The Potential of the Window in 'Framing' Landscape Meaning

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Abstract: *frame. 1. v.t. & i. Shape, direct, dispose, adapt, fit, devise, express, articulate, conceive, plot. In this paper a preliminary report on the study of landscape meaning and how it is shaped, expressed and so on by windows is described. Landscape is conveyed as being understood in at least four different ways: perceptually, politically, experientially and existentially. The framing quality of windows is shown to be complicit in these understandings. Using a contextual and inter-textual approach, a case for the consideration of the philosophical possibility of framing is presented. Through the model of linguistics used in a hermeneutic way, it is shown in this study that 'aesthetic experience is not a solitary monologue... but an integral part of a shared discourse concerning the realisation of meaning'* (Heywood & Sandywell, 1999, p. 10).

Keywords: *framing, interior design, landscape*

Introduction

This paper focuses on the phenomenon of 'landscape', speculating about the role of windows in perpetuating specific conceptions of landscape. Central to this is the articulation of the meaning of landscape into descriptive categories and an alignment of these to decisions designers make about windows. In this respect, it locates the 'viewer' in the interior position emphasising the interconnectedness of landscape architecture, interior design and architecture. Implicit in this is a greater respect for how the decisions we make as designers in one design field influence the meanings people have of concepts central to another discipline (such as the actions of interior designers and architects in relation to 'landscape') and of the reciprocal role of these meanings in affecting the overall quality of the dialectic relationship of people and the world.

Context

Theoretical context

An overview of recent landscape research of significance to this study reveals a substantial body of work that deals with landscape meaning. Rather than provide an overview here, the paper integrates this in the substantive sections in line with the study's contextual and inter-textual methodology. What is worth pointing out here is that in landscape

research, such as Dakin (2003), there is increasing support for the holistic nature of person-environment interaction. While the study described in this paper adopts a similar stance, it offers something new, first in its attempt to identify and describe the various conceptions of landscape evident in formal literature, popular literature and everyday understandings, and second, in its adoption of an interior design perspective to examine a phenomenon central to landscape architecture.

Methodological context

To identify conceptions of landscape the study employed a phenomenographic approach. According to Marton (1988) who coined the term, the approach is aimed at '...mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and various phenomena in, the world around them' (pp. 178–179). For the study, a cross section of academic and popular literature dealing with the concept 'landscape' was analysed using a contextual approach informed by the work of Lennart Svensson, one of the co-founders of phenomenography. Part of the data also comprised graduating interior design students' written descriptions about their understanding of landscape; some of which were anonymously conveyed in a survey and some of which were contained in written reports.

Four conceptions of landscape emerged from the analysis:

- Landscape as a perceptual phenomenon

- Landscape as a political phenomenon

- Landscape as an experiential phenomenon

- Landscape as an existential phenomenon

To understand the potential of windows in mediating these conceptions, the study was informed in part by visual semiotics, in particular the work of Kress & van Leeuwen (1996). Not withstanding the visual focus, their work is relevant because it is grammatically oriented as distinct from being concerned with vocabulary and the significance of people, places and things depicted in images. In other words, it is more concerned with how people, places and things *combine* in visual statements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 1). In terms of this study, the visual statement is the building window together with what it is framing of the surrounding landscape as experienced from inside the building; the experience being described in terms of a conception or to use a linguistic term 'the signified'.

Landscape meaning and the role of the window in its framing

Landscape as a perceptual phenomenon

In this conception, landscape is understood as a picture; that is, as something viewed (Figure 1). Associated with this then is a notion of landscape as an image. In other words, what is understood is not environmental actuality but rather a representation and an enduring image and experience of landscape quality. In the built environment, windows reinforce this extension of representation in various ways, the most persuasive through the mechanism of framing. Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) in their exploration of the two dimensional image identify the frame as one of the aspects of interactive meaning, in their case referring specifically to the size of the frame and its relation to the human body. While the distance of elements in a landscape from a building is determined by a variety of factors; the size, shape, position and articulation of a window reinforce physical and social distancing. As some designers appreciate, large expanses of glass do not put us more directly in touch with our surroundings, rather they alienate us from them. The smaller the windows and their panes the more intensely windows connect us to what is on the other side (Alexander et al, 1977) (Figure 2).


Figure 1: Landscape as a picture;
as something viewed.
(Picnic Point Lookout, Toowoomba)

Figure 2: Window articulation and its role in the
perception of distance.
(Musée Rodin, Paris [left]; (Café, Paris [right])

In addition to establishing a relationship between landscape and people, framing also contributes to meaning through its role in composition. While the placement of windows affects the information value of the view, framing disconnects or connects elements of the view, signifying that either they belong or do not belong together (Kress & van Leewen, 1996, p. 183). An example of connection is the way the frame halts the continuity of the horizon line and reinforces the role of the horizon line in conjoining earth to sky; in the

process, a sense of grounding is produced for the viewer. The significance of the horizon line and its association with landscape is reflected in art and design through the landscape format that privileges the horizon through its horizontal orientation (Figure 3).
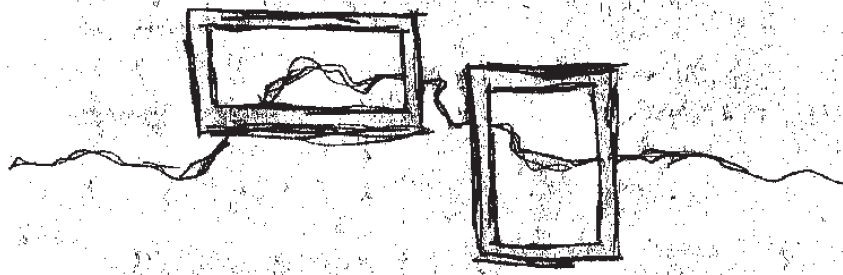
Figure 3: Framing the landscape.
(Nelson, 2004, p. 2).

Sometimes this horizontality is reinforced through vertical elements such as mullions, sometimes it is fractured creating a sequence of compositions challenging the view's quality of wholeness although ironically at the same time contributing to it (Figure 4). Windows, then, can be complicit in presenting our surroundings as a perceptual construct that we label 'landscape' and, as with landscape painting, designed from the view point of a single viewer (Cosgrove & Daniels, 1988).

Figure 4: A sequence of compositions.
*(*Musee d'Orsay*, Paris)*

For researchers like Appleton (1975), the interpretation of environment as landscape possessing the features just described gives it strategic value related to human survival. This value is highlighted in two theories, 'Habitat Theory' which draws a relationship between the semantic nature of the visual environment and survival, and 'Prospect Refuge Theory' where the focus

of interest is on the environmental conditions that are deemed to provide opportunities for both prospect and refuge; that is, opportunities to see without being seen. Other theories such as 'Information-Processing Theory' and 'Humphries Theory' also highlight the agency of the environment; the former through its tenet that people prefer environments that facilitate and stimulate the acquisition of knowledge; the latter proposes that we are attracted to the patterns and rhythms of nature because we like to classify (Bourassa, 1994, p. 99).

While these theories are limited in their downplay of the role of other social and cultural factors such as the classed, racialised and gendered subject (Rose, 2003, p. 166), they do invite attention to the '...formal visual qualities of a landscape image, for it is the visuality of an image that is the seat of its actancy' (Rose, 2003, p. 167). For Rose, they beg questions like: 'How exactly is a particular image organised? What does it display and what does it hide? What are its colours, spaces, volumes, dynamics? How are these arranged and what are their effects?' (p. 167).

Landscape as a political phenomenon

While there is obvious merit in asking and responding to these questions, this can be problematic when they are the only questions asked. We know this only too well where in our design fields prominence is given to a formalist approach to design associated with a rationalist understanding of the world. Dakin (2003) describes this detached position as an expert-based position which is characterised by an understanding of landscape in terms of '...physical features such as water and topography, properties such as diversity of extent of view and formal abstract elements, expressed in design terms such as forms, lines and textures' (p. 3).

In Corner's (1996) words, '...visual regimes – such as perspective and aerial views – are extremely effective instruments of power, enabling mass surveillance, projection, and camouflage. Synoptic, radiating vision extends a gaze that makes the viewer the master of all prospects; a scopic regime of control, authority, distance, and cool instrumentality' (p. 155) (Figure 5). In this process, other qualities such as smells, textures, tastes and sounds are often de-emphasised, even devalued. For Rose (2003), this represents a 'masculinism of seeing landscapes' producing in turn 'a passive', and as such, 'feminised landscape' (p. 165). For Corner (1996), it equates to what Heidegger refers to as 'loss of nearness' (p. 156), one which interestingly enough is not experienced by everyday inhabitants of a 'landscape' (p. 155). For these 'insiders', Corner suggests, there is no clear separation of self from scene, rather theirs is an eidetic relationship characterised by an 'acoustic, tactile, cognitive, intuitive as well as picturable' connection to their surroundings (p. 154).

Kress & van Leeuwen (1996) also refers to the politics of perspective suggesting that frontal angles invite involvement while oblique angles (Figure 5) contribute to detachment; high angles reinforce viewer power compared with eye level angles that situate us in a more equal way. In contrast, low angles give the participant in the scene more power (pp. 134–146).

From an architectural and interior design perspective, one has to question the extent to which windows are complicit in, as Corner puts it, 'concealing the agendas of those who commission and construct the landscape' (p. 158) beyond the building. Sometimes, of course, the agenda is quite overt for example office designs where senior management offices are located at the perimeter of the floor minimising the eidetic potential for the remaining employees in terms of the surrounding environment; or where in reception areas skylines are hijacked to reinforce the firm's social, economic and political status (Figure 6).

*Figure 5: Perpetuating landscape as a political phenomenon. (*Versailles*)*

Figure 6: Perpetuating landscape as a political phenomenon. (Solicitors' office, Brisbane)

For Corner, accepting a design role concerned with improving the human condition demands an emphasis of the 'experiential intimacies of engagement and participation' and a situation where 'performance and event assume conceptual precedence over appearance and sign', where 'the emphasis shifts from object appearance to processes of formation, dynamics of occupancy, and the poetics of becoming' (p. 159).

Landscape as an experiential phenomenon

Central to an understanding of landscape as an experiential construct is a belief that people are not passive viewers of the landscape but in a multi-faceted way actively participate in its construction of meaning (Dakin, 2003, p. 4). The painter William Robinson provides an evocative perspective on this in an interview where he says: 'I tried to describe the feeling of being in the landscape and walking around it ... to look up and down almost at the same time; to have a feeling of time; the beginning and the movement of the day and night; to be

aware of the revolving planet … I did not paint these works as a visitor to the landscape, but as one who lived in it and experienced it everyday' (Robinson in Seear, 2001, p. 85). Forming these experiences is what we bring to it, our '…own subjectivities, histories and geographies' (Rose, 2003, p. 167).

Windows that encourage an experiential relationship with the environment are those that enable the occupants of dwellings to participate in the cycles and rituals of life. Daisann McLane writes in relation to her study of hotels: 'The first thing I do when I enter any hotel room for the first time is open all the shades and curtains. The room is my first window on a new place, an unexplored culture, and I want to make sure I can see as much as possible… Parades, religious processions, clanging gongs, rhythmic chants and unexplained animal noises have all, at one time or another, enriched my hotel room experience' (McLane 2002, p. 23).

In design terms, the potential for this type of connection is heightened with windows that can be fully as well as partly opened to the elements such as side hung casement windows; corner windows which dissolve the sharp edge of the building and the single viewpoint of one point perspective; windows and window bays that project beyond the face of the building forming their own alcoves; windows that frame a part of the environment where everyday activities occur; low window sills, deep reveals and window seats (Figure 7); the location of windows where people undertake a range of activities including passage areas (Figure 8); interior windows that interconnect rooms and frame inside activities; portrait shaped windows and so on.

*Figure 7: Casement windows with low sill height positioned in alcove with side lights.
(Casa Mila, Barcelona)*

Figure 8: Window in stairway to Casa Mila *rooftop.*

Landscape as an existential phenomenon

The data analysed also implied an understanding of landscape that went beyond perceptual and experiential meanings while also incorporating them. Pollock (2004) for instance describes how 'Landscape painted representations have offered poetic means to imagine our place in the world ... Represented land is more often than not a reflection of the human subjectivity which projects itself on to a space either of its sheltering habitation or its sublime otherness' (p. 1). She proposes that this is possible through the middle ground which is generally characteristic of landscape image; a ground that presents itself as '...the possibility of space, and hence of imaginative entity' (p. 10). 'Its absent centre is always the spectator, the human consciousness reflected in this brilliant exercise of formal invention coupled with a field of dreams' (p. 10). Similarly, Amidon (2001) in citing the work of Jeffrey Kastner and Brian Wallis, writes: 'Subject both of science and art, the landscape functions as a mirror and a lens: in it we see the space we occupy and ourselves as we occupy it' (p. 80). It would appear then that whether one is producing a representation of the environment through paint or words or design, an opportunity exists to enrich the meaning of our relationship with the environment.

Alexander et al (1977) describes this in relation to the archetypal Zen view, one which is enduringly engaging. It is also one I argue that encourages a respectful and humbling relationship with nature. If the view must be visible inside a room, Alexander et al suggests making it a definitive act in its own right by creating its own room around it, perhaps even

giving it a window seat. Such is the case in the *Alhambra* in Grenada, Spain. In situations where windows open on to the surrounding hills and mountains, these are generally located in transition spaces, with the main reception and living areas facing inward to landscaped courtyards and gardens. Of particular note is the *Mexuar Palace* where windows open from *The Golden Chamber* waiting room to the woodlands beyond. Two seats facing each other are inserted in the window alcove but placed so one's position is tangential to the window opening (Figure 9).

*Figure 9: Windows and window seats
(*The Golden Chamber*)*

*Figure 10: Ornamental openings
(*The Mirador of Lindaraja*)*

In this case, the window mullion and other elements are heavily decorated as are many of the surfaces in the various palace interiors of the Alhambra (Figure 10). As their designers realised, ornamentation provides a crucial and very potent means by which one can facilitate transcendence beyond the literal and, in the case of this study, contribute to landscape as an existential phenomenon. Highly ornamented windows and window openings create a unifying seam '...between the elements of buildings and the life in and around them' (Alexander et al 1977, p. 1150). The existential quality is heightened further by the use of pattern, its reiterating rhythms moving one towards infinity; infinity being a metaphor of eternity (Nunez, 2000, p. 72). Central to this is the role played by light, with windows and various window treatments playing a dominant role in its movement from outside to inside, and vice versa.

Conclusion

This paper suggests that we understand environment as landscape in four qualitatively different ways: as a perceptual phenomenon, as a political phenomenon; as an experiential

phenomenon; and as an existential phenomenon. Common across all conceptions is an appreciation of landscape as a construct. Complicit in this is the window through its role in framing. Rather than 'construct', Corner (1996) uses the term 'image'. 'Landscape and image are inseparable; without image there is no such thing as landscape, only unmediated environment' (Corner, 1996, p. 153). Unfortunately most designers appear to be unaware of the constructive potential afforded the image, for as one of the students writes: 'Sometimes we become so complacent with our surroundings that like a painting we don't notice the brush strokes that intricately weave the scene together on the canvas and instead step back and critique the picture as a whole from afar' (Walters, 2004, p. 7). As this paper illustrates, the window is a place where people and environment merge and overlap. More often than not, however, this is purely as viewer and picture rather than participant and image interwoven experientially and existentially.

This existential phenomenon invites us, interior designers and landscape architects, to consider the philosophical possibility of framing; to consider, for example, the proposition made here that without framing there is no landscape. The model of linguistics that has been used in a hermeneutic way in this paper also shows us that aesthetic experience is not a solitary monologue but an integral part of a shared discourse concerning the realisation of meaning (Heywood & Sandywell, 1999, p. 10).

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