

# FUNCTION AND MEANING IN CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE DESIGN

## SEMNIIFICAȚIE ȘI FUNCȚIUNE ÎN ARHITECTURA PEISAGISTĂ CONTEMPORANĂ

**PETROVICI Liliana-Mihaela<sup>1</sup>, NICA R.M.<sup>1</sup>**

e-mail: liliana.petrovici@yahoo.com

**Abstract.** *The functional meaning in landscape architecture refers primarily to the coherence and readability of the spaces of the parks and gardens and their relationship to the built environment of the cities. Secondly, certain morphological elements of landscaping, many of them borrowed from architecture, fall into formal typologies dictated by their utility, and often have symbolic connotations. For example, the stair means the aspiration and ascension; column expresses verticality, support, is a symbol of human or tree of life. The technological development, the evolution of thinking and the need to adapt to the diversity and instability of modern life causes transformation of functional meanings. They are constantly redefined according with the requirements of the changing and complex contemporary life. Currently, architects propose innovative ways of dealing with the utility of the urban environment and even novel association of various functions: parks, gardens - building – infrastructure.*

**Key words:** symbol, meaning, identity, readability, coherence, functional innovation, new functional association, landscape design

**Rezumat.** *În domeniul arhitecturii peisagere, semnificațiile funcționale se referă în primul rând la lizibilitatea și coerența amenajărilor, la asigurarea unor condiții optime pentru utilizarea parcurilor și grădinilor și la relaționarea acestora cu spațiile construite ale orașelor. În al doilea rând, anumite elemente morfologice ale amenajărilor peisagere, multe dintre ele împrumutate din arhitectura clădirilor, se încadrează în tipologii formale dictate de utilitatea lor și au adesea conotații simbolice. De pildă, scara semnifică aspirația și ascensiunea; coloana exprimă verticalitatea, susținerea, este simbol al omului sau al arborelui vieții. Dezvoltarea tehnologiei, evoluția gândirii și nevoia de adaptare la diversitatea și instabilitatea vieții moderne determină transformarea semnificațiilor funcționale. Ele sunt permanent redefinite, în acord cu cerințele atât de schimbătoare și complexe ale vieții contemporane. În prezent, arhitecții propun moduri inovatoare de abordare a aspectelor utilitare ale mediului natural amenajat din cadrul urban, și chiar asocieri inedite dintre diverse programe și funcțiuni: parcuri, grădini – clădire - infrastructură.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** simbol, semnificație, identitate, lizibilitate, coerență, inovație funcțională, noi asocieri între funcțiuni, design peisager

---

<sup>1</sup> “Gheorghe Asachi” Technical University of Iași, Romania

## INTRODUCTION

Functional meanings in landscape design refer primarily to the readability and coherence of the outdoor spaces, the ensuring of optimal conditions in using parks and gardens, their relations with the built environment of the cities.

The functional meanings are communicated by icon or index type signs; through them, the morphological elements of landscape design render readable their purpose, utility and spatial-functional relations. By means of these signs, the outdoor space get ordered, logical and easily to walk through.

## MATERIAL AND METHOD

Cultural and psychological conventions establish formal, spatial or environmental typologies for various types of landscaping or morphological elements within them. They became distinct and get an easy and comfortable use due to the coherence of the planimetric composition, the hierarchisation of the paths, the particular atmosphere and the specific treat of the aesthetic elements. Par example, the distinction between the court of an institution and a playground must be easily observed, because each destination has a certain character that has to be visually expressed through ambiance and scale: monumental and sober or playful and intimate, delicate or coarse, public or private, introverted or extroverted.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 1. SIGNS AND SYMBOLS ASSOCIATED TO THE MORPHOLOGICAL ELEMENTS IN LANDCAPE DESIGN

Certain morphological elements of landscape architecture communicate their functional meaning in that they fall into formal typologies dictated by their utility, according to some social, cultural, or psychological codes, and often have symbolic connotations. Here are a few examples:

The wall - separates, divides, defends, protects, restricts, or prohibits. The wall represents the taking into possession of a territory; it outlines an outdoor space with a certain identity. Within urban parks and gardens, the wall (de)limits laces and creates a sense of intimacy and psychological protection (fig. 1). Concurrently, the wall directs the paths and focuses the viewer's attention.



**Fig 1** - Arboretum, Gjøvik, Norvegia, Rintala Eggertsson Architects - windscreens creating outdoor spaces for relaxation that give the feeling of intimacy and psychological protection

The wall may also be a communication support in urban spaces, when it becomes a media screen, a billboard, or a graffiti drawing expressing social frustrations. The construction of the Berlin Wall meant a barrage of communication; its break down marked out a symbolic shift in post-modernity, while its graffiti painting represented a way of protest of the society.

**The gate** is a semantic threshold that marks the border between public and private, profane and sacred, between the hectic world of the street and the world full of peace and freshness of a garden. It represents a border between two worlds, a symbolic transition from a reality to another; beyond the gateway we face a different context, the space transforms and takes other coordinates.

The gate is a cutout in the wall which is designed to provide the functional relationships from the outside to the inside of a fenced landscaped area, or between different zones of the same landscaping.

**The tower** symbolizes the perpetual aspiration of the man to the sky (fig. 2). When it presents as a compositional dominant in the landscaping, it plays a role in spatial orientation or in the marking of important areas of the paths.



**Fig. 2** - The white city, Tel-aviv, landscape architect Dani Karavan  
a tribute to the men who built the city, it uses the symbolism of the primary structures

**The column / pillar** is a basic structural element. It signifies durability, safety, strength. The column is the symbol of verticality, of the human or of the tree of life (Chevalier, 2009). It is the symbol of the support, of the setting or of the lastingness (Eseev, 2001). In modern architecture, the column is often a univocal sign of its structural scope. The freedom of expression during postmodernism has facilitated the association of columns with new and various meanings.

The landscape architecture often takes the column out of its structural context, differing from the tower only by its dimensions, and having an exclusive symbolic function. Therefore, the landscape architect Dani Karavan transforms the column into a poetic metaphor in order to transmit to the society certain social or political messages. The columns that decorate the court of the National German Museum from Nuremberg are engraved with texts from the Declaration of Human Rights. The row of columns that compose the “Way of Peace” through the Sumerian desert in Nitzana, Israel, have inscribed the word „peace” in 100 languages.

The sculptural work „The way of light” created by Karavan for the Olympic Park from Seoul in 1988 (fig. 3), is made of groups of 12 and 2 vertically cut columns, which have semantic and compositional roles. They are a symbol of orientation and compose a solar clock and a calendar. The sectioned columns also represent the 24 letters of the Korean alphabet.



**Fig. 3** - „The way of light”, The Olympic Park, Seul, 1988 & „The Way of Peace”, Nitzana, Israel, 1996-2000, landscape architect Dani Karavan – the column, a symbol of man

**The stair** corresponds to some parameters of topographic sense, so it represents „a cultural unity which suggests the possibility of a vertical movement” (Eco, 2003). Concurrently, the stair has the semantic of the verticality: aspiration, ascension, rising, releasing (fig. 4). „The stair figuratively embodies the level break that makes possible the passing from a type of existence to another. (...) The escalade or ascension symbolizes the way to the absolute reality” (Eliade, 1994).



**Fig. 4** - Awaji Yumenbutai, Awaji Island, arch. Tadao Ando: the stair – rising, ascension

## 2. THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE FUNCTIONAL MEANINGS IN CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE DESIGN

The problem of function is reconsidered according to the continuously changing life and culture of nowadays society. The architects and landscape designers are increasingly concerned with redefining solutions for different architectural or landscaping functions; they reconsider the exterior – interior, public – private relations, and even the relations between morphological elements: wall, ceiling, floor (fig. 5).

The changes within the society, the new stylistic trends, the technological progress and the evolution of thinking during the modern and contemporary period, have determined the reorientation of the aesthetic and functional design options, the evolutions of form, and the enrichment of the meanings for different landscaping types.



**Fig. 5** – Swimming pool, Vienna, architects Heri & Salli: the annulment of the borders between wall, ceiling and floor

For a better adaptation to the contemporary life needs, the architects and landscape designers propose innovative ways of dealing with utility aspects, and even novel solutions and combinations of different function types within urban environment.

The reconversion project of the former industrial railway West Side from New York composes into a whole two elements considered by then separated: the public park and the infrastructure (fig. 6). The park set up on the existing suspended metallic structure invites the public through numerous accesses from different areas of the city and through a large variety of spaces. The areas designed for relaxation and walking offers panoramic views on the city and the port; they are decorated with green areas inspired from the wild prairie, becoming an element of identity.



**Fig. 6** - New York Highline, arch. James Corner Foeld Operations, Diller&Scofidio + Renfro, 2003 - a novel combination: industrial infrastructure and landscape architecture -

Shanghai Houtan Park (fig. 7) – the public park built on the brownfield of a former industrial site from Shanghai, designed by the landscape architects from

Turenscape, constitutes a regenerative environment that recycles the existing materials and structures and restore them to the city. The project transforms a degraded landscape into a pleasant and relaxing public place.

Concurrently, this new leisure complex integrates, in a aesthetical and ecological way, instalations of water purification and flood control, setups against erosion and areas for urban agriculture with local specific.



**Fig. 7** - Shanghai Houtan Park, architects Turenscape  
- a regenerative, aesthetic și ecologic environment on a former industrial site -

## CONCLUSIONS

The functional meanings in landscape design are redefined according to the dynamic and complexity of the contemporary life. By means of technical and functional innovations, the landscape architects responds to the changes of the society needs, giving solutions for a pleasant, comfortable and ecologic urban landscaped environment.

The functional design conceived for the real needs of the cities and of the people, according to their particularities, creates identity and ensure physical and psychological comfort.

## REFERENCES

1. **Chevalier Jean, 2009** - *Dicționar de simboluri*, Ed. Polirom, Iași, p.3 50.
2. **Eco Umberto, 2003** - *O teorie a semioticii*, Ed. Meridiane, București, p. 281.
3. **Eliade Mircea, 1994** - *Imagini și simboluri*, Ed. Humanitas, București, p.61.
4. **Essev Ivan, 2001** - *Dicționar de simboluri și arhetipuri culturale*, Ed. Amarcord, Timișoara, p. 173.
5. **Petrovici Liliana, 2011** – *Arhitectură și comunicare. Influențe asupra calității vieții în societatea modernă și contemporană*, PhD thesis unpublished.
6. [www.archdaily.com](http://www.archdaily.com)
7. <http://www.danikaravan.com>

### Photo credits:

- Fig. 1.* © Pasi Aalto, <http://www.archdaily.com>  
*Fig. 2, 3.* © Pixel-delight.com, <http://www.danikaravan.com>  
*Fig. 4.* © Ken Conley, <http://kwc.org>  
*Fig. 5.* ©Paul Ott Photografiert, <http://www.archdaily.com>  
*Fig. 6.* © Răzvan Nica  
*Fig. 7.* © Turenscape, <http://www.archdaily.com>