



**BEZALEL** Academy of Arts and Design Jerusalem  
Department of Architecture  
**UNESCO** Chair in Urban Design and Conservation Studies  
unescochair@bezalel.ac.il

Round Table 2008  
Canada Research Chair on Built Heritage  
Faculty of Environmental Design  
University of Montreal  
18-20 March, 2008

## **FINAL DRAFT**

### **Protecting important views – the city revisited**

**Michael Turner**  
**Professor,**  
**UNESCO Chair in Urban Design and Conservation Studies**

The Bible is full of views; from the life of Abraham to Moses' virtual view of the Promised Land from Mount Nebo and the city view over Nineveh of Jonah waiting to see what would happen to the prophecy of God. A city of enormous dimensions, as quoted - 'Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across'. But without a doubt, the most poetic of viewpoints was that of Balaam in the Sinai wilderness.

#### **Numbers 23**

<sup>27</sup> So Balak said to Balaam, 'Come now, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there.'<sup>28</sup> So Balak took Balaam to the top of Peor, which overlooks the waste-land.\*

#### **Numbers 24**

<sup>1</sup> Now Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, so he did not go, as at other times, to look for omens, but set his face towards the wilderness.

<sup>2</sup> Balaam looked up and saw Israel camping tribe by tribe. Then the spirit of God came upon him, <sup>3</sup>and he uttered his oracle, saying:

'The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,

the oracle of the man whose eye is clear,\*

<sup>4</sup>the oracle of one who hears the words of God,

who sees the vision of the Almighty,\*

who falls down, but with eyes uncovered:

<sup>5</sup>**how fair are your tents, O Jacob,**  
**your encampments, O Israel!**

I will not go into the full Midrashic explanation as to what he saw from that viewpoint that moved Balaam to utter the texts, but to adopt the 'pshat'<sup>1</sup> simply the order of the tents in the wilderness viewed from above, had an intrinsic beauty. What were the ingredients? A spiritual point, omens and spirit – genus loci and a majestic overlook.

---

<sup>1</sup> **PaRDeS** is an acronym typology describing the four different approaches to Biblical exegesis in rabbinic Judaism. The '**Pshat**' is the first of the four formats, being the simple or literal meaning.

There are some basic texts that I have chosen for the discussion, including Berger, Halbwachs, Kostof and Lynch. Spiro Kostof in his book *The City Shaped*<sup>2</sup> analyzed the city views to the urban skyline, including the static high vantage point. But he also identified the dynamic approaches to the city from land and sea. Together these were defined as

the high vantage points,  
the approach by land and  
the waterfront views.

But in addition to long views from the high vantage points, there are the street vistas integrated as part of the streetscape. The street was always an integral part of the public realm and activity; if you needed to know what was going on in the world without radio and internet, you would stroll out on to the street and hear the 'word-of-mouth'. In the eighteenth century, Dr Samuel Johnson pointed out that 'if you wish to have the notion of the magnitude of this city you must not be satisfied with seeing its great streets and squares, but must survey the innumerable little lanes and courts. It is not the showy evolutions of buildings, but in the multiplicity of human habitations which are crowded together, that the wonderful immensity of London consists'.

These street views were, essentially vistas towards monuments becoming important because they were carefully articulated;

closed by a curtain,  
framed or  
fixed by the means of some object<sup>3</sup>

The objects were the markers and monuments; these were the landmarks of Kevin Lynch in his seminal work, *The Image of the City*, and included the triumphal arches, the commemorative columns and the statues together with the public buildings which stood out from the urban day-to-day fabric.

The landmarks and views have been considered by Lynch<sup>4</sup> in the wake of the discipline of environmental psychology. He identifies the components of the *observer*, the *environment* and the *built setting*. The images are dramatically different for each observer and the mental maps have a life of their own even for children imagining their village. The mental image gains identity and organization between the present - personal and the past-collective memory and is part of its representation. It is a layered palimpsest built up with historic associations and interpretations in art and literature intertwined with social, political or religious meanings.

The physical view and visual integrity emerges from the image of the city. The view is comprehended through the elements as identified by Lynch – the paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. People viewing the city will move through the *paths*, they will have glimpses, vistas or panoramas. The accumulated number of shared images would be a factor of the number of years this image was accepted and the number of people that have seen the image. In this way, its importance is

---

<sup>2</sup> Kostof, S. *The City Shaped*; Thames and Hudson, 1991

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Lynch, K. *The Image of the City*; MIT Press, 1960

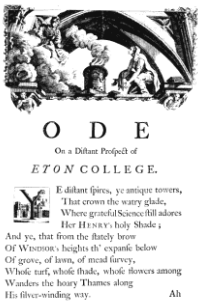
developed. While the *edges* might be relevant in viewing the city in its approach and at the waterfront, they will only have a meaning if an oddity or idiosyncrasy highlights the view giving a unique identity to the place. This could be natural or man-made. The *districts* could be interpreted as Johnson's multiplicity of habitation.

I had the opportunity of participating in an invitational seminar at the University of Washington, during my sabbatical at UBC in 1980 in which Kevin Lynch announced that '*nodes were out!*', which leaves us with the last and most critical element to comprehend, the concept of views overlooking *landmarks*. These are essentially external elements of a visual nature. While the distant elements are the hallmark of the city, *for the visitor and tourist*, the more detailed local elements are the landmarks for the residents.

Let us focus on the views and vistas. It was the skyline that gave the civic identity. Spiro Kostof defined the skyline as the line where earth and sky meet, physically and spiritually. It was the meeting of the real and virtual – the heavenly and earthly Jerusalems. By the middle ages this 'meeting' was engraved in the minds of the community expressing itself in art and literature.

Historically, the urban silhouette, what the Germans called the "city portrait" or Stadtbild, was the result of a cumulative process, and its reading was debated. The landmarks were symbols of a collective life; they advertised civic priorities, and made palpable the hierarchy of public institutions.<sup>5</sup>

The Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College, by Thomas Gray portrays Oxford as a centre for public learning and science.



Ye distant spires, ye antique towers  
That crown the watery glade,  
Where grateful Science still adores  
Her Henry's holy shade;  
And ye, that from the stately brow  
Of Windsor's heights th' expanse below  
Of grove, of lawn, of mead survey,  
Whose turf, whose shade, whose flowers among  
Wanders the hoary Thames along  
His silver-winding way.

Canaletto painted the stadtbild of London in 1746 from the house of his patron, the second Duke of Richmond – the observer. For centuries, St Paul's Cathedral ruled the skyline – the object, together with a host spires, almost all designed by Wren – the narrative. At this period, only two secular features appear on the scene, the glowing Monument and a dark conical bottle oven.

---

<sup>5</sup> Kostof, S The City Assembled, Thames and Hudson,

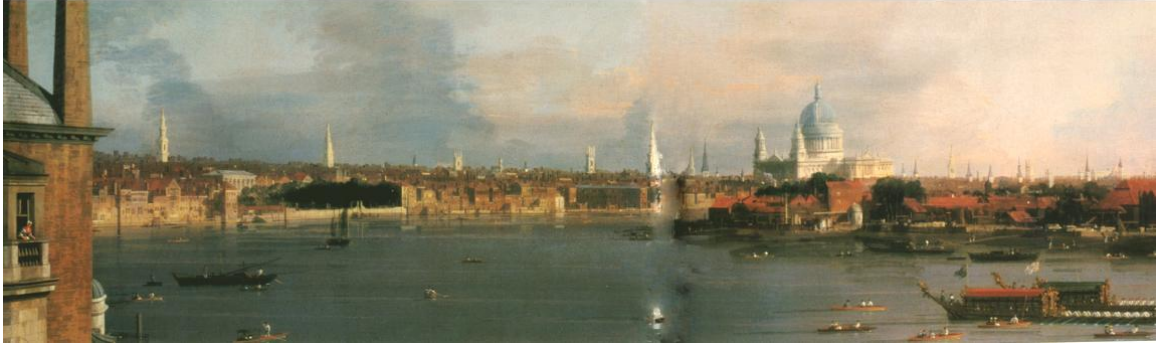


fig ... – Canaletto

Half a century later, the focus moved to Westminster with the depiction of the Thames and the embankment buildings in the backcloth as a new major part of the London identity. Not only the sonnet by William Wordsworth, but the paintings by Turner, Whistler and Monet all played on the theme of the city fair and majestic.

Upon Westminster Bridge – September 3, 1802 by William Wordsworth

Earth has not anything to show more fair;  
 Dull would he be of soul who could pass by  
 A site so touching in its majesty;  
 This City now doth like a garment wear

The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,  
 Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie  
 Open unto the fields and to the sky,  
 All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

This definition of majesty is entwined between the skylines of the towers and domes with the human activity of theatres and temples. The cultural significance of the architecture and its symbolism is evident. The outstanding values moved from the religious to the secular.

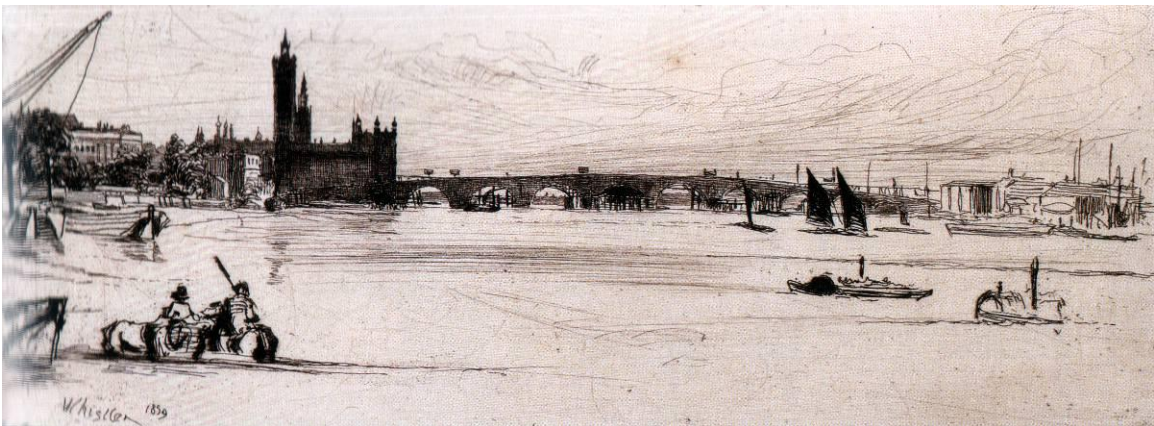


fig ... - Whistler

But it did not stop there. As the industrial revolution gained momentum the values and form of the cities were debated. The Garden Cities Movement and the City Beautiful were part of the reactions to the changing order of the skyline from spires to chimneys. Pugin's images of 1836 shows this very contrast still lauding the landscape of the Gothic city as opposed to its industrial competition.

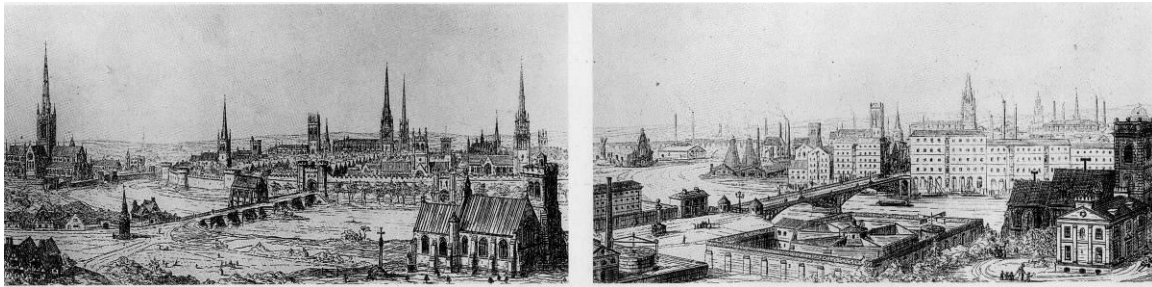


fig ... - Images from A.W.N. Pugin's Contrasts 1836.

The views were purveyed by the city fathers, patrons of the city and most of all travel books. It was these travel books that were part of a longer history and were critical in the representation of cities especially their bird's eye view.

The picture postcard industry has been at work for centuries in developing our understanding of the world. The 'wish you were here' syndrome was an inherent part of the historic one-upmanship. It started in Europe with the Crusades following the sun to the Holy Land. The incunabula *Peregrinatio in Terram Sanctam* by Bernhard von Breydenbach (1440-1497) is remarkable for a number of reasons. It includes the first detailed and accurate printed illustrations of some of the most important European and Middle Eastern cities from Venice to Jerusalem. It is regarded as the first illustrated travel book and as such acted as a preparatory guide for pilgrimages to the Holy Land. The book was illustrated by Erhard Reuwich of Utrecht, described by the author as a 'skilful painter'.

Towards the end of the 16th century, travel literature began to appear for readers who wished to "travel" without leaving home. Publishers were challenged to give their readers pictorial representations of cities that were both pleasing to the eye and true to life. The German and Flemish publishers and printers Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg took up this challenge with their *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, a work in six volumes totaling over 300 bird's-eye views and plans of the world's major cities. It was their intention to provide the pleasures of travel without the attendant discomforts. As Braun wrote in his preface to the third book:

"What could be more pleasant than, in one's own home far from all danger, to gaze in these books at the universal form of the earth . . . adorned with the splendor of cities and fortresses and, by looking at pictures and reading the texts accompanying them, to acquire knowledge which could scarcely be had but by long and difficult journeys?"

Braun and Hogenberg's city books were the 16th-century version of our coffee-table travel books. Their view of Seville emphasized the cathedral's bell tower, the Giralda, long established as the key symbol of the city.

The examples of the Holy Land pilgrimage sites reaching their goal in the Heavenly Jerusalem from sites as far away as London, the Babylon of Shelley. The evolving European cities are an important backcloth to the story. While the similarities to other cultures are apparent in, for example,

the Asian art, literature and architecture and the depictions in the rock art of Africa, a comparative analysis must be the subject of a separate paper.

The depiction of the cities developed as a sense of pride and local patriotism, with the public buildings and towers featuring high on the list. The Italian city states contributed with their outrageous depictions of the towers reaching to the sky. El Greco in the 1570's, on arriving in Toledo gave us the first realistic images of the city he loved.

But it was the belvedere that personified the archetype building to take advantage of a view. On the hillside above the Vatican Palace, Antonio Pollaiuolo built a small casino named the *palazzetto* or the Belvedere for Pope Innocent VIII. It became the fashion in the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Donato Bramante linked the Vatican with the Belvedere, under a commission from Pope Julius II by creating the Cortile del Belvedere. The ensuing structures took on many forms, including turrets, cupola or even open galleries. And what could be more evident than the Belvedere on Mont Real?

Views are important when they move from the personal to the collective memory, when they become loved by the local community and visitors and then are engraved in the image of the city. Nothing is more relevant than the seminal work of Maurice Halbwachs<sup>6</sup> where he coined the current term of *collective memory* separating the notion from the individual memory. The collective memory is shared, passed on and also constructed by the group, or modern society. The conclusion in his excursus *The Legendary Topography of the Gospels in the Holy Land* weaves the two millennia narrative between the real wool and the virtual warp; the reality of the history and the images of Jerusalem and the Biblical landscapes. Mark Twain in his travel diary of Innocents Abroad had, on the other hand, great difficulty in merging the real and virtual.

The collective memory of a nation is represented in part by the memorials it chooses to erect and preserve from one generation to next between one regime and the other. These were the buildings and monuments erected over the events. But Halberwachs, more significantly, notes that what was not memorialized was the real indicator of the collective memory.

How was importance ascertained? History always constitutes the relation between the past and its present. The past is not for living in; it is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act. The factors and variables include the defining of the importance for whom and for what. These are the subject, object and narrative and their interrelationship in space and time.

The subject – the observer, the citizen, the pilgrim, the tourist  
The object – the monument, the buildings, the vista, the study and view  
The narrative - the selective creation of a sense of identity for the local community which could take the form of nationalist or other esprit de coeur; a sense of mysticism for the visitor; information and knowledge for the resident; a sense of belonging, of love.

---

<sup>6</sup> Halberwachs, M. *Collective Memory*, University of Chicago

When we see a landscape, we situate ourselves within it.<sup>7</sup> The narrative and commentary can change the relationship as John Berger so aptly adds to the Wheatfield with Crows of Van Gogh. The image reproduced has become part of an argument of significance which has little to do with the paintings original intent.

The outstanding universal value of a view might be in its inherent beauty or sense of emotion, representing a period of time or value accepted in a collective memory. Its value might be in the monument itself or in the setting of the landmark. The interaction between the views and the monuments and sites become the setting and context that is now part of the typo-morphological analysis of history.

But the views and visual understanding of our cities dramatically changed in 1840 with the advent of the photograph by Fox Talbot. He was an all-rounder, mathematician and classicist, having translated the cuneiform texts from Nineveh, merged the real and the image. The renewed interests of the City Fathers and their architects in the image of the city, or perhaps an interest in their own personal image, were the basis for the new dismemberment of the city for which the Haussmanniana<sup>8</sup> was the epitome. 'Our cathedrals were not built for the desert as the pyramids of Egypt, but to soar over the dense habitation and narrow streets of our city' impassionedly declared Montalembert, the Count with Mediaeval roots. This was a wonderful up-to-date statement of cultural significance echoing the sentiments of Johnson. But the opening of views was also on the agenda of the Athens' Charter of 1933 with the paradigm:

'The destruction of the slums around historic monuments will provide an opportunity to create verdant areas.'  
....The situation can be turned to advantage ....There the vestiges of the past will be bathed in a new and possibly unexpected ambience,....

The case of Cologne and the effects of high building around the Cathedral and the setting of the Tower of London are of particular interest. The current situation in Cologne reduces the views of the cathedral to visual corridors as opposed to the panoramas in the Woensam woodcut of the sixteenth century; no doubt, a change affecting its cultural significance.



fig ... - Cologne, woodcut view by Anton Woensam of Worms, 1531

A similar situation has arisen with the setting of the Tower of London, with the last 'authentic and uninterrupted view' reduced to a narrow corridor, which would be accompanied by a viewing platform – 'what the butler saw'.

---

<sup>7</sup> Berger, J. Ways of Seeing, BBC-Pelican, 1972

<sup>8</sup> The term coined by Carlo Ceschi and developed by Cevat Erder in his book Our Architectural Heritage; from consciousness to conservation, UNESCO, 1986

The views and panoramas are a shorthand for the reading and legibility of the city. They are reduced to a glimpse, or even wiped out completely depending on the values and needs for the community and the importance and value that is currently being attributed.

Sharon Zukin claims in her book<sup>9</sup> that the latter day modern cities of Babylon are often criticized because "they represent the basest instincts of human society. They are built versions of Leviathan and Mammon, mapping the power of the bureaucratic machine or the social pressures of money" but the image of the city is constructed also on the micro level. It is produced by many social encounters that make up daily life in the streets, shops, and parks - The question of who can occupy public space, and so define an image of the city, is open-ended.

"New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps and no matter far he walked ..., it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well"

I leave you with this image of Montreal and the signs on the Belvedere from the 1950's with a text by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his novel, *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), in which the protagonist, Saint-Preux, moves from the countryside of Switzerland to the Parisian city, and experiences the full impact of the modern metropolis:

"I'm beginning to feel the drunkenness that this agitated, tumultuous life plunges you into. With such a multitude of objects passing before my eyes, I'm getting dizzy. Of all the things that strike me, there is none that holds my heart, yet all of them together disturb my feelings, so that I forget what I am and who I belong to."

This is the real challenge of visual integrity.

---

<sup>9</sup> Zukin. S. (1995) "The Cultures of Cities" Blackwell, Cambridge, Ma.