

URBAN WINDOW

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Contemporary expression made up of two words coming from Latin: "Finestra" and "urbis".

The urban window is the name given to the particular vision of a landscape experienced by somebody walking in town. It consists of a framework made of: the building frontages, the street and background, where the sky is a permanent element (in both day and night) (2).

This concept is based on Alberti's city that, similarly to houses, has windows to shed light on its streets.

In the same way, Raymond Unwin indicates to us the two major urban windows of the traditional city, the view of the countryside and the view of the town centre (cf. quotation). Gordon Cullen illustrates this definition, in his work "Townscape", by associating views and plan (1).

Whereas the ancient city traced the streets with chalk line and square, the long ones leading to a landscape like an arc, a temple, conversely the medieval city, like the Mediterranean city, is contained through a maze of narrow streets (3) which sometimes let discover a view of a point of interest: glimpse of an alley leading to a significant building (4).

The Quattrocento, with the discovery of the laws of linear prospect, magnifies the concept of urban window which emphasizes backgrounds, where palaces and churches (5) are composed around squares.

At the classical epoch the window is extended to privilege the axis of vision

"Les vues urbaines donnant sur la campagne ont un charme particulier et il vaut la peine d'en ménager sur la mer ou sur la montagne, ou même de faire profiter la ville du tableau qu'offre le coucher du soleil quand on peut conserver des ouvertures vers l'ouest. Souvent l'on trouve des tableaux charmants à l'extrémité de certaines longues perspectives, celui dont on jouit sur la place de Lisieux est de ce nombre. Ces vues lointaines semblent avoir un charme particulier aux yeux des Français, et on les rencontre en grand nombre dans les villes de France; elles sont très agréables à l'œil, mais l'effet n'en peut être rendu par la photographie car en général les lointains se perdent dans le vague. De même, une vue intéressante, dans le sens opposé, c'est à dire vers la ville, peut être ménagée dans chacune des rues de manière à permettre à ceux qui s'approchent de la ville de jouir de loin de ses monuments."

Raymond Unwin
Etude pratique des plans de ville.

and the monument. The urban windows developed taking the city as a spectacle.

Haussmann's wide roads cut through the urban fabric also made it possible to create new streets leading to the spectacle-monument: the rue Soufflot is a characteristic example of it (6).

However in the 19th century the backgrounds of streets and avenues are more frequently required elements of the urban composition. The backgrounds emphasize the water of a river or the trees of a wood, or even a reference mark such as a statue located at the centre of a crossroads or a shop front, a pharmacy, a café, a bank. All are used to make the city readable, pleasant and lively (7).

It should be noted how, regularly, in a rising street the soil stabilization always remains a strong visual element. Just as in a downward street, the

landscape perceived at a distance is what dominates (8).

Modern town planning turns its back to the urban window and its concept, and rather produces panoramic views. Similarly, the traditional window gives way to a larger picture window (9).

The "street corridor" denounced by Corbusier gives way to the "free plan". On a sketch, Corbusier inserts the landscape of the Rio de Janeiro bay in the dwelling by way of a picture window. In its turn, focusing on the views of a monument or a landscape is replaced by exalting the vertical. The skyscrapers (10) are silhouetted against the sky to symbolize the proud dynamism of a society.

The business life can also generate excesses and see the urban window invaded by advertising signs which can disfigure streets of character, but of which it is

possible to draw a plastic effect of night with illuminated signs (11).

The protection of the natural urban windows should constitute an objective of town enhancement. The reserve of a protection zoning in the town-planning document, guarantees a free cone of vision on a natural space and brings to the city some breathing that is useful to our well being.

The treatment of degraded urban windows can contribute to improving the environment. The before and after pictures make it possible to realize the importance of action on the urban window (12).

The use of the axis of a street (7) can lead the architect - town planner to create or emphasize a reference mark at the time of the layout of streets for a housing subdivision or a new district.

Any urban diagnosis must draw up a list of the major urban windows of the town. The visual plan of a town consists of a set of visual sequences of which the urban windows are the most representative sights of the identity of a town.

Cf. CROSSROADS, TOWN CENTRE, SKY SILHOUETTING, GLIMPSE, SIGN, BACKGROUNDS, HOUSING SUBDIVISION, VISUAL PLAN, PANORAMIC, REFERENCE MARK, VISUAL SEQUENCE, ALLEY, STREETS.

