

# Posturbanism and Paradise: Real gardens, vicarious landscapes or virtual arenas for stillness and spectacle

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the paradox of stillness within posturban space, and in particular the garden. Posturbanism is identified as a synthesis of two principle ideas: the city as an analogue of the mind, and for virtual urban space to satisfy immaterial human needs. The contention is that for urban theory to be useful and satisfying it must direct the integration and extension of the real into the virtual. The human need for spectacle is described in an historical context.

Only one element of urban landscape is explored here - the garden. More specifically, the Eastern/Persian paradise garden is juxtaposed to the Western modernist city and park, drawing on (visual) commentary derived from film, virtual gaming arenas, and thirdspace hybrid landscapes. The paradox of stillness within the real and digital landscapes is critiqued. It is concluded that a rehabilitated posturban landscape is required if stillness is to be revealed and embraced.

Keywords: Garden, landscape, posturbanism, spectacle, vicarious

## Introduction

This paper investigates the paradox of stillness within posturban space, and in particular the garden. At least two distinct trains of thought are evident. The first of these focuses on the potential for recently emergent posturban space to satisfy human needs. This is discussed within an historical perspective detailing the shift from reality towards virtuality as a primary means of satisfying the desire for spectacle.

The second train of thought (which cannot be fully detailed here) relates to the design and interpretation of garden-space as a metaphor for stillness. Trinh Minh-ha defines the paradox of stillness as “sound or silence, movement or stillness, not opposed to one another” (Minh-ha, 2005). In terms of the garden, we interpret stillness as ‘duration’. Stillness as duration abounds in Eastern gardens. Accepting the quantum view of decoherence, there is a flow of information about an object (for example, a garden) into its surroundings, and since information can be neither created nor destroyed, the duration of this flow is as timeless as the centuries between the construction of Eastern gardens and the present and future.

The East's social paradigm, which is underpinned by near totalitarian capitalism with its singularity of idea/information, provides a semblance of homogeneity, and thus immutability and durability, at least to the outside observer. In contrast to this homogeneity that remains relatively undisturbed, the West enjoys the riches of disaffected/economic immigration, accentuating the paradigm shift towards diversity and postmodernism.

Many Western gardens do not contain information that is *homogeneous* enough to be retained through time. *Heterogeneity* does not seem to lend itself to duration. Cosgrove notes the ephemeral nature of postmodern landscape space (Cosgrove, 1997):

The concept of carnival is frequently employed in discussions of representation and promotion in postmodern space. In the renaissance city one can observe a parallel significance of carnival as a significant element in both civic and social life... the Piazza San Marco... Often described as a stage set, this celebrated apotheosis of urban landscape

design is, in fact, an eclectic assemblage of architectural styles... It would not be inaccurate to describe this space in terms now regularly employed for postmodern landscapes: ‘an architecture of spectacle, with its sense of surface glitter and transitory pleasure, of display and ephemerality, or jouissance ...

In contrast to the postmodern Western landscape, on a semiotic level the Zen garden is empty; movement is implied, yet *stillness* is the reality. Saito outlines ideas behind the placement of “principle and “subordinator”, “pursuer” and “pursued” stones in the Japanese Garden (Saito, 1970). The Persian garden embodies stillness as duration with its reflection pools of infinite stillness, in counterpoint to the constancy of noise generated by fountain jets. In the Alhambra, movement from cloister and pavilion, to loggia/veranda, and walled courtyard, varies from containment to strongly axial: movement through creates spectacle, Grand Tour being the goal. (These metaphorical/interpretive design ideas are described in the visual presentation).

### **Posturbanism, human-needs and spectacle**

Posturbanism is “identified as a synthesis of two principle ideas: the city as an analogue of the mind, and for virtual urban space to satisfy immaterial human needs. The contention is that for urban theory to be useful and satisfying, it must direct the integration and extension of the real into the virtual” (Hotten and Diprose, 2003). This paper focuses on one aspect of posturbanism, namely that well-designed real/virtual spaces should satisfy immaterial human needs through their provision of settings and situations.

The range of needs per se may be few and unchanging, but the ways in which these needs can be satisfied may vary markedly over time, or from place to place, and culture to culture. The human requirement for affection, understanding, participation, leisure, creation, identity, and freedom can all be satisfied to some degree by virtual cultural environments. However, some satisfiers are less satisfactory than they appear at first glance, and may in fact have the potential to undermine the genuine fulfilment of needs (Max Neef, 1992). For example, internet relationships/sex may seemingly satisfy the need for affection in the short-term, yet prove merely an addiction (Carnes, 2001). An evergreen satisfier of understanding, leisure, identity, and freedom is that of the ‘spectacle’. Whether a genuine satisfier or not, the human desire for spectacle is well documented (Cosgrove, D. 1997, Hotten & Diprose 2000).

### **From panoramic view, to cinematic view, to virtual view**

More than one hundred years ago the urge for (exotic) spectacle was satisfied by the 360-degree panorama. Comment states the panorama was one of the most popular phenomena of the nineteenth century. “A motley crowd in search of wanton, enigmatic and rarely denied pleasure would rush to see these spectacular paintings” (Comment, 1999).

In general, the panoramic photograph or painting technique records and simulates comprehensive views of a portion of the earth’s surface, landscape, or built environment (Oettermann, 1997). Between 1787 and 1900, panorama painting was a medium through which ordinary people could access and experience the other. Namely, for those living in the large established European cities, this ‘other’ was life beyond typical mundane existence, a reality experienced by others elsewhere at some other time. Through the panorama, newly discovered exotic colonial landscapes and architecture were ‘captured’ by teams of painters for homeland audiences. An example is “Panorama of the Congo” by Alfred Bastien and Paul Mathieu. The viewer of this period was also able to gaze upon the totality of significant events in time and

space through a single work. An example of this is “Panorama for the struggle for Tyrolean independence in 1809”, by Michel Zeno Diemer. This was the nineteenth century equivalent of “Saving Private Ryan”, with the viewer being transported to a hazardous time and location to experience a situation of spectacular interest in relative safety and comfort.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the still panorama was quickly displaced by film as the means of vicarious experience. With the introduction of television, and more particularly the proliferation of personal computers over the last decade, screen-based media, which satisfy the (instant) human desire for vicarious experience have become pervasive (Hotten and Diprose, 2000).

### **Garden spectacle and movement**

The garden can also be located within an historical framework of spectacle. However, the popularity of the exotic garden has not wavered...until now. With the vicarious representation of garden in cinematic form together with the potential offered by virtuality to provide (instant) gratification of landscape spectacle, the future of the real ‘garden’ is now less certain. We suggest that the garden within human imagination is likely to become the major focus in the future, a state that Riley predicted ten years ago (Riley, 1997):

...vicarious... landscape experience... fantasy landscape or internal landscape narrative... Landscape scholars have paid almost no attention to this vicarious, internally structured landscape - despite our fascination with deconstructionism, with its tenets of the indeterminacy of the text and the open-endedness of interpretation and its common sense - confirmed contention that such landscape readings will exist and will vary. These internal landscapes might well be central landscape experiences in a person’s life.

Our consciousness as observers may be vastly more powerful in our construction of visual texts than ever imagined. Robert Lanza outlines this dualist dilemma (Lanza, 2007):

...a reversal, of the central mystery of knowledge: that the laws of the world were somehow created to produce the observer. And more important than this, that the observer in a significant sense creates reality and not the other way around... We are living through a profound shift in worldview, from the belief that time and space are entities in the universe to one in which time and space belong to the living. Think of all the recent book titles - The End of Science, The End of History, The End of Eternity, The End of Certainty, The End of Nature, and The End of Time. Only for a moment, while we sort out the reality that time and space do not exist, will it feel like madness.

From this view are we to expect ‘The End of the Garden’?

With the above ideas in mind we have created the following historical list of garden representation for spectacle and stillness. Actual movement to satisfy need for spectacle is noted as well as the (metaphorical) concept of stillness as duration.

Real Gardens and Landscape:

1. Native landscape / authentic landscape / reality (Historical Eastern and Persian garden); Stillness and duration; BC to present
2. Exotic landscape / stolen landscapes / altered realities; Extreme movement; 1850s to present

### Artistic and Photographic Representations of Gardens and Landscape:

3. Dreamscapes / artistic landscape / panoramic landscapes in 2D and 3D (for example, sci-fi drawings); Some movement; Panoramas 1800 to 1900

### Cinematic Representations of Gardens and Landscape:

4. Classic vicarious landscape / TV and epic cinematic landscape (for example, The Constant Gardener); Limited movement and stillness as duration landscape imagery; 1920s -1950s to present
5. Hybrid vicarious landscapes / blue screen digital landscapes for cinema (for example, House of Flying Daggers / Matrix / Sin City); 1990s to present
6. Screen-based, virtual arena landscapes 'A', cinematic-themed gaming arenas that are spin-offs from film (for example, Star Wars); Stillness and instantaneous gratification; 1990s to present
7. Screen based, virtual arena landscapes 'B', standard gaming arenas which may have movie spin offs (for example Final Fantasy / Spirits Within); Stillness and instantaneous gratification; 1990s to present

### 'The end of the Garden' – the Posturban future

8. 3D fully immersive arenas / simulated 3D / 360 degree stereoscopic environments; Stillness and instantaneous gratification; Late 1990s to present
9. Immersive virtual "parallel" realities and communities (for example, the Second Life 'game' and addictive dreamlands; Stillness and instantaneous gratification; 2000s to present

### **Towards posturbanism**

The posturban garden is more an illusion, as are film or digital gaming arenas or thirdspace hybrid landscapes, than a real artefact. One of the strengths of posturban landscape is that it provides neutral ground: a territory for *fusion* of peoples (for example, within online communities) beyond the contested, sometimes over-regulated and typically inequitable landscape reality. We contend that posturban virtuality can, in part, satisfy an individual's need for spectacle. That is, understanding, leisure, identity, and freedom, embodied in examples such as the individual realising/morphing themselves into a virtual person in Second Life (Sobchack, 2000); or as character/player within an alternative internet gaming universe (Irvine, 2007); or as the location for an immigrant to rise above alienation within (an)other place, enabling reconnection to authentic/native communities.

Physical distance to exotic spectacle has been overcome, and reconnection to distant community is now instantaneous. Stillness is the result. So what of the garden? Should real landscapes be reinterpreted with this in mind, seeking out timeless, authentic, and still places of sanctuary? Should real space be informed by new environments derived from *film*, *virtual gaming arenas*, and *thirdspace hybrid landscapes*? In schools of architecture this has been happening for many years as a regular aspect of the pedagogical instruction, directing students away from naïve reproduction of standard/functional types and towards creative processes informed by the realm of vicarious landscape and idea (Diprose and Hotten, 1999).

At one end of the spectrum the result may be (real) recreations of authentic still and timeless gardens reminiscent of the Generalife garden. This approach can be identified in the rustic-modernist gardens of Fernando Caruncho. Caruncho notes that "in order to travel into the future, it is necessary to walk towards the pure clarity of the past" (Cooper and Taylor, 2000). This authentic/recreation garden type may be considered as a site of contemplation and of stillness, in

which the mind is free to travel. In contraposition to this, our 'death of the garden' proposition suggests the rise of a posturban thirdspace - a place of dazzling speed and diverse garden spectacle. This posturban landscape may include globalised gardens of varied phosphoric movement which embrace the viewer - electric displays of instantaneous gratification resembling Eros (Piccadilly Circus). While the need for spectacle may be satisfied in this realm, the garden is recreated as a restless and uneasy site, inevitably overwhelming the mind. The desires of the designer and the gardener respectively are likely to be expressed and fulfilled within and between these spatially schizophrenic realms. "In today's electronic space of computerized realities, the sage's words would fare quite well, for one can hear in them all at once: the practical voice of ancient wisdom, the dissenting voice of postcoloniality, and the visionary voice of technology." (Minh-ha 2005). Posturban space is likely to be a world colonised by architects and all those that seek designs and dreamscapes for stillness and spectacle. If that's the case, we will see you there.

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## Illustrations



Figs. 1 & 2. Reflection Pools, Alhambra and Generalife Garden, Granada, Spain, P. Diprose, 2005



Fig. 3. Jets and Pool, Alhambra, P. Diprose 1995.



Fig. 4. Rock garden, Kyoto, K. O'Meara 2006





Figs. 5 & 6. Zen Garden - Ryoanji, Kyoto, K. O'Meara 2006



Figs. 7 & 8. Contrasting landscapes from "The Constant Gardener", UK Film Council, 2005



Fig. 9. Panorama of the Irwin Garden at the Getty Center Los Angeles, Robert Hotten, 1999

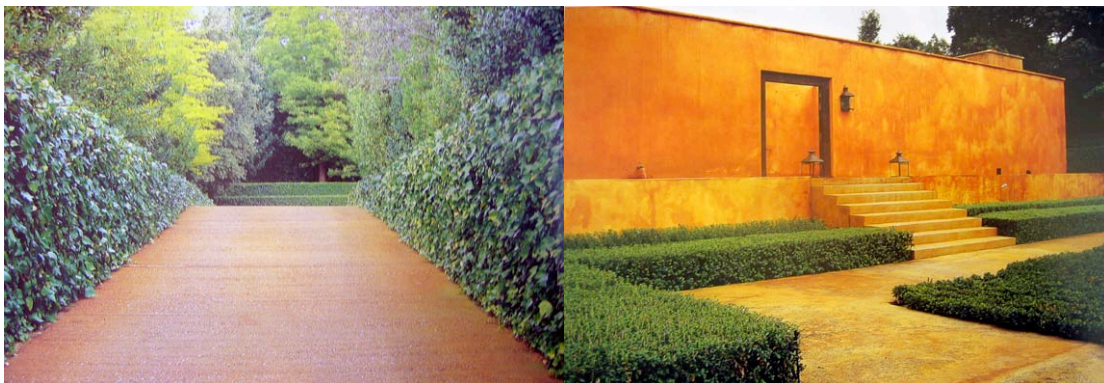


Figure 10. Rosales Garden, Madrid 1988, F. Caruncho Figure 11. Caruncho Garden, Madrid 1989



Figure 12. Caruncho Garden, Madrid 1989, F. Caruncho



Fig. 13. Eros, Piccadilly Circus, London

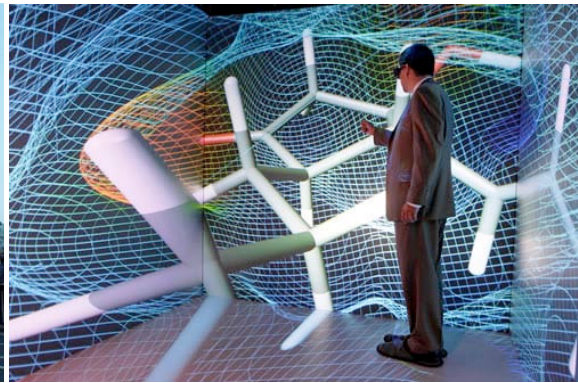


Fig. 14. 'Holodeck', CAVE Fakespace Systems 2007