

# Imagining the City Scenery: Categories of Renaissance Aesthetics and Architectural and Urban Metaphors

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Examples discussed in this article are showing that from the late Middle Ages all through the Renaissance, there existed an idea of the city as scenery imagined as a metaphorical ground for interpreting different social and cultural values. In that context, the aesthetic categories relevant to the process of imagining the city as scenery are directly anticipating the observer's aesthetic respond to the emotionally created character of the scenery. From the mediaeval time, urban space reflected metaphorically the regional space and its essentially performing and theatrical characteristics. More precisely, in the twelfth and thirteenth century western European literature, the city has been interpreted as an urban mirabilia, miraculous scenery of many important events. However, in the thirteenth century the city is becoming a matrix of an ideological system. It is a social urban utopia, which success depends on the coordination between the actual story and the cultural and psychological heritage of the citizens and their system of values in the context of the time. These components of experiencing beauty of the city seem to develop further into a particular ethical concept under the influence of the philosophy of humanism. This was a kind of process through which man express' his longing for acting as necessity in creating an ambivalent world. In this world rationality and irrationality are correlated in a complex way through the form of architectural and urban scenery. Far from rationalized aspects, intuition and emotion as aesthetic values, are now interpreting the ethical bond between individual and eternal aspects of humanity.

**Keywords: Aesthetics, City, Scenery, Architecture, Judgment**

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The topic regarding the idea of the Renaissance city as scenery and its relationship to the process of development of categories of its aesthetic judgment is a specific one. Actually, this topic can be discussed on two levels on which the relationship between the city as scenery and aesthetic categories can be established. The first level appears to be established on premises of a metaphorical language. On the second level, the relationship in question works more through rationally defined aesthetic categories. Our discussion, emphasizing the metaphorical notion of the scenery, will be more related to the relationship between the character of the scenery and the observer's aesthetic respond to it, than to the

formal, factual principles of shaping the city as scenery.

However, it will be shown that the aesthetic categories relevant to the process of imagining the city as scenery are directly anticipating the observer's aesthetic respond to the emotionally created character of the scenery. It is interesting to emphasize that, in fact, on both named levels the city imaginary as scenery is actually involved in the performance of a specific idea, as an important part of its essential character, rather than as a pure decorum. The city imaginary as scenery reveals that way, important aspects fundamentally linked to the story performed within it.

The essential theatricality of the Renaissance city has been already emphasized by Tafuri<sup>1</sup>. However, he distinguished the *city as a matrix of signs and as itself a privileged sign*, a difference very important for our topic, which will particularly influence development of various aesthetic approaches to the aspects of judgment.

The source of this characteristic of the Renaissance city can be found in mediaeval time, as shown by Charles Burroughs. He wrote that *...the symbolic landscape of late mediaeval Italy was structured in large part through the interrelationships on a regional scale of major centers of economic and ritual activity and social intercourse and the highways and waterways that connected them...*<sup>2</sup> In fact, urban space reflected metaphorically the regional space and its essentially performing and theatrical characteristics. In that sense we can follow a development from a broader concept of landscape scenery to the idea of the imaginary of a city as a scenic space where political and social aspects of a society can be metaphorically performed.

However, we should also emphasize and discuss another potential source of the Renaissance ideas of city scenery, particularly regarding categories of its aesthetic experience and judgment: the literary visions of cities in the late middle age. The main characteristic of these visions reflects the city as scenery where the idea of equalizing the city and human body took place. It seems that this idea participated largely in the immediate aesthetic experience and judgment of a city according to its metaphorically transformed perceptual values and formal characteristics. As Jacques le Goff has shown, in the twelfth and thirteenth century western European literature, the city has been interpreted as an urban mirabilia, miraculous scenery of many important events.<sup>3</sup>

In the twelfth century knight's stories as "The Praise of Orange" and "Conquest of Nimes", the cities have been experienced as adorned beautiful women. The cities are desirable and the knight was approaching them as if he would approach a charming young bride. The epithets, defined as aspects of aesthetic judgment and used in descriptions of the cities are: good, rich, wonderful, strong, firm, honorable, mighty, large, adorned and beautiful. However, all these aspects and aesthetic categories were more provoking an emotional reaction in the observer/actor of the story, than a tranquil sense of harmony and supernatural beauty.

The aesthetic experience of the cities was actually in the sphere of individual and emotional respond to a desirable object, provoking an agonal behavior. The city has all named attributes because it is miraculous, unknown and desirable. Personal feelings are compatible to these categories, and they are not directed towards social or moral aspects of the city, in a philosophical way of speaking. The city is a reason for a personal achievement, but also scenery embracing that effort. However, the nature of that scenery can not be equalized with stage craft, because the city is at the same time an object of desire and the site of the performance. The observer becomes actor in the conquering performance, the final act which is placed within the space of the very desirable object/space. In some way the observer/actor transforms his personality and emotional capacity in experiencing the city as a desirable object. The formal values are activating the observer's emotional respond, which on his own behalf activates the space within the city as scenery of a personal, agonal performance. The aesthetic satisfaction is not only in contemplation of eternal values, but also in participating in the process of an interactive relationship with the aesthetic object.

In the thirteenth century, the relationship to the city scenery has been slightly changed.

From the city as a desirable, adorned body which activates the observer's personal aesthetic respond in "Eulogy of Marie de France" it becomes scenery for a happening based on a system of spatial ideology. This kind of understanding of the city scenery continues in the "Legend of the Holy Grail" by Crétien d' Troyes.<sup>4</sup> The city is not ultimately beautiful. At the first place it is described as good. However, the epithets of a good city are not exclusively those used in the twelfth century. What makes the city good (and consequently beautiful) is the fact that it is inhabited with beautiful men and women. The streets are full of good workers dealing with different jobs and occupations. This description is very important, because it will continue as aesthetic category into the time of Renaissance. It will appear again in Alberti's idea of a good arrangement of the city.

The city is becoming a matrix of an ideological system. It is a social urban utopia, which success depends on the coordination between the actual



Fig. 1 Ambrogio Lorenzetti, *Effects of a good Government*, Finished in 1340. detail, Siena City Hall.

story and the cultural and psychological heritage of the citizens and their system of values in the context of the time. Therefore, the city with the same physical structure can be ideologically equalized with the heavenly Jerusalem or Babylon; the metaphors of good and evil. The city is becoming scenery for a particular development of ethical principles, their experience and judgment. This kind of urban mythology one can recognize later in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's painting in the Siena City Hall. (fig.1)

It is interesting to emphasize that these values of the city scenery regarding moral, cultural and psychological aspects are complementary with particularly developed aesthetic principles of judgment, different from those established by scholasticism and philosophical principles of defining beauty. These aesthetic principles are based on personal, individual process of evaluation of aesthetic values, and not on firm established aspects.

Sir Gawain is judging the city as good or evil according to the temporal personal experience of the citizens' friendly or hostile behavior towards him. Personal aesthetic experience and judgment of the citizens' activity is more powerful in the aesthetic evaluation of the city than its material qualities. However, there are general values according to which Gawain is judging. They are in the sphere of ethical norms developed according to his cultural and ethical heritage. These aesthetic principles belong to the field of universal norms, however, established on values of a particular cultural and ethical environment. Gawain is using them to judge aesthetic values of a different culture; therefore these norms are in that particular context of judgment not universal but individual. More precisely, these aesthetic norms are working on two different levels.

On the level of material values they are absolutely universal. Those aspects are numbered on the beginning of Gawain's story, where he is describing the structure of the city. The second level incorporates cultural and ethical behavior of the citizens. On the beginning of the story they are friendly and in that context the city has been experienced as absolutely beautiful. However, at the end of the story, when the citizens are showing their animosity and hostility towards Gawain, he describes the city as a hell, Babylon, an ugly spot divorced from any beautiful and positive experience. All this indicates that ethical and cultural aspects of aesthetic judgment of the city are superior for Gawain than structural, material values. However, although superior they are changeable and according to that in the sphere of individual, emotional aesthetic judgment.

In the first half of the thirteenth century there are literary examples establishing ethical and moral aspects as universal norms of aesthetic judgment of the city. In the second part of his "Opera omnia" named "Summa", Guillaume d'Avergne is comparing the aesthetic values of the city with seven Christian holy secrets.<sup>5</sup> That way he equalized the material and moral values and unified them on the level of aesthetic judgment. The city becomes scenery where the metaphorical body and soul are unified. The soul, however, can be corrupted, but also healed. Giotto's representation of the *Miracle of St. Francis* performing exorcism of demons, is one of the artistic examples of this idea. In this context, the spiritual beauty of the city is dominant. (fig.2)

The city is equalized with spiritual values of the citizens, but comparing with Gavan's experience, here is emphasized the idea of differentiating the human from animal desires, the city as a cultivated environment from the forest as a wild, beastly spot, cultivated love from barbaric desires. The city

becomes a unified space: physical, ethical, and lawful.

It seems that in this context, the aesthetic experience is somehow equalized with a religious experience of a presence of a divine order. These two experiences are working together, side by side, and they are emphasizing the level of intuitional and deeply ecstatic emotional aspects of experiencing beauty. The city is becoming scenery where the unification of Christian morality and divine order is performed in many ways, even through miracles of healing and concealing.



Fig. 2 Giotto, *Miracle of St. Francis*, Upper Church of St. Francis, Assisi, detail, before 1300.

However, these divine and miraculous performances can not be rationalized aesthetically. Although the aspects of morality are rational matter, the beauty of the divine presence and its miraculous appearance is far from being defined by comprehensive aesthetic categories. This kind of experiencing beauty belongs to the sphere of human intuition and emotional recognition of its divine origin.

These components of experiencing beauty of the city seem to develop further into a particular ethical concept under the influence of the philosophy of humanism. As shown in the illuminations illustrating the book of Christine of Pisa "The City of Ladies", building the city is a metaphor of building self respect and personal values as ethical base for a healthy society full of virtue, moral concerns, and consequently beautiful in a higher idealistic way of thinking. (fig.3)

In this context city is scenery where the process of development of self-esteem takes place. Now, individual efforts are coordinated with the ideals of the community, which results in the fulfillment of high moral standards and spiritual beauty. Aesthetic *sensus communis* depends on the achieved level of ethical *sensus communis*.



Fig. 3 The City of Ladies from Christine of Pisa, The Construction of the City of Ladies, Illumination, Bibliothèque National, Paris, Ms. Français 607, Folio 2, beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century.

In the time of Renaissance these aesthetic aspects and ideas developed in a particular way.

Beside the existence of the rational concepts of creativity, aesthetic experience and judgment, which Alberti established in the Vitruvian tradition, there was another approach to the process of creativity and aesthetic experience which has been essentially different. This other set of ideas regarding aesthetic experience, belongs to a particular understanding related to the architectural and urban forms as metaphoric scenery, where few interesting philosophical ideas were developed and performed.

In that context, through few of his plays, Alberti established a scenery for a philosophical interpretation of human, social, and divine virtue and their metaphoric appearance. He developed an idealistic interpretation of the society grounded in the vision of the city where the philosophy of the Polis and personifications of virtue and the divine harmony has been proportionally correlated. This concept was transferred into architecture and city visions, where the ethical and aesthetic forms of philosophical interpretation of human characters were emphasized.

In that sense, in Alberti's ideas we can recognize the process of transposition of the mediaeval distinction between the human body and spirit into a distinction between society and the ideal humanist. This idealistic concept transformed architecture and city into a dream world scenery where, according to the understanding of the human psychology and sub-consciousness, as an important aspect of intuitive and emotional aesthetic interpretation of reality was emphasized.

This was a kind of process through which man express' his longing for acting (in Alberti's understanding) as necessity in creating an ambivalent world. In this world rationality and irrationality are correlated in a complex way

through the form of architectural and urban scenery. Far from rationalized aspects, intuition and emotion as aesthetic values, are now interpreting the ethical bond between individual and eternal aspects of humanity.

In his main architectural writing, Alberti from time to time pays attention to aesthetic aspects not compatible with the rational concept regarding proportion, utility, and firm structure. For instance, equalizing the variety of human nature with *the range of different works*,<sup>6</sup> Alberti is not only involving aspects of the human characters into the creation of architecture, but he is also reflecting on aesthetic aspects of judgment close to the intuitional recognition of those characters and to the emotional respond to them. In that context, in Alberti's statement that beauty *can restrain the aggressive feelings and destructive personalities* we can not recognize the rational nature of the aesthetic experience, but its deep emotional component.<sup>7</sup>

It seems that Alberti covered this kind of aesthetic experience under the term *concinnitas*. In that sense this term regards also aspects of intuitional and emotional judgment of architectural aesthetic values, experience of cities, and specific sites as caves. These aspects, however, reflect the human, social and political nature of metaphorically shaped characters in architecture. Through the language of metaphors the architectonic and urban space transforms into imaginary scenery, which on the other side can be aesthetically experienced mainly by intuitional and emotional engagement with the observer.

In a way, according to Alberti's writings, we can generally name few important elements which trigger the process of intuitional and emotional aesthetic experience: variety of forms; attraction for the eyes; sense of admiration of many wonderful things; interpretation of human

characters through psychological, social, cultural, and political reflections. Intuitional recognition of these elements and their emotional judgment are necessary parts of that concept of aesthetic experience.

However, the city is in Alberti's official theory still scenery for expressing ideas of political and social virtue. As in the late Gothic examples, he is talking about a proper compositional organization of roads and planed distribution of manufactory. Good special organization implicates virtue and establishment of proper ethical principles, and its judgment is mainly based on the process of rational analysis.<sup>8</sup> However, the intuitional recognition and emotional respond as aspects of aesthetic experience and judgment of architecture and urban visions are particularly emphasized in the book "Hypnerotomachia Polifili".<sup>9</sup> This work, published in 1499 is an evidence that the period of Renaissance developed aesthetic criteria different from rationalized aspects of the Vitruvian tradition. Through the text, immediate recognition of natural excellence and perfection of architectural and urban form has been emphasized, and equalized with the intuitional recognition of the human nature. In this context, *concinnitas* really becomes a natural excellence and perfection that stimulates the mind; *it is immediately recognized if present, but if absent is even more desired*.<sup>10</sup>

Placed in a dream, Polifili's journey is full of strong emotional experiences in encountering buildings and different sites. These emotional responds are parts of an aesthetic system in which rational principles are replaced by *extreme delights, incredible joy, frenetic pleasure, cupidious frenzy*.<sup>11</sup> Again, as in the late middle age, in the Polifili's dream architecture has been equalized with the human body, however, now in a system of a very complex cultural and social reflections and architectural metaphors. (fig.4)

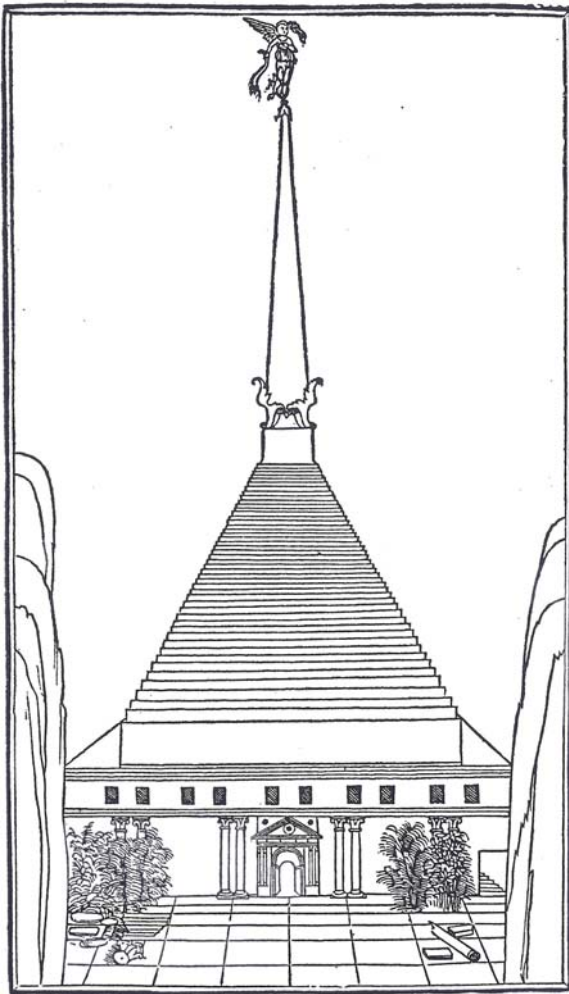


Fig. 4 Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, *Architectural Phantasy*, [b2-b2'], 1599.



Fig. 5 Serlio, *On Architecture, a Stage Scenery*, [64v(44r)], second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

Interesting that similar to ideas regarding theatrical pleasures which took place in Alberti's *de re Aedificatoria*, Polifili is impressed by many wonders used in spatial scenery, in which all expressed emotional responses are guided by elements of a particular aesthetic system. "Hypnerotomachia Polifili" is showing that in the Renaissance, there was in work side by side rational and intuitional aspects of the creative process, to which belongs a different set of aesthetic aspects and principles of experience and judgment.

A dream world as a place of free imagination was a world of architectural scenery close to the theatrical scene, which by itself, has been thought as a kind of wonderland. In that context, the free imagination divorced from any rational means become a creative tool. Interesting that in "Della tranquillità dell' anima", Alberti was deeply concerned with his dreams in which his creativity has been released by free imagination, producing variety of forms and a new aesthetic system of judgment.<sup>12</sup> Beauty was not anymore defined by solely rational means. It can be an ecstatic spiritual elevation, and voluptuous. Not only Alberti, but also Filarete agrees with that. He wrote that a *building is nothing more than a voluptuous pleasure*.<sup>13</sup>

This kind of ecstatic architectural and spatial experience has been also described by Serlio in the section of his book regarding theatrical space.<sup>14</sup> For Serlio, good scenery is giving a great pleasure to the eye and satisfaction to the heart. More than that, his theatrical scenery is in fact complex city scenery capturing and expressing different human psychological characters. Serlio's city sceneries for comedy and tragedy are based on the idea that variety of particular architectural forms and their arrangement can shape an urban form in a metaphorical way. The meaning of such a complex appearance of a stage work can be obviously

recognized by intuition and experienced through an emotional respond. In fact, in Serlio's opinion, it seems that all spaces can become complex dynamic scenery. For instance, in his description of Pantheon, people inside the temple are emphasizing side by side with architecture the sense of elevated beauty, participating that way in a complex system of perception and experience. (fig.5)

Comparing to Alberti and Serlio, Palladio is more rational in presenting beauty of an urban space by scenery means.<sup>15</sup> He is even presenting an illusionary system that should influence an observer passing through a beautifully shaped main street, to think that all the other streets are also well shaped. Palladio's idea is working on a premise that people react aesthetically in a moment, establishing an imaginative idea of a whole according to one part only.

However, this Palladio's idea is not a superficial one. Experience of parts of a city, or of particular buildings, is a kind of aesthetic perception by which observer can judge the beauty of the whole. It is a kind of dynamic aesthetic perception, by which the sequences of the city, or a number of particular buildings placed in the urban matrix, should be integrated in ones mind within a limited time. This system of aesthetic perception of a city is obviously by its inherent values and character similar to the nature of theatric experience. However, in the context of the Palladio's idea, unification of the perceptual particles in observer's mind can work only under one condition. All perceived buildings should be built in the same manner.

The city becomes scenery of a complex aesthetic performance. Identification and aesthetic experience of a number of buildings built in the same manner, is in fact a kind of the observer's temporal perceptual and aesthetic performance.

The perceptual characteristics of a number of buildings and the aesthetic sense belonging to the observer are working interactively. The image of the aesthetic whole can be completed only in time, by a dynamic perceptual action.

However, this is not a process of a mechanical unification of the parts of the city. The city is a scene on which the recognition of buildings' stylistic values is unifying the aesthetic perception through a double coded system. In that way, visual values of a particular style are not important. The presence of a style as a condition for a process of a dynamic harmonization of the aesthetic perception is important. That way the aesthetic perception is based on the unified visual values of a number of buildings. According to that, the city should be beautiful because it reviles a possibility for a dynamic aesthetic experience, and not because it is built in a particular manner.

Examples discussed in this article are showing that from the late Middle Age all through the Renaissance, there existed an idea of the city as scenery imagined as a metaphorical ground for interpreting different social and cultural values. Consequently, this idea emphasized non rational aesthetic categories of judgment of beauty and ethical values. Emotional, individual respond became a valuable tool in the process of recognition and evaluation of beauty. This was particularly important in the context of aesthetic judgment of urban complexes, embracing wildly ethical and cultural metaphors. That way the aesthetic of the western world established a set of categories complementary to the Vitruvian tradition. They influenced further development of the creative process based on intuitional and emotional respond to the idea of beauty, consequently guiding the aesthetic judgment in a new direction.

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**Endnotes**

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- [5] Ibid; Guillaume d'Auvergne, *Opera Omnia*, Orleans-Paris, 1674, pp.407-416: *De sacramento in generali*.
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- [7] Ibid, (VI-2)
- [8] Ibid, (VII-1)
- [9] Colonna Francesco, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Thames & Hudson: London, 2005.
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