



Theoretical Debates on Landscape for Critical Urbanism: Playing in the “Semiological Field”

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There has always been an interest in the communicative-aesthetic aspects of urban landscapes for different purposes: for city marketing (Kearns and Philo, 1993), for the expression of power and authority, of geographic possession, ideology, or building-expressing identity and everyday culture (Mitchell 2001, 2002, 2003; Said 2002). Predominantly, it has been argued that singular meanings and narratives have been invented, and underlined for urban landscapes by political authorities as if they were the only reality (Till, 1999; Mitchell 2001), although urban landscapes have been conceived as containing a multiplicity of communicative contents and processes as numerous as the people of the city, who everyday struggle for life (Mitchell 2001, 2002).

Urban design disciplines have approached the aesthetic and communicative dimension of urban landscapes by stripping the phenomena from their social relativities, complexities and indeterminate imaginative associations (Barthes, 1986(1971); Gottdiener and Lagopoulos, 1986). The concept of landscape has been further neutralized by disintegrating culture and nature, and its physicality into the conventional typologies of parks and gardens. The physicality of landscapes is perceived through an analytical framework of modernist urban planning and design, dividing it into synthetic fragments until they lose the meanings which are connected to wider experiential contexts. Modernist urban planning and design discourse reduces the meaning of landscape to nature and the ultimate meaning of landscape architecture into creating and preserving the nature (Berque 1993). In landscape architecture, meaning and symbolism in cultural landscapes are predominantly introduced as if they are singular, intrinsic and never-changing (Treib 1995). In this context, cultural landscapes associated with fixed communicative contents, symbolisms and messages are often romanticized and stressed as assets to be the subject of conservation. The critics in landscape architecture in recent decades (e.g. Corner, 1999), derive their arguments from the ‘cultural landscape’ mainstream in cultural geography, in particular from interpretations of J.B. Jackson and others, who define landscape as an instrument in relation to the city that encrypts social and emotional patterns and processes over natural and built environment in contrast to the above approaches. Jackson (Jackson, 1960:1-2 in Meining, 1979) had suggested that the city is the densest form of this encryption. Moreover, Appadurai (1996) has discussed that the contemporary cities in the globalized world have become more and more refuges for aesthetic languages which carry messages of varying cultures, political discourses, class tastes, lifestyles, everyday experiences and urban functions. So far, however, there has been little discussion about these arguments about the complexity of meanings and the associated social processes in relation to the communicative-aesthetic dimension of urban landscapes and landscape architectural practices.

Corner (1999:4) suggests thinking landscape “as an innovative cultural agent” and landscape architecture as a “force” cultivating it toward this. How could the formation and complexity of meanings, the aesthetic and communicative dimensions of urban landscapes be understood, and a critical, comprehensive insight be brought as a foundation to enable landscape architecture to become such a “force”? Building upon these arguments as hypotheses, this study takes a critical viewpoint with regard to the monolithic, disintegrative and stagnant perspectives. Furthermore, it attempts to explore the theories of landscape and to demonstrate that cultural landscapes, particularly in urban milieus, involve various complex communicative phenomena, symbolisms and meanings, which depend on the diversity of subjects in the cities and their social and emotional memories, their everyday experiences and future dreams relating the concepts to issues of designed, emerging, commemorated or imagined public spaces, urban landscapes. In this respect, it is an attempt to constitute a critical approach that proposes comprehensive, explorative insights into the complex, plural, unpredictable, instable and integrated social, imaginary realities of landscapes in order that such data will provide a basis for such interventions that use landscape as “an innovative cultural agent”. Beyond denigrating populist landscapes or associating singular, superficial, or fixed meanings to urban landscapes, how could the causalities, the historical formations and everyday narratives, the subjective experiences and imaginations, including the

complexity behind them and their influence on the social ecology in the city be understood comprehensively? Beyond the framework of monolithic (de-cultured) interpretations of conventional urban planning and design about aesthetics of urban landscape, how could the aesthetic-communicative aspect, the complex meanings of landscapes be comprehended? Beyond only the conservation of tangible heritages of the past only, how should planning and design disciplines conceive their role in stimulating aesthetic experiences and imaginary associations in urban landscapes for the construction of meanings? What could be learned from the emerging landscapes outside the frameworks of the normative values and codes of the urban planning and design disciplines? How could the role of landscape architecture in the larger context of urban realities could be analysed, criticized and envisioned? How could be derived from theories of landscape for critical, reflexive urbanism in the neo liberal city? These questions form the core argumentation along with theoretical elaborations and exemplifications from Istanbul.

KEY WORDS: Theories of landscape and urbanism, aesthetics and communication, complexity, semiotics, planning-design agency.