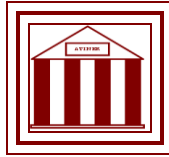


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The Fictional Environment

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The Fictional Environment

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Abstract

The threshold of early twenty-first century poses to urban-architectural scholarship a peculiar environmental situation: the world we live in today is an *urbanised* one. Moreover, what we called *city* has now numerous nicknames such as mega-cities, global cities, fractured cities, edge cities, regional cities and even meta-real cities. However, despite the numerous narratives employed to depict a contemporary urban environment, most of them fail when trying to enunciate satisfactorily the patterns that best characterize a city nowadays. Today, a suitable depiction of a city will almost certainly need to include a descriptor linking the idea of an urban environment to some fantastic or imaginary element; in other words, connoting to the idea of a *fictional environment*. This is clearly uncovered through the production of today's invented *places* – places that are conceived through placemaking and placemarketing practices – depicted through their morphing into a diversity of revealing layouts: shopping malls, revamped historical settings, sports complexes, integrated museums, hybrid compounds, multiplex cinemas. The paper elaborates on the assumption that today's invented places present a tendency towards being depicted through fictionalised forms, denoting that cities of present contemporaneity are intimately associated to unusual morphological settings. For this matter the paper deepens on the study of differentiated urban scenarios symbolized by iconic architectures, since these scenarios will prove representative of: (i) *new urban landscapes*; which, in turn, will result from (ii) *new urban design operations*; which will be satisfactorily capable of expressing the manifestation of (iii) *new urban cultures*.

Key words: *iconic places; placemaking and placemarketing; urban cultures*

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Introduction

The threshold of early twenty-first century poses to urban-architectural scholarship a peculiar environmental situation: the world we live in today is an *urbanised* one. Moreover, what we called *city* has now numerous nicknames such as mega-cities, global cities, fractured cities, edge cities, regional cities and even meta-real cities (as we call them in our own research work). However, despite the numerous narratives employed to depict a contemporary urban environment, most of them fail when trying to enunciate satisfactorily the patterns that best characterize a city nowadays. In Modernist times it was common to employ the expression *functional city*, which proved quite illustrative. Today, however, a suitable depiction of a city will almost certainly need to include a descriptor linking the idea of an urban environment to some fantastic or imaginary element; in other words, connoting to the idea of a *fictional environment*. This is clearly uncovered through the production of today's invented *places* (CARMONA et al. 2003) – places that are conceived through placemaking and placemarketing practices – depicted through their morphing into a diversity of revealing layouts: shopping malls, revamped historical settings, sports complexes, integrated museums, hybrid compounds, multiplex cinemas. This fictional imaginary represents the influence of actual society cultural behaviours on the shaping of the environment, creating an intriguing topic of investigation on environmental research terms. Moreover, they are particularly enunciated within the areas of interest included in the 3rd *Annual Conference on Architecture* (2013) supported by ATINER, the Athens Institute for Education and Research. Amongst the major areas of interest registered on the Conference's topics there is a mention to 'cultural research studies, place-making, and norms of the inhabitants of natural and built places past, present, and future'; and another one to 'design research and the processes of shaping and making of places'.

This paper intends to elaborate on the assumption that today's invented places present a tendency towards being depicted through fictionalised forms, denoting that cities of present contemporaneity are intimately associated to unusual morphological settings. In other words, to becoming represented by meta-realities that transcend daily reality.

For this matter the paper, methodologically, will need to deepen on the study of differentiated urban scenarios – past, present, and future – symbolized by iconic architectures, since these scenarios will prove representative of: (i) *new urban landscapes*; which, in turn, will result from (ii) *new urban design operations*; and will be satisfactorily capable of expressing the manifestation of (iii) *new urban cultures*.

New Urban Landscapes

In 1996, the cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai created neologisms to represent the effects of the new cultural global economy on the construction of landscapes. In his view, the anthropological constitution of today's globalized urban regions would assume five categories, namely: 'ethnoscapes',

‘mediascapes’, ‘technoscapes’, ‘financescapes’, and ‘ideoscapes’, all related to how ‘images’ of their foundational components circulate globally. More recently, we have been called to participate in an international conference in Portugal, denominated ‘Shoppingscapes’, an expression very conveniently employed so as to illustrate urban morphological situations marked by an intense density of commercial activities – indeed a situation increasingly found in most global cities nowadays. Ultimately, all these new so-called ‘scapes’ will help to provide an initial explanation for the production of what we here call a *fictionalised* environment. As a matter of fact, the resulting environmental features displayed on Appadurai’s scapes is nothing but a mimicking of the major images allusive to the conceptual frameworks intrinsic to the types of landscape each one denotes to.

Accordingly, the paper will examine built iconic places representative of a diversity of layouts, attributed to *starchitects*, focusing primarily on their ability to create new *places of urbanity* for the cities on which they are located.

A Diversity of Layouts

In view of the profuse diversity of layouts presently exposed through the universe of invented places, it is not unusual to find odd environmental designs giving physical forms to some urban elements already listed above, such as, shopping malls, revamped historical settings, sports complexes, integrated museums, hybrid compounds and multiplex cinemas, of which, it is not difficult to quickly select suggestive examples of each category. The illustrations that follow have been randomly extracted from today’s imaginary of *varied* urban environments.

In the case of shopping malls, since the times Disney Corporation has inaugurated the offer of fictionalised fantasies as a marketing strategy to whet the appetite of their visitors’ consumerism, addressing them more compulsively towards the shopping areas of the Disney’s ‘worlds’, the practice has not but increased, as shown, for example, by

Figure 1. *A shopping mall deployed as a skiing track. Mall of the Emirates, Dubai, UAE*



Photo: L. Castello

Figure 2. *An old gasometer transmuted into a shopping mall. Vienna, Austria*

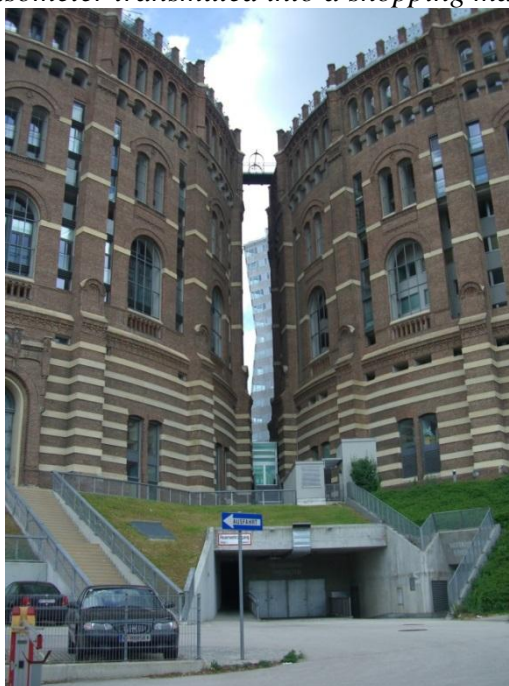


Photo: L. Castello

Figure 3. *A mall in a region of strawberry fields. Bom Princípio, Brazil*



Photo: L. Castello

Figure 4. *The newly introduced capitalist shopping centre 'Saturn' turning Hungarians perceptions upside down*



Photo: L. Castello

When it comes to revamped historical settings, there are also outstanding layouts offered by exemplars such as:

Figure 5. *Dearly loved new(old) places like New York's High Line Park introduce innovative views in terms of urban landscapes*

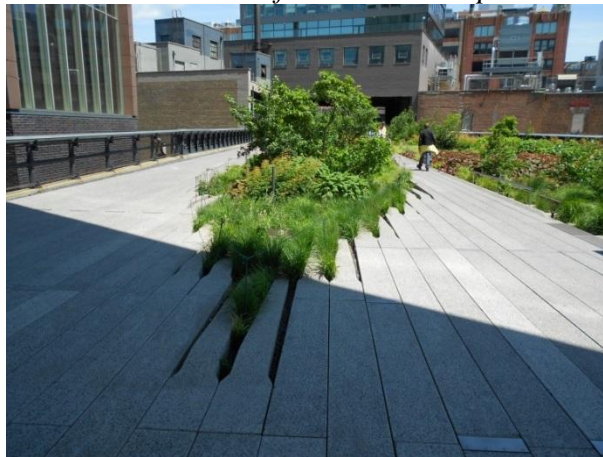


Photo: L. Castello

Additionally, a recent trend rapidly spreading all over the world and which can be acceptably included here is the imposing presence of new gigantic sports complexes. These new urban landscapes are usually implanted in strategic locations of the urban fabric, often marked by exceptional layouts. Their introduction occurs in function of the celebration of special World Sports Championships or periodic Olympic Games. Though an old practice, it is at present experiencing successful revivals sprouting everywhere in the world, and being increasingly adopted by today's global cities in their competitive 'city-marketing' policies.

Figure 6. *Arena do Grêmio, Porto Alegre, Brazil.*



Source: Internet

Figure 7. *London's Olympic Stadium*



Photo: L. Castello

Figure 8. *Recent additions to New York's museums landscape bring renewed foci such as the 'New Museum' (by SANAA)*



Photo: L. Castello

Another typical globalised manifestation responsible for generating new fantastic urban landscapes is undoubtedly the widespread proliferation of renowned museums, their impressive layouts usually associated to the names of renowned architects, often referred to as *starchitects* due to the stardom of their works. Again, this is a practice frequently linked to the fierce competition increasingly recognized among global metropolises in their goal for attracting visitors and/or residents of the said *creative class* (FLORIDA 2004). Consequently, new museums morphed under strange configurations now proliferate along the urban territories, summing up odd pieces to the local collections of traditional museums.

Also interesting to register is the presence of massive hybrid compounds, such as Seoul's World Trade Center, singled out for including a diversity of uses gathered in a single district of the city, denoting a noticeably emblematic urban landscape.

Figure 9. *Bizarre gardening surrounds a whole area of Seoul known as World Trade Center*



Photo: L. Castello

Lastly, fictional layouts can also be found inside the urban complexes that contain entertainment venues. This would be the case, for instance, of multiplex cinemas, whose layout in contemporary cities bears such a growing resemblance, repeating themselves in all latitudes, that one can already say that they form a specific configurational typology.

Figure 10. *Integral constituents of the group of new urban landscapes, 'cineplexes' are very much alike worldwide. This one is in Buenos Aires, Argentina*



Photo: L. Castello

New Urban Design Operations

Some of the new landscapes result from wide-ranging urban design operations. Some of them portray fictional hyper-realities that gain visibility thanks to their association to an outstanding iconic edifice. The inclusion of iconic buildings to the structural design of an urbanscape acts as a plus, and adds to highlighting the whole of the design operation. This is a well-known urban planning strategy that, though remaining stagnant for some period, is now reaching a triumphant revival. Its early manifestation dates to the design of Sydney's Opera House in the 1960s, which coincided with a wide range of exciting new Modernist design experiences.

In addition, another interesting point to stress here is that examples of these operations can include specimens either of the recent past, as with Sydney's Opera, by Jorn Utzon; as well as with present representatives (e.g. DongDaeMun Plaza, in Seoul, by Zaha Hadid); and future examples (e.g. Iberê Camargo Museum, in Porto Alegre, by Alvaro Siza).

Eventually, this will indicate a process rather than merely a trend, as it continues to advance in the urban-architectural contemporaneity. Indeed, it can even be argued that, in effect, it is a major representational subject of that contemporaneity, as the chronologically differing designs shown in Figures 11, 12 and 13, indicate.

Figure 11. *A groundbreaking moment in the advent of fictionalised environments: Sydney's Opera House, by Jorn Utzon*



Photo: L. Castello

Figure 12. *The constant introduction of new fictional environments, such as DongDaeMon complex, is a continual feature in urban-architectural trends*



Photo: L. Castello

Figure 13. *Iberê Camargo Museum, in Porto Alegre, by Alvaro Siza, one of the various examples of new places waiting to gain consolidation in the future*



Photo: L. Castello

New Urban Cultures

As essayed in the previous sections, it seems a relatively easy task to collect a number of exemplary pictures to illustrate trends towards a growing number of fictionalised environments making up today's cityscapes. The difficult – if not impossible – thing is to provide a reasonable *explanation* for it. Notwithstanding, in a paper directed towards understanding the circumstances that best characterize contemporary urban scenarios, this is what seems to matter the most. Therefore, at least an initial insight will be tried out as follows.

Really, in face of the emergence of the varied amount of new urban landscapes mentioned above, it seems the urban-architectural scholar scenario is prone to receive new contributions in order to move forward its state-of-the-art. A growing number of arguments seem ready to be brought into the theoretical discussions that currently permeate our area of knowledge. Moreover, some of them may prove helpful to better understand the present changes the area actually faces, so as to possibly engender a satisfactory explanation about their causes.

In its general outline, this paper assumes that there is a set of major determinant factors that collaborate to acceptably interpret why so many changes are happening in actual cityscapes. And that this whole set of likely factors can be intimately connected to the advent of *new urban cultures*.

Indeed, it is in the realm of new urban cultures that one may find reasonable explanations for the recognition of new urban phenomena permeating the daily life routine of contemporary society. In due course, new urban cultures activate new values and also different behaviours which, in turn, influence the ways current urban society experience the quality we became used to define as *urbanity*.

In our own view, urbanity is '(...) a typical and unique quality of the built environment, understood as that quality related to the dynamic of existential experiences acting on people when using the public urban space, through the capacity for exchange and communication implied by this space'. (CASTELLO 2010: 21).

Admittedly, there is a plethora of factors that can determine changes in *urbanity*. Actually, this is a quite common condition that applies indiscriminately to all social sciences alike. In fact, it is quite accepted in the social sciences to attribute to a multifaceted combination of factors the causal triggering of changes expected to occur in its inner domains. Nonetheless, only three of these factors will receive further attention here, mainly because in their essence they are all extremely wide-ranging, and all of them encompass implications to a diverse number of other components. In such terms, one can say that the determinant factors of change in the perception of urbanity these days need to contemplate at least three directions, which include: an amalgamation of cultural determinants; of urban-architectural spectacularity; and of globalisation trends.

Cultural Determinants – Escapism

It is a well-known fact that socioeconomic factors can act very compulsively upon human behavioural aspects. It is not different when the perception of urbanity comes to light. Perhaps the factors' most crucial manifestation happens in terms of *escapism*, i.e. the very human inclination to retreat from the crude side of daily realities through the diversionary routes of fictional alternatives. Yi-Fu Tuan, the respected humanist-geographer wrote an elucidative book called precisely *Escapism*, explaining today's fictional environments as a clue to the understanding of human nature and culture. Challenged to write about Disneyland, he found it delightful '(...) "to my surprise", because well-educated people...are taught to dismiss the theme park as an unreal, fantasy world supported by hidden ... forces' (TUAN 1998: xii). He goes beyond the theme park and debates what comes after it, arguing: 'Shopping mall? It has been attacked as an escapist Eden for mindless consumers. Suburb? Academic detractors...prefer the city. But the city is escapist par excellence ... to the degree it has distanced itself (escaped) from nature and its rhythms' (ibid). Thus, convincingly, he contends that the same social and economic arguments that explain a city as escapism from nature are likely to also explain some of the fictionalised environments we currently favour in our daily city life.

Urban-Architectural Features – Postmodern Spectacularity

Analogously, similar arguments can again evoke *cultural* determinants as explanatory factors for the fictionalised environments of today. Though a good number of scholars follow an argument such as that when examining human bias towards *spectacularity* in contemporary sites, the trend towards the accentuated proliferation of fictionalised environments encounters less resonance in scholar investigations than it righteously deserves. Regardless, to some authors, cities contemporaneity is seen as intimately connected to environmental spectacularity. Anthony Vidler, the celebrated architecture critic, edited a book focussing the theme of *Architecture, Between Spectacle and Use*, underlining whether architecture has dived too deeply into the 'society of the spectacle' hence becoming prey to corporate marketing and consumerist exhibitionism. Choosing Jorn Utzon's Opera in Sydney as the Modernist background, and Frank Gehry's Guggenheim in Bilbao as the Postmodernist one, Vidler recovers an old Hal Foster's critique which dealt with the fictionalised expressionism of Bilbao's museum. In his critique, Foster rephrased a Guy Debord's legendary saying, extracted from his *Society of Spectacle*, in which the French author defined spectacle as '(...) "capital accumulated to the point where it becomes an image." With Gehry and other architects the reverse is now true as well: spectacle is "an image accumulated to the point where it becomes capital"' (VIDLER 2008: vii).

Globalisation Trends – Branding Metropolitan Competitiveness

Finally, it seems this brief crusade trying to gather explanatory factors of today's empathy for fictionalised environments would not be complete without the inclusion of this last message, recalling the effects *globalisation* eventually accrues upon the distinctive morphological configurations of today.

One distinguishing mark of contemporary cities in globalisation times is their tendency towards competition. In the face of that, expressions such as city-marketing and city-branding became increasingly integrated to up-to-date urbanistic vocabulary. Surely, one of the highest stakes cities have to excel themselves among other cities is based on the assets presented by their built environments. Icons, iconic buildings, places of urbanity, are all assets that score high in city's rankings. The more they have, the most qualified cities are, the highest they rank. So, it is not difficult to guess that cities actually praise more and more their distinctive edifices – their fictional environments. The architectural critic Deyan Sudjic is categorical about this preference:

Every ambitious city wants an architect to do for them what they think Jorn Utzon Opera House did for Sydney and Frank Gehry and the Guggenheim did for Bilbao. When the Gehry-designed Disney Concert Hall finally opened in Los Angeles, most of the speeches at the opening ceremony talked more about what this new concert hall was going to do for the city's image than about its acoustics. Everybody wants an icon now. (SUDJIC 2005: 318).

Sudjic continues his observation adding that 'This state of mind is the entirely predictable outcome of the bizarre quest for the icon that has swept architecture and has become the most ubiquitous theme of contemporary design' (ibid: 319). It goes without saying that the *fictionalised* architectural items approached in this essay have profuse liaisons with today's iconic constructions, a tendency all the time more examined in the literature of the area. Furthermore, in an epoch massively labelled by an extraordinary growth in globalised urban tourism, 'Cities are sold just like any other consumer product. They have adopted image advertising (...). Each city tries to project itself as a uniquely wonderful place to visit' (FAINSTEIN and JUDD 1999: 4).

Conclusion

In all likelihood, the trend towards an everlasting expansion in the number of urban-architectural inventions that fulfil our cities with unusually creative forms will not diminish. If – as we do effectively believe – they are due to factors associated with the three foundational dimensions we selected to examine more closely – escapism, spectacularity, and competitiveness – they will surely go on and on, because these factors are a typical human manifestation – as is the city.

Paul Goldberger once presented an enlightening theory concerning this human demand in his column at *The New Yorker* magazine. He argues that, as a critic, there is a need to place buildings within the context which enhances their meaning: “All architecture involves some degree of compromise with the demands of the real world; if it didn’t, it would be art, not architecture” (GOLDBERGER 2009: 10).

It is probably within the realms of our own discipline that seem to reside the providences that can be taken to accommodate the variations. Fortunately, the topic has been approached ever more seriously, as numerous authors dedicate themselves to focussing on the manifestation of the new urban phenomena represented by what we label as *fictional environment*. In fact, the initial efforts started by some professional critics, such as, for example, Ada Louise Huxtable, in her wonderful book debating *The Unreal America. Architecture and Illusion*; or Beth Dunlop, with her *Building a Dream*, pioneering an in-depth study about *The Art of Disney Architecture*; authors who, among others, opened a path to explain and understand the phenomena of the fictional environmental pieces of today’s cities.. Thanks to their ground-breaking works, other specialists like, for instance, François Ascher, David Grahame Shane or Rem Koolhaas, are introducing the necessary mutational guidelines so deeply demanded in the theoretical grounds of our area of knowledge.

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