

The Instrumentalization of Landscapes in Contemporary Cities

TALI HATUKA and CRISTINA MATTIUCCI

Landscape is a medium found in all cultures.

W.J.T. Mitchell, 2002

Today, cities are redefining their relationships with the natural world, spurring a new dynamic between the built environment, man-made landscapes, and nature. Nature is no longer seen as the antithesis of the city and civilized life, or as something simply to support urban dwellers' social life, but also as a means of fighting challenges such as climate change, urban health and well-being within the city. This approach to landscape and nature in cities has evolved as a response to the human–nature crisis and the need to limit urban development in open areas of ecological importance.

In terms of planning, this approach called for the preparation of pre-development surveys, including a comprehensive land survey that relates to climate, geology, hydrology, flora and fauna as means to better planning the built environment. In addition, and in parallel, to the discussion on the conservation of land resources outside urban space, there was also recognition of the need to address the natural systems in cities (Scheer, 2011). This recognition led to investigation of flora and fauna in the city and examination of the city's ecosystems, which in turn led to new design strategies viewing landscape as a key component in creating new hybrid ecosystems (Mossop, 2006). At the beginning of the twenty-first century this ecological emphasis in cities is associated with two prominent concepts: landscape urbanism (Waldheim, 2006) which emerged from architecture and planning, combining design with ecological

approaches, and urban ecology (Mostafavi and Doherty, 2016; Steiner, 2011) whose roots are in ecological positivist studies.

Viewing landscape and nature as a means/tool that can 'solve' some of the major challenges of contemporary urbanization also contributed to their presence in our daily life. Recycling, greening and rehabilitating nature in the city have not been merely theoretical-utopian ideas but rather translated into practice through policy documents, designated campaigns, and legal initiatives. This condition contributed to the centrality of landscape in city life and also, as suggested by W.J.T. Mitchell (2002), contributed to the use of landscape as a verb. As he further argues, landscape is not just an object to be seen, or text to be read, but a process by which social and subjective identities are formed; as such, landscape is not merely signifying power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power, perhaps even an agent of power that is independent of human intentions (*Ibid.*, p. 1).

Landscape and Nature in Contemporary Cities

The centrality of landscape in cities should be viewed as ideological. Policies, practices and projects that focus on the landscape and nature of city are part of what could be called the *ecological turn* and the aim of researchers and politicians to 'protect the globe'. This ecological turn is manifested in two overarching global key concepts that shape contemporary urban development: the sustainable city and the resilient city.

The idea of sustainability focuses on the responsibilities and rights of current and future generations, emphasizing the high cost of the developed world's way of life and humankind's obligation to act to reduce environmental degradation, particularly the threat of global climate change (Haughton, 1999; Jabareen, 2013). Ultimately, the notion of sustainable development concerns the long-term survival and healthy evolution of the planet (Haughton, 1999). Spatially, the sustainable city is concerned with the transformation and restructuring of major infrastructure (e.g. transportation systems, water use management, waste disposal, energy efficiency, and green construction) and the management of green areas (e.g. parks and gardens). The sustainable city concept also emphasizes issues such as enhanced walkability and accessibility in the city and the preservation of urban ecosystems (Brebbia, 2000; Wheeler and Beatley, 2008) as well as the growth and regeneration of built and populated urban areas (Jenks and Jones, 2010). Thus, the implementation of this approach implies interventions on multiple levels, including neighborhood, municipal and regional levels. Physically, the sustainable approach advocates ideas such as compactness, density, mixed land use, diversity, passive energy design, greening (Burton *et al.*, 2003), and the protection of the city's natural areas and food-producing capacity.

The concept of the resilient city is embedded in the latest defensive concept of the 'risk society' and highlights the vulnerability of certain communities to large-scale global challenges, such as climate change, terrorism, and the globalized economy, and stresses that these challenges impact not only global but also (and even more so) local, especially certain underprivileged, communities in specific cities (Jabareen, 2013; Pelling, 2003; UN-HABITAT, 2011; Vale, 2014). Spatially, urban planning plays a central role in making cities more resilient by shaping the built environment through land-use management and the prediction and anticipation of risks,

uncertainties and ways of coping (Jabareen, 2013; Zhang, 2010). The concept demands addressing threats and helping cities recover from natural disasters or heinous human acts by creating networked social communities and lifeline systems through which it is possible to adapt and rebound to new levels of sustainability (Grove, 2014; Vale and Campanella, 2005; Pelling, 2003). Also this approach can be applied on multiple levels, both as territorial scale and as governance (Godschalk, 2002; Pickett *et al.*, 2004; Vale, 2014). Like the sustainable city concept, the resilient city also promotes smart growth, compactness, and high density as a means to combat urban sprawl (Duany, 2000). Physically, resilient cities are regarded as heterogeneous ecosystems that promote flexibility and adaptability (Pickett *et al.*, 2004). As such, natural and human-made hazards must be considered when developing physical systems and infrastructure such as roads, buildings, and communications facilities (Godschalk, 2002).

These concepts have influenced dramatically the manifestation and centrality of landscape in cities. Their emergence have contributed to legislation that encourages greening, to the development of new landscape projects at the urban and regional scale, to the rehabilitation of natural resources, and to the investment in designated infrastructure that supports the preservation of nature. Policy-makers worldwide have been embracing all these tools in greening cities. More than that 'people have gradually come to believe that gardens are (or have once again become) a symbol of change and powerful lever for community life, tied in with major political, economic and environmental issues' (Terrin, 2013, p. 12). Greening was thus not merely attached to the survival and healthy evolution of the planet but also to a sense of community, belonging and urban health. Landscape has become a practice and a solution to multiple challenges; it has become the 'hope' of future cities.

Key Factors in Greening Cities

While these paradigm shifts have been established in theory and practice, the public institutions, i.e. municipalities and governments, could not carry them alone but required economic support from the private sector. Such a situation, in which landscape initiatives are subjected to the political economy of the city, results in the loss of much of the idealism (and thus substance) associated with many ecological and social initiatives. To put it differently, the landscape projects and greening policies that have emerged as a fundamental requisite for the contemporary sustainable and resilient city have often become marketing and branding tools that enhance city's image, attract development, propel the economy forward and cultivate cultural heritage, and in doing so contribute to commodification and modify land values.

This bi-directional approach to considering the landscape in cities – i.e. the significant and necessary role of landscape and nature in cities' development on one hand, and its instrumentalization as branding and economic tools that impact land value and affordability, on the other – is the framework within which most contemporary cities now operate. Without doubt, this approach, which is influencing both the process of implementation and materiality manifestation, is considered a common feature of the urbanized world (Brenner and Schmid, 2015). In that sense, the multiple tools for greening cities cannot be considered as context-specific but rather as universal, with policies and projects, being imitated and replicated worldwide.

More specifically, three levels are involved in greening cities: governmental institutions, i.e. policies; municipalities, i.e. landscape projects; local/individual, i.e. daily practices.

- ◆ *Governmental institutions* mainly initiate generic policies, with a reference to broader principles stated by international institutions such as the UN, EU, and so on. As such

they tend to be a-contextual, supporting initiatives that increase ecological as well economic value of sites. In addition, governmental policies play a significant role in building a consensus around the concept of sustainability and resiliency, so making a city more attractive for citizens and for foreign and local investment.

- ◆ *Municipalities* focus on the development of landscape projects, conceived and programmed for a specific site, as well as cities' developing infrastructure that would support recycling and greening. Though they might be adjusted to a particular city or culture, the development of projects and infrastructure are based on similar rational and design strategies. Especially in the last twenty years, landscape design projects have taken on a kind of homogeneous approach in the quest of balancing urbanization and densification.

- ◆ *Local/individual practices* represent an important level in the absorption of the ecological turn. It is the local initiatives and practices of individuals that contribute to the spread of green in contemporary city; individuals and collective subjectivities (e.g. associations, cooperatives, movements) take care of the green in their urban environment, from the scale of the individual urban gardening to the communal public green. Such practices are usually very encouraged by institutions and local governments, because they also work as a means to enhancing a sense of community, belonging and urban health, beyond increasing the landscape materiality of the city.

In exploring further the levels of landscape initiatives, it is important to understand the actual instruments that contribute to the development of landscape and nature in contemporary cities. *What are these instruments and what has been achieved by them? To what extent have we commodified landscapes and nature? How has this commodification influenced life in the city, including urban processes? Where*



Exemplary cases of landscape projects and greening initiatives.

Urban-scale solutions

1. China: community garden.
(Photo: CC Steph L)
2. Santa Monica: community garden.
(Photo: CC NH567)
3. Abu Dhabi: urban park.
(Photo: CC Александр Карпенко)



Exemplary cases of landscape projects and greening initiatives.

Municipal-scale solutions

- 4. Sydney: vertical garden.
(Photo: CC Ashley)
- 5. Turin: environmental park.
(Photo: CC Uccio D'Agostino)
- 6. Turin: '25 verde', housing/
residential neighbourhood.
(Photo: CC Uccio D'Agostino)



do efforts to reclaim space within the city for nature fit in the power dynamics within cities?

The Instrumentalization of Landscape: The Paradigmatic, the Urban, and the Personal Levels

The papers in this issue present three perspectives on the *instrumentalization* of landscape and nature in cities: the paradigmatic, the urban and regional, and the local/personal. Each perspective is addressed both from a discursive analysis and from an empirical-contextual point of view, offering diverse viewpoints on the contribution and realization of these instruments.

1. The *Paradigmatic Perspective* focuses on the ideology of greening the city. Federico Ferrari's paper, *Reactionary Landscape: the Discourse of Naturalism as a Grand Narrative*, argues that we live in the era that is marked by the presence of the term landscape in all discourses and disciplines. The most hegemonic ideas and representations are those associated with nature and whose tools are often marketing strategies of 'greenwashing' including rooftop gardens, vertical forests, plant walls. By deepening the ideology behind that and focusing on some processes, Ferrari interrogates the cultural meaning of this phenomenon.

Addressing this grand narrative of landscape and nature in the city, with a focus on materiality and design, Tali Hatuka explores contemporary trends in landscape design. In her paper, *Beyond Pragmatism: Challenging the Generic Design of Public Parks in the Contemporary City*, she presents some of the dominant design features in the development of urban landscape. Addressing varied examples, she argues that the design of open spaces in the city is based on a pragmatic approach that further contributes to the consumption of public spaces. The paper ends with a discussion of alternative approaches and the role of complex, dynamic public spaces in our cities.

2. *The Urban and Regional Perspective* focuses on the way landscape projects are changing and modifying life in cities and regions. The first more conceptual paper, *Branded Landscapes vs Reform of Ordinary Landscapes: An Insight from Italy*, by Arturo Lanzani and Cristiana Mattioli focuses on the way landscapes have become a central component in the economic improvement and in the valorization of heritage, as well as in planning strategies. The key argument is that landscape heritage sites have become a branding tool for cultural economy. This dynamic may be seen in the context of cultural heritage policies that aim to preserve heritage from aggression and destruction, but at the same time are responsible for a new process of stereotyping and 'showcasing' protected heritage sites. The paper ends by proposing strategies to overcome the threats of ill-conceived and misdirected, glossy, and/or overbearing initiatives, policies and projects related to natural and designed landscape sites and projects.

Complementing these ideas, Cristina Mattiucci, in her paper, *Landscape as a Founding Element of the Contemporary Urban*, discusses how landscape transformations redefine the features of territories in collective imaginaries, making the landscape emerge as a strategic element in planning policies. The paper investigates an artificial basin landscape project, tracking the changes in the perception of the area by those who permanently and temporarily inhabit it. Mattiucci argues that understanding the cultural, economic, and political meanings of the landscape strongly influences territorial marketing strategies and individual living choices. In her conclusions she suggests that interpretation of the landscape in the contemporary city must go beyond addressing forms and functions, and address the cultural and political perspectives that contribute to its transformation.

3. *The Personal and Local* level refers to initiatives and practices associated with greening cities. Addressing the phenomenon of

community gardens and the discourse evolved around it, *One Landscape, Multiple Meanings: Revisiting Contemporary Discourses on Urban Community Gardens*, by Efrat Eizenberg, maps the different ways in which scholars conceptualize the formation of, and care for, urban community gardens. It shows how these gardens are perceived both as spaces with the potential to cultivate new ideas about cooperative relations and sustainable urbanism, and as a form of a neoliberal 'green-washing' development strategy. Eizenberg's perspective takes into account the broad, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations of community gardens and offers a complex reading of what kind of landscape is produced by them.

Greening not only affects community perceptions but also the way individuals envisage their living space and conduct their day-to-day activities. Lise Bourdeau-Lepage in her paper *Nature and Well-Being in the French City: Desire and Homo Qualitus*, argues that individuals have become aware of the essential role played by nature, in particular in terms of their well-being. They have rediscovered the benefits of nature and seek to make the most of it. Exploring the practices of individuals in French society, she shows how people, policy-makers and economic actors are developing an ecological conscience, and how plants and vegetation are occupying an ever more important place in cities. In her conclusion she underlines the way in which the desire for nature and the willingness to preserve the environment exposed the environment itself to a real risk of the instrumentalization of nature.

Linking both the level of the community and the individual, the last paper in the issue by Alessia de Biase, Carolina Mudan Marelli, and Ornella Zaza reminds us that we must view contemporary landscape ideas and practices in a historical perspective. In their paper, *From Collective Urban Gardens to Individual Micro-Landscapes*, they show that the politicization of urban nature is unavoidable. By exploring the evolution

and the cultivation of landscape in the city of Paris, they explain the shift that has taken place in the public policy approach with regard to urban nature. As they argue, the individual (citizen) is becoming a dominant actor in the management of nature in the city, a role that is further enhanced by the use of digital platforms and applications that support it.

From the Fragmented to the Systematic: Future Interventions for Cities

The centrality of nature and landscape in the city, as the papers in the issue show, is an ideological construction. Yet, this ideology is not new, but rather it is evolutionary. What characterizes contemporary ideas and instruments is that they are embedded in the neoliberal economy with all its associated disadvantages. To be sure, contemporary cities rely on the market and private-sector participation in greening the city, and certainly these initiatives contribute to urban health, to the development of an ecological consciousness, and to well-being. Yet, greening does not benefit all inhabitants of the city and the question of the accessibility to these emerging landscapes and places is questionable. Furthermore, beyond the question of accessibility and justice, there is also the issue of culture and context, and the fact that greening instruments do not always fit all communities, places, and cities. In short, greening and beautifying cities comes with a 'price-tag'. The critical questions are: *What now? Where do we go from here?*

As a first step it is suggested to be conscious that these different instruments are all part of an eclectic toolbox used and supported by governmental institutions, operating under the framework of neoliberal economy. As a second step it would be valuable to go beyond focusing on specific instruments and to develop a holistic and dynamic city strategic landscape-plan that takes into account not just space but also time. This type of strategic plan is not just a programmatic

tool, but should be viewed as an ongoing adaptive framework that takes into account spatial and societal changes. This approach to landscape planning will assist both planners and theorists in viewing the city and the region as a whole and assessing the links between ideas and materiality, and their influence on people. Such a synthetic approach will also help cities determine what has been done and what needs to be done, or reprogrammed. Finally, this synthetic approach would also push researchers not only to be critical of contemporary *instrumentalization* of landscape but also to develop and suggest new tools and frameworks for action that enhance more balanced interventions, for the sake of all inhabitants in the city.

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