed-external and perception-interior of the subject, mainly related to the concept of complexity and beauty of existence, comes from a radical writer like Aldus Huxley, cited above. After the enormous international fame of his prophetic text “*The New World*”, he approaches the study of perception to cure his almost total blindness. Almost contemporarily to the attempt to rationalise the urbanists’ perception, Huxley questions whether consciousness can see “beyond” what appears.

### 4. The doors of perception: from Huxley to Deleuze

Moreover, in *The doors of the perception* he describes an exterior landscape, reflected and amplified in the inner world. In this work, which is a faithful diary of an ex-

perimentation (he assumes hallucinogens obtained from peyote under medical supervision) he describes his visions during which he approaches a universe that appears to him as “a repeating flow”, which goes from “beauty to a higher beauty, from a deep to an ever deeper meaning”. In this expanded universe, his mind perceives “in terms of intensity of existence, profundity of meaning, relationships within a scheme”. Relationships do prevail, and not measurements: “Space was always there, but it had ceased to prevail. The mind was concerned, above all, not with measures and collocations, but with existence and meaning”. What Huxley tries to tell us, and he does it through the analysis of landscape and poetry art, is that through the exercises of Gestalt psychologists we can broaden the scope and increase the acuteness of human perceptions to capture the unfathomable mystery of the beauty of the universe. The works of great landscapers are born from this interconnection between interior and exterior: “the best of these are works of sources of first order visions.

In their own way, they are likewise heavenly, they remind with as much power what is happening to the antipodes of the mind, the great masterpieces of the landscape painting of the utmost distance”, and he follows: “The Sung mountains in their immense loneliness; the Ming Rivers of endless beauty; the blue subalpine world of distances of Titian; Constable’s England; Turner’s and Corot’s Italy; the Provinces of Cezanne and Van Gogh; Sisley’s Ile de France and Vuillard’s Ile de France”. “Through the loss of rational consciousness he had revised the whole history of art and discovered how it revealed to him, among the creases of the matter, the beauty of the world: “My attention stopped and I was fascinated, not by the pale heroine (Judith of Botticelli), nor by his companion, nor the thick hair of the victim, nor the winter landscape in the background, but by the purple silk of the pleated bustier and the swollen skirt of Judith”. And here begins, as he did for landscapes, crystals and colours, a description of one of the finest draperies of painting and sculpture, pleadings in which the mystery of the perception of the world still lies. When the book came out, it seemed like the story of a bold writer who wanted to attempt the frontiers of his creativity under the influence of mescaline, and heavily influenced only the Psychedelic rock bands<sup>4</sup>.

But, in 1988 Huxley’s aesthetic madness seems to find a scientific basis in Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze, 2004). Through the metaphor of the crease, Deleuze not only analyses the Baroque and Leibniz’s mathematical equations, but also tries to define the construction of the perception and of the modern experience of the chaos metaphysics. The

delirium described by Huxley finds in Deleuze a philosophical and scientific key: Deleuze writes of hallucinatory states, analysed by the psychiatrist Clérambault, through which the soul folds are “perceived”: “If there is a delirium in Clérambault, it is of the creases found by him in the small hallucinatory perceptions of the etheromans (Deleuze, 2004). Clérambault’s passion for the folds of the Moroccan women’s clothing, which he catalogues, are not simply perversions, they serve, like Mallarmé’s shawl, to deduct the matter unravel. In his thesis Deleuze then distinguishes: “the Folds, simple ones or composed ones; the Edges (the knots and seams as dependence of the fold); the Draperies, equipped with support points”. Perceiving the world is equivalent to deployment, and the universe is nothing more than a fold on the fold, an infinite curve, an equation: “For this reason, unfoldment is never the opposite of fold, but the movement that goes from one to the other”. And it becomes increasingly clear that, by living, we unfold “between two folds”. In the next step, then, in Deleuze we can find both Huxley’s metaphysical state and Blake’s poetic verses: “Every perception is hallucinatory since perception has no object.” Thus, the Cartesian separation of subject-object is overcome: “Great perception has no object, nor it refers to a physical mechanism of excitement that arouses it from the outside: it is based, rather, on the purely psychic mechanism of differential relationships between the small perceptions that compose it”. This is because the world does not exist outside of the monads that express it, since for Leibniz, the mathematical philosopher of reference, every monad includes the world itself. Differential calculus then becomes “the psychic mechanism of perception... On one hand, in as much as the world itself is included in all existing monads, the latter have the same infinity of small perceptions, and the same differential relationships that produce in them, strangely, similar conscious perceptions”. The double microscopic and macroscopic circuit mentioned by Leibniz can be found in William Blake’s verses, too: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand And Eternity in an hour”. Every monad, or soul, includes the whole world “in the form of small perceptions, small stresses, small springs”; the monad makes accords, but not unequivocally, not everywhere. The monad is also communication and he “expresses the world from his own point of view”. In this infinite production of melodies, the material universe and Nature itself become an immense harmony of bodies and of their streams.

And here, Deleuze, and with him Leibniz, return to perceive the outside world as a reflection of the inner world: “And this expanding collective unity does not contradict at all the other unity, the subjective, conceptual, spiritual, harmonic and distributive unity. On the contrary, it depends on it, as it confers it to a body, just as the monad requires a body and all those organs without which he could not know the Nature. The “conformity of senses” (melody) is the sign of which I can recognize harmony in the reality”. I can perceive the real world, though chaotic,

<sup>4</sup> The Doors was founded in the summer of 1965 in Venice Beach, California, following a meeting between Jim Morrison e Ray Manzarek, both students of the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. Morrison chose the name of the band from the book of Aldous Huxley *The Doors of Perception*, in which we can find the famous phrase of William Blake: “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it truly is, infinite”.

because it expresses a mathematical harmony, which is the same of the one of our senses: “We are made of the same substance of the dreams” (Shakespeare, 1610-1611). In this fast and certainly not exhaustive transdisciplinary excursus we have seen how perception, synthesis of gaze and thought, mutates with the evolution of thought itself.

## 5. Contemporary geography and the birth of modern space

Today the discipline that can contribute to the definition of landscape perception, is certainly geography. Franco Farinelli, during a geography lesson explained to architects, affirms that today it is impossible not to talk about landscape: “It is the crisis that forces us to invent new forms to interpret reality. Moreover, the landscape, at least until now, is the only possible one. It is the form of the place, and it has taken the place of other concepts, such as that one of the space, placing perception in the first place. The *European Landscape Convention*, which is a very important document, affirms exactly this to us.” (Roda, 2015).

Contemporary geography, as studied by Farinelli, refers to the birth of modern space that has made a further change both to place logic and to plastic and artistic thinking. Landscape perception, even in geography, is a dynamic and synthetic action at the same time, and to understand better Farinelli (Farinelli, 2015), he uses, too, the parallel with the art: he sees in the classic clash that followed for centuries between painting and sculpture, the dualism of the valley’s fixed system and the mountain practice of the many points of view.

The “gaze” of modernity goes back to the rediscovery of Ptolemy’s Geography “occurred in Florence in the early fifteenth century” and without which the “invention of the modern linear perspective” could not have taken place, what Erwin Panofsky “called ‘artificial’, to distinguish it from the natural one of the ancients.” Farinelli reminds us that modern perspective is “the technique of reconciling the gap between subject and object”, and it is nothing else but “the horizontal translation of the vertical geometric device that in Ptolemy’s work serves to transform the Globe into a map.” Modern space originates right from this perceived distance between viewer and image. The prospective projection, term that derives from alchemy, marks “the precise consciousness of having to deal with the greatest (cultural) metamorphosis you can imagine.” This transformation does not only affect artistic thinking, but it also influences the codex of territorial organisation, superseding the “old logic of places” everywhere.

To go back to the analogy between arts and geography, we can affirm that Renaissance painting is ultimately Ptolemaic, as it defends the uniqueness of the point of view “and as a result, of the immobility of the subject”. Pavel Florenskij noticed that fixity is essential condition of “prospective trick” and he remained amazed “how the spectator seemed paralysed, as if he had been poisoned with curare”.

It will be the seventeenth century with the Galilean revolution, the introduction of the two Baroque focuses and the angular perspective, to claim the plurality of the points of view. Benvenuto Cellini, who claims the primacy of sculpture on painting, looks incredibly close to modern and contemporary perceptual sensitivity. Referring to a register of representation based on the subject’s mobility; “Perseus with Medusa’s Head” can be observed and admired while in movement, and at every step we will have a different, but always synthetic, vision of the work, as it will be in the XXth century with Terragni’s *Casa del Fascio*, or Le Corbusier’s *Villa Savoy*. The obsolescence of the fixed point of view, of the unilateral gaze, is valid not only for Ptolemaic vision, but, as says Farinelli, also for that Euclidean: “In classical geometry we call definitions what for Euclid are real limits, something beyond what reasoning cannot go; and for this reason, he literally calls them ‘mountains’”. It is therefore in this other geography that presumes “not only the multiplicity of the visuals, but also the necessity of their connection” that I recognise the other perception, described by Huxley, by Deleuze, by the sculptors of the seventeenth century and by the Cubists. The anti-spatial figurative system does not reflect much on the plain, rather similar to the flat surface where the lines of the classical perspective are traced, but it is, for Farinelli, typical of the “mountain range practice”, in which with every step the view can change, and the subject must continually connect it to the previous ones”, to orient himself.

## 6. A workshop on the regeneration of the urban landscape

The perception of urban space or, in other words, teaching students to “see architecture and space” (Zevi, 1948) was preparatory to a workshop held in the context of the Biennale of public space, an event promoted by the National Institute of Urban Planning, happened in Rome last May.

A participated exploration on planning, conducted by a research group of which I was the team leader, in a suburban neighbourhood, among the urban voids of the post-industrial context.

The aim was the development of a survey method on metropolitan landscapes that can unveil cultural potentialities and become engines of social activation.

The method was based on the realisation of an experiential map of urban geographies, from the intensive residential areas to the banks of the Tiber river with its abandoned former industrial complexes. The required project, a cube or a 4x4 m surface that, like the points of a temporary diffuse library, shall become the activators of new public spaces and urban regeneration.

Finally, the design references for this workshop were the “playing objects” through which architect Aldo Van Eyck managed his open public space transformations in Amsterdam, already in the ‘60s. More recently, we can find the public spaces of the Muf Architecture in London, of the Aspect Studio in Sidney or of Bruit de Frigo in Bordeaux.

## Conclusions

Therefore, perceiving, in the landscape discipline, is grasping the movement, typical of living things, and reconfiguring a unity of that “void”, which is “federator” (Clément, 2007) of the landscape itself for the landscaper: “it is (the void) that associates all the elements around, and they are, sometimes, built elements. There is, therefore, a strong federation function that urbanists can understand fairly well, and that landscapers generally understand very well, because this is the material they work with. “Landscapers”, affirms Clément, work (and perceive) “with the void and with the living”.

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