

26 APRIL 2010



What is the meaning of landscape?

By Pierre Donadieu

The question of the meaning of landscape is recurrent among the landscape designers. The French landscape architect Alain Freytet states: "The landscape intentions are often subject to specific representation and formulation. The project must have a meaning before a form. The term "meaning" is understood here through three aspects: the sensitive (what the project can provide as sensations, emotions), the dynamics (in which direction the project will it grow and how?) and the interpretation (what says the project on nature and space, ideas and intentions related to the order, can it help to better understand the places, sites and the horizon?)¹."

In this professional approach to landscape project the word "meaning" has three definitions. The first is an allusion to the human sensitivity to the sensitive characteristics of a place. It, like a clever decor, can provide, from bodily sensations (the five senses), emotions, impressions and feelings. In English: *sense*.

The second acceptance refers to the approach and process taken by the project, which will transform the material characteristics, and therefore the perception of the site. In English: *way*. The third refers to the interpretation of the site, developed according to the customer's wishes and the ideas of the designer. In English: *Meaning or landscape interpretation*.

Combined, these three acceptations are inaccessible to the uninitiated who may seek to seize them as the issue of the meaning of life by example. This latter question can be answered only subjectively; because meaning is not an objective characteristic of the world or the nature, but a typical human construction. These are men who give meaning(s) to the world.

It is the same for the first acceptance for the landscapers. By experiencing the sensations together – warm / cold, smooth / rough, soft / hard, dark / light, loud / quiet, etc.- each builds his personal understanding of a place and retains impressions (of quiet, surprise, fear) and feelings (of delight or outrage).

However, the second acceptance covers both the processed materiality (tree planting, surface treatment by earthworks, lighting and traffic patterns of visitors), and the changes in the social practices of a place and in its imaginary interpretations. The project's direction desired by the designer must be verifiable by the customer.

The third acceptance: the understanding of developed places is either an interpretation of shapes and signs perceived by the landscape critics, or explanations given by experts in disciplines of relevant knowledge: the naturalist, who observes the birds nesting, the historian who reveals the origin of the preserved architecture, the sociologist who analyzes the social uses, the geographer sensitive to the establishment of organizations in the territory of a local authority, the landscaper who explains what he wanted to do, etc. The polysemy of places corresponds to the meaning of the human life in these places, including the landscaper who designed it.

These three acceptations of meaning are not independent, especially for the landscaper who may choose to include in his project a message, to deploy a story, a legend. But the visitor has the freedom to

¹ Alain FREYTET. *Le paysage pour un paysagiste*. Nouveaux Actes Sémiotiques [online]. Actes de colloques, 2005, Paysages & valeurs : de la représentation à la simulation. Available on : <<http://revues.unilim.fr/nas/document.php?id=2260>> (consulté le 14/02/2010).

ignore them and to take advantage of the place for any personal reason (eg jogging). In this case the meaning comes after the creation.

Landscapes such as physical places have neither definitive scientific definition (sciences change) nor eternal definition. These vary in the length of history as in the time of our lives. Hostile in the past, the banks have now become very attractive, and places of childhood are mostly sources of nostalgia.

The question of the meaning of landscape as the universe and life is a real question without more answers than what each individual brings to his own life.
