

Abstract **Jérôme Monnet**

Public Landscape as Communication Space

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In contemporary cities, public space appears as a system of material places where strangers meet: they incidentally cross each other's path because their daily or weekly routines lead them to massively use open spaces such as streets, squares or parks and enclosed places such as railway stations, leisure facilities, etc. All these places form the public landscape, i.e. the visual surroundings transformed into mass media by more or less powerful social actors to deliver religious, political or economic messages to the crowds flowing through them. For centuries, public architecture has been an important component of the urban landscape for the purpose of glorifying a divine or mundane authority through the monumental facades of temples and churches. Military strength or colonial power have been symbolized through gateways and walls, towers and

triumph arches. In the late period, this symbolism was re-actualized into countless Justice, Government, Parliament and City halls, Universities, Museums or Chambers of commerce. In some manufactures were erected ostentatious facades in order to project an image of technological progress, social modernity and economical wealth. Since then, all the big players in the service industry have relied on architecture as a public media embodying their local prestige and global ambitions in skyscrapers or futurist headquarters.

Public art also invaded the streets. After kings and emperors punctuated the most prestigious urban squares or perspectives with statues at their image, governments disseminated figures of heroes or allegories at the crossroads and in public gardens. More recently, the public landscape has also been adorned with figurative or abstract officially-commissioned artwork and murals, challenged by alternative expressions such as graffiti and street art.

Actually, the intent to monopolize public space for communication by the rulers was always contested by dispersed but resilient means of public appeal such as illegal posting, underground pamphlets, protest songs and, of course, political demonstrations of different

kinds (march, sit-in, Occupy...). When military and religious parades or public ceremonies are intended to reassert the social order envisioned by authorities, they could be counter-balanced by subversive events such as carnivals. Beyond architecture, art and politics, public landscape is also continuously used by economic actors in order to communicate with the people. Almost universally, shop signs and windows or displays enable the seller to inform the potential buyer about products or services. However, during the last century, commercial communication has evolved from "hic et nunc" information to messages about unlocated values and desire. The current trend is to interconnect stationary communication devices such as shop windows or billboards with mobile personal devices such as smartphones, in order to individualize the economic or political messages displayed in the public space.

These different communicative uses of the public landscape are competing between them, diachronically and synchronically. Where one kind of communication dominates or eradicates the others, criticism arises against the "Totalitarian", "Capitalist" or "Museum" City, between others. To the contrary, the subtle and unstable arrangement of various

messages in the public space could appear as a condition for a dynamic, creative, inclusive and attractive urban life.