

Water Towers, Landscape, Project and Utopia

Mattighello, D.
University of Udine
(email: davide.mattighello@uniud.it)

Abstract

Often the over-contextual logic of the processes that have insisted on the territory has caused the formation of infinite “functional fragments”; the only homogenous-connecting element of this contemporary landscape seems to be the infrastructure, the structural data of the territorial scene. But if some steps have been made in this direction, in recognizing in the reconfiguration of the transport infrastructures a strategy of landscape requalification, no attention has been paid to the other civil infrastructural components that have accompanied the city expansion as, for example, the water infrastructures. Following the lesson of E.Turri who proposes the metaphor of the landscape as theatre, the sense of seeing and of observing acquires a political and operating meaning; and it is precisely from this “postulate” that I intend to propose a re-reading of the ground water level towers as landmark devices from which to view the landscape. Discovering the aesthetic value of the urban and landscape dimension through the observation from such privileged places does not mean to legitimise the chaos that surrounds them but to stimulate a critical reflection on the territorial palimpsest that accommodates our condition trying to decipher the infinite actions that have been carried out on it. And it is here that the observation, meant as a complex cognitive process, by the community, becomes an instrument able to promote the reading of the territory consequently a critical awareness of reality able to determine the change of the same reality. Making water towers accessible and practicable at higher levels, through the appropriate planning operations, will allow the creation of unknown points of view able to widen the perception of the landscape in all its extension; to ascend, to conquer the spectator status and to institute a new system of appreciation of the territory. In this way, the strategy described will delineate new spatial devices of the territory, converting the intrusiveness of such handiworks into landscape structures able to redefine the compositional and figurative arrangements of wide portions of the contemporary palimpsest, but still more effectively, in the role of observation stations, that will favour an awareness of the territorial transformations and of their policies of management.

Keywords: water tower, landmark, landscape, infrastructure, architecture

1. From the aesthetic to the political and vice versa

We know that after the great social and economic changes which characterised the second half of the XX century followed a progressive change in the layouts of the city and the territory. The rapid sustained expansion of urbanised areas, in part, by the increasing use of the lands made available from the countryside and, partially, by the acceleration of the communication networks produced a phenomenon of counter-urbanization characterised by the ongoing dispersion of buildings and an overturning of consolidated spatial and city hierarchies. The formation of new peripheral conurbations in this way brought life to a continuous building reticulum, that extends over hundreds of square kilometres and that we can recognize by the terms, diffused city, nebulous city, sprawltown or megalopolis. The often over-contextual logic of the processes that have imposed on the territory has caused the formation of infinite “functional fragments” delineating a metropolitan landscape whose character can be rightly defined as chaotic; the only homogenous-connecting element of this contemporary landscape seems to be the infrastructure, the structural data of the territorial scene.



Example Figure 1: Nature, building and infrastructure

Now urban planning, critically distanced from the excesses of the functionalist vision, that has characterized the last few decades, must take charge of the integration of the environmental, cultural, functional and above all *aesthetic* dimension in order to give back coherence to the set of fragments present within the territory. But if some steps have been made in this direction, mostly at a theoretical level, in recognising in the reconfiguration of the transport infrastructures a strategy of landscape requalification, no attention has been paid to the other civil infrastructural components that have accompanied the city expansion such as, for example, water infrastructures, subject of this report. At the base) of this planning strategy of spatial integration of the several systems servicing of the

territory, we find again the priority requirement of providing recognisability to the landscape and clarifying the relationship between the territory and us in a cultural real synthesis, that of the landscape, the most possible determined. Following the lesson of E.Turri who proposes the metaphor of the *landscape as a continuous theatre of society in its subsequent elaborations*, the sense of seeing and observing acquires, as we will see, a political and operating meaning; and it is precisely from this “postulate” that I intend to propose a re-reading of the ground water towers as landmark devices on which to become observers of the landscape.

Discovering the aesthetic value of the urban and the landscape dimension through the observation from these privileged places does not mean the legitimisation of the chaos that surrounds them or elevating it to a theorem of the current condition, on the contrary it means soliciting a critical reflection on *the territorial palimpsest*, that accommodates our condition trying to decipher the infinite actions that have been carried out on it.

The nucleus of this reflection corresponds to its objective, to take back control of the city and its landscape through an awareness rising by those who are interested in the involvement that is by the active community. And it is here that observation, meant as a complex cognitive process, by the community, becomes an instrument able to promote the reading of the territory and consequently a critical knowledge of the truth able to determine the change of the same truth. Making water towers and suspended tanks accessible and practicable on their highest floors, through the appropriate planning operations and safety procedures, besides contributing to redefine the role of the water infrastructure from a simple feat of civil engineering to new place or contemporary situation, will allow the creation of unknown points of view able to widen the perception of the landscape in all its extension; to ascend, in order to conquer the spectator status and to establish a new system of appreciation of the territory. When we understand that the *landscape exists* and becomes active only if *someone is looking at it* trying to recognise its structure, is the necessity for an ethical and political commitment aimed at its protection created. Since looking at the landscape means seeing with awareness change and evolution, but also not remaining indifferent and inactive faced with these issues. In this sense, the definition of a platform at a high altitude (between twenty and forty metres from the floor of the countryside) on which we become observers of nature, and appreciate at times its beauty, besides materializing the supremacy of the reflecting activity of man, will allow the creation of *unknown places for a democratic monitoring of the complexity of the world*.

Analogously, to the work of the astronomer, who stationary in his observation station tries to probe the dynamics of cosmic nebulas, to colonise the great vertical water infrastructures will mean creating privileged observatories of the territorial conurbations in order to foresee future evolutions. It seems opportune to start again from the reading and understanding of the phenomena that have determined the current scene and in this case, to redefine the theories; the cognition of time and the acquaintance of space, it is precisely through here that the understanding of the landscape passes.

If in order to understand the landscape, the hypothesis of a high viewing point can appear as the simple addition of a viewing point to the infinite set of those already accessible on the ground, and to arouse a natural diffidence towards the operation, it is enough to take a plane and to land towards evening time in Venice, to observe from above the Padana-venetian urban nebula extending across the

entire plain without solution of continuity; incandescent magma tracks seem to crack that surface in a temporary regression to geologic origins. It is the vision itself that imposes a reaction! On the other hand, during the last few years, the research carried out with the aid of GIS technologies seem to confirm the success of the cognitive strategies linked to the *vision* as an exploratory means of the territory-landscape. Also in this case the reading (or mapping) is provided by the crossing of two models: the condition of things that is the space and the change that is the time. The map is never a form of data of departure, but a plan of vision that is derived from the combination of satellite images and algorithms, transformed into a geometric spatial model.



Example Figure 2: High viewing point as Plan of vision

But the landscape is above all the result of the action of the senses activated before reality and it excludes any taming derived from geometry; paraphrasing F. Farinelli, we have always operated on the territory through the mediation of the map, *we have not come to terms with the territory, but with the map signifying territory.*

If this has been an instrument useful for all modernity (in order to undertake a rationalization of the space which had subsequently failed) now the map is no longer a copy of the territory, but the copy of the map is the territory; the results of the traditional planning practice and of the zoning are the more obvious evidence. The inappropriateness of the cartographic instrument is by now a recognised fact. This circumstance represents one of the evident difficulties that the policies of the landscape are facing in dealing prudently with the management of the territory and imposes new reflections for the definition of a new operating culture for the landscape. In this sense, the hypothesis of preparing the extremities of the already present water towers scattered throughout the territory as real observatories, is integrated within a strategy that intends to elevate *the acquisition of familiarisation with the landscape through observation*, to a catalyst of the protection and the construction of the same

landscape by means of the direct involvement of the community, according to a principle, as already mentioned, which is democratic and with probably unknown real implications.

Obviously, the inadequacy of these structures in order to receive a public space will involve a redefinition of the infrastructural handiwork from a mono-functional element to a “hybrid” social place, while not even renouncing its function of suspended tank. This scene, besides constituting a valid occasion for the architecture of reclaiming the plan of the infrastructure (*or the equipment that can be integrated into this kind of infrastructure*) by means of a creative rethink of its potentialities, will confer a new role to these tasks in the contexts within which they occur. The described strategy will thus delineate new spatial devices of the territory, converting the intrusiveness of such elements into landscape structures able to redefine the compositional and figurative arrangements of wide portions of the contemporary palimpsest, but still more effectively, in the role of observation stations, they will favour a sensitisation to the territorial transformations and their policies of management. The same action to ascend these structures will assess and above all promote the participation and education of the landscape.

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