

Memory Space as a Narrative Medium

— In the Lens of the Book of “Landscape and Memory” Written by Simon Schama

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Abstract: Simon Schama’s seminal book *Landscape and Memory* revolutionised the understanding of landscape design, shifting the focus from visual aesthetics to psychological and emotional interaction with the natural environment. Schama argues that landscapes are physical spaces and deeply intertwined with collective memory, history, and the human psyche. Through detailed explorations of European and American cultural memory, he demonstrates how landscapes embody symbolism and have profound emotional and psychological effects on individuals. Tracing the origins of the human aesthetic sense of landscape to flood defence development in the Netherlands, Schama points out that the concept of landscape is intrinsically linked to human intervention and the use of land. By introducing the concept of ‘landscape narrative’, Schama marks a significant departure from traditional approaches to landscape design that emphasise the aesthetics of form and symmetry. His work encourages the reinterpretation of landscape as a repository of cultural identity and collective memory, fundamentally changing how we perceive and interact with the natural world.” *Landscape and Memory* takes a groundbreaking look at the role of landscape in shaping human experience and cultural expression.

Keywords: Memory space; Narrative Medium; Expression of Landscape; Human Emotion and Feelings

Introduction

Prior to the mid-20th century, research on landscape design focused on formal and symmetrical landscapes. For example, the Park of Versailles in France in the 18th century and Le Corbusier’s idea of the ‘city of light’ in 1930. Specifically, urban landscapes are designed to serve cities in the face of future population growth (Karmanov, 2009). In the 20th-century landscape design in Western countries, more attention was paid to the visual expression of gardens, colour schemes or the expression of the output of religious emotions, while little research has been done on the relationship between landscape and psychology. However, in 1995, Simon Schama, in *Landscape and Memory*, referred to the notion of “landscape narrative” as a reversal of the emphasis on the expression of landscape, in other words, from the visual to the psychological. The National September 11 Memorial and Museum case is a typical example of various landscape elements such as water, light sources and plants to convey people’s feelings of remembrance of a significant historical event or disaster. In the design of the National September 11 Memorial and Museum, designer and architect Peter Walker expressed that landscape is not only the designer’s repair of the site’s problems but also the use of design techniques to express people’s emotions or memories of the site (Micieli-Voutsinas, 2017), which proves that the landscape focuses on not only the visual feeling but also the for the expression of people’s emotions and heart feelings.

Simon Schama’s “*Landscape and Memory*” has significantly advanced the field of landscape narratives by integrating landscape into collective memory and history, fundamentally changing how we interpret and engage with the natural environment. Simon Schama traces the history of landscape consciousness and practice in European and American cultural memory and makes clear that the relationship between landscape and the human psyche is interconnected and inextricably linked, particularly in terms of symbolism and imagery, emotion and psychological impact. Beginning with an account of the fascinating things worth describing that the word landscape encompasses, an idea that arose at the beginning of the construction of the Dutch flood defences, the history of the word is the planning and use of the landscape by human beings.

What exactly does the word landscape mean? When did humanity’s aesthetic sense of landscape originate? Simon Schama answers this question in his book “*Landscape and Memory*”. Simon Schama answers this question in his book “*Landscape and Memory*”.

“*Landscape and Memory*” was published in 1995, and its influence became more apparent towards the end of the 20th century and be-

yond (Ogborn, 1996). Simon Schama argues that the landscape is an entire cultural memory. He argues that historical narratives, myths and cultural symbols heavily influence our understanding of landscape. He argues that landscapes are physical entities and repositories of collective memory and cultural identity (McDowell & Braniff, 2014).

In *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, Assmann discusses the role of collective memory in shaping cultural identity, emphasising the importance of shared narratives, symbols and rituals in promoting a sense of social belonging and continuity. He defines *collective memory* as a shared treasure trove of knowledge, experiences, symbols, and narratives people share and pass on (Roudometof, 2002).

Simon Schama's theory of landscape narratives has profoundly impacted understanding and interpreting the landscape in terms of cultural and historical narratives. He has influenced landscape design by incorporating "Landscape and Memory" to integrate cultural and historical narratives into the understanding of physical space, encouraging landscape design to reflect collective memory and identity, and influencing designers to create physical environments that are rich in storytelling.

1. Exploring the intersection of landscape narratives and memorial space

Aristotle's earliest work on the study of narrative structure, particularly in tragedy, was seminal in the *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE). He analysed the plot (myth) as a critical element of storytelling.

However, in terms of a direct definition of 'narrative' in the modern sense, we see more development in the 20th century with the rise of structuralism, formalism and narratology, with scholars such as Vladimir Propp and other literary scholars primarily based on the basic ideas of the ancient texts, but focussing on the basic structure and function of narrative rather than restricting themselves to the classics.

On the other hand, Simon Schama was the first to link landscape narratives to landscape memory and describe them systematically. He made an essential contribution to the concept of landscape narrative by showing how landscapes are imbued with cultural and historical significance, thereby shaping perception and interpretation of natural spaces.

Landscape narratives are inseparable from symbolic symbols and metaphors. Symbol is proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussurean semiotics studies signs and symbols in language, emphasizing the arbitrary relationship between them and the objects they represent. Landscape design explores how spatial elements convey meaning, integrating cultural narratives and ecological contexts (Lindström et al., 2011). This approach enables designers to create spaces that reflect and influence social values, identity and environmental awareness, enriching the communicative dimension of the landscape.

Metaphor, on the other hand, is the use of landscape symbols combined with site elements to convey and express human emotions (Harmanşah, 2011). Memorial space transforms landscapes into places of remembrance, integrating collective memories and histories into the natural environment. Landscape narratives weave these memories and histories into stories that enrich our understanding of place and identity.

In his book, Simon Schama explores the profound connection between sites and social development, where landscapes are far more than just natural features on the earth's surface; instead, Schama sees landscapes as dynamic entities, deeply intertwined with collective memory, myths and cultural identities. He argues that people's perceptions of natural landscapes are shaped by cultural narratives and historical events, resulting in a symbiotic relationship in which landscapes influence human culture, giving meaning to landscapes. Simon Schama pointed out that "Landscape is culture before they are nature", which means the imagination constructs landscapes projected onto timber, water elements and rocks (Schama, 1996). Through rich historical analyses, art criticism and storytelling, Schama illustrates how mountains, forests, rivers and other natural landscapes have been transformed in people's imaginations over the centuries to become symbols of national identity, spiritual significance and personal heritage (Lekan, 2009). Through a series of case studies and research, Sharma has found that landscapes have values and historical experiences that reflect the culture of the place and carry the collective memory of the local people.

From the connection with the Polish nation and the Polish forests to the American mountains, which symbolize freedom and exploration, he delves into how forests, rivers and mountains are integrated into the life of human societies and become a product of their development, how the spiritual pillars of a nation or tribe can be expressed through landscape design techniques and symbolized with landscape elements to convey emotions. Through these examples, Schama demonstrates that landscapes are not just passive environments but are actively

constructed through narratives that become repositories of collective memory and identity (Schama, 1996). Through the convergence of art history, geography and narrative storytelling, Simon demonstrates that the environmental narratives we construct are an essential part of how we interact with and perceive the world around us and, even more so, the medium through which societies express their values, dreams and histories.

Sharma's writings contributed significantly to understanding the landscape, imbued with cultural and historical significance. This view influenced scholars, artists and writers in the late 20th century, encouraging them to think more deeply about the landscape's symbolic and narrative aspects.

2. Case study

In Simon Schama's book "Landscape and Memory", the Parco dei Mostri in Bomarzo, Italy, the famous scenery of the Parco dei Mostri is the King of the Underworld L'Orco, which was created in the 16th century by Pier Francesco Orsini after the death of Orsini's wife. This garden of grotesque and fantastical sculptures was designed not just for aesthetic pleasure but as a profound reflection on grief, love and memory. Against the natural backdrop of the garden, each sculpture and its natural surroundings express emotional solid states and memories, transforming the space into a tangible expression of Orsini's inner world and the cultural context of the time.

Schama emphasizes how the surreal and disturbing sculptures in the park disrupt the harmony and order of traditional Renaissance gardens, providing a landscape of chaos, wonder and reflective symbolism instead. Monster Park is a testament to the power of landscape to encapsulate and evoke the depth of human experience, merging personal emotions with culture, history, and mythology (Schama, 1996).

Moreover, this book also uses the Villa Lante Gianicolo as a prominent example for exploring the links between "Landscape and Memory", landscape space and emotion. In this case, the villa's gardens and architectural features form a narrative space that reflects the cultural, historical and personal memories associated with the creation and evolution of the villa. The design of the villa and its gardens encapsulates the Renaissance ideal of harmony between man and nature, reflecting the emotional and intellectual pursuits of the era.

Through its Renaissance gardens, water features, and sculpture, the Villa Lante is a space of visual beauty and a medium for storytelling, with each element imbued with symbolism and intentionality. The garden's layout embodies the Renaissance ideals of balance and enlightenment, and its precise geometry and harmony with nature invite contemplation and reflection. At the same time, the presence of fountains and waterfalls adds a layer of emotional depth, symbolizing the transience of life and the flow of time, thus connecting the visitor to the universal themes of life, death and rebirth. The skilful blending of natural and architectural elements creates a sense of place imbued with memory and emotion, making Lante al Villa a vivid example of how landscape design can be a conduit for historical narrative and emotional expression (Coffin, 1991). The book argues for the close integration of landscape and cultural memory by exemplifying the work of Villa Lante al Gianicolo. It also shows how landscapes can be designed to evoke collective and individual memories, thereby blending physical space with emotional landscapes.

At the same time, under the influence of Simon Martha, the Walter Benjamin Monument, designed by Danny Caravan in the United States in the 20th century, is a landscape narrative. Martha's influence, the Walter Benjamin Memorial, designed by Danny Caravan in the United States in the twentieth century, profoundly commemorates the return of people during wartime through the utilization of landscape narrative and the travel of critical elements such as tunnels, platforms and walls. Located in Porto, Spain, the design exemplifies Walter Benjamin's philosophical exploration of landscape narrative and the intricate connection between "Landscape and Memory". The monument embodies Benjamin's concepts of history, memory and travel through its symbolic architecture and interaction with the natural landscape. A descending staircase leads the visitor to the sea, alluding to Benjamin's themes of exile, crossing and journey's end. This physical and reflective passage invites deeper consideration of the intersection of human experience with the landscape of history and memory (Post, 2016). The monument is, therefore, a poignant spatial narrative that intertwines the landscape with the timeless legacy of Benjamin's ideas. It demonstrates how the landscape narrates, commemorates, and evokes collective and individual memories.

The design of the Jewish Museum in Berlin in the 21st century (2001) was also affected by Simon. The design of the Jewish Museum in Berlin in the 21st Century (2001) also reflects Simon and Martha's contemplation on "Landscape and Memory". Architect Daniel

Libeskind embodies the profound connection between “Landscape and Memory” as well as the relation between physical space and emotion through his architectural narrative. The design incorporates abstract spaces and forms that evoke the complex historical and emotional memories of the Jewish experience in Germany, particularly the Holocaust. The zigzag shape of the building, the absence of right angles, and the inclusion of voids create a disorienting experience that reflects the dislocation and trauma of Jewish history (Hansen-Glucklich et al., 2019). These architectural elements are aesthetically significant and imbued with symbolic meaning designed to provoke reflection and emotional responses.

The museum’s garden, known as the ‘Garden of Exile’, further illustrates this connection by disorienting visitors through the sloping columns and uneven floor, symbolizing the dislocation of the exiled Jews. The museum’s void, the space that runs the length of the building, is a powerful reminder of what was lost during the Holocaust, creating a space for memory and mourning (Rosenberg, 2012). Libeskind establishes an intuitive connection between the visitor and the historical narrative through these design choices, making the museum a memory landscape. This case also illustrates how architecture and landscape can express and evoke intertwined layers of memory and emotion, transforming physical space into a medium for historical reflection and emotional engagement.

Historic sites serve as vital conduits for the cultural production and interpretation of the past, drawing upon a collective understanding of history as an inherent attribute of the local landscape. In the context of Western cultural traditions, these sites forge an intangible yet profound connection to historical narratives, rendering the latent histories of landscapes visible through their preservation and interpretation (Azaryahu & Foote, 2008). Cultural artefacts and narratives, irrespective of their ideological underpinnings, leverage these historical sites as platforms to craft and convey interpretative frameworks, transforming the raw content of history into accessible and engaging historical visions.

Echoing Prince’s definition, as referenced by Coste.D (2014), narrative is the art of reconstructing events and situations along a temporal axis, utilizing various mediums such as literature, visual arts, and performance to weave and present stories. This conceptualization underscores the narrative’s versatility and universality as a storytelling tool across diverse formats (Jahn, 2021).

Simon Schama’s contributions, as detailed in his seminal work, delve into the symbiotic relationship between landscape and memory, offering a nuanced exploration of how human recollections and historical narratives are inextricably linked to the physical environment. This perspective has profoundly influenced subsequent generations of designers and scholars, guiding them towards a deeper engagement with landscape narratives. Through this lens, landscapes are not merely backdrops but active participants in storytelling, shaping and being shaped by human memory and history. Schama’s insights encourage reevaluating the landscape as a narrative medium that conveys complex historical and emotional truths.

3. Implications

Simon Schama’s groundbreaking work on the interplay between landscape and human memory is a foundational pillar in the evolving field of landscape narrative. His pioneering ideas, as presented in the influential book “Totality,” have illuminated the profound relationship between physical landscapes and the cultural and collective memories they encapsulate. Schama was among the first to delve into how landscapes are not merely backdrops to human activity but dynamic canvases that bear the imprints of in situ culture and history, emphasizing the significance of narrative in shaping our understanding and appreciation of these spaces.

This intellectual legacy has had a lasting impact on subsequent generations of designers and architects, who have taken Schama’s insights as a springboard to explore further the landscape’s potential to express human psychological states, moods, and emotions. The evolution of this thought can be seen in the design of therapeutic landscapes, or “healing landscapes,” that aim to offer solace and emotional uplift to individuals. The practical application of Schama’s theories is visible in contemporary projects such as High Line Park in New York, the World War II Soviet Union Memorial Park, and Franklin Park, which stand as testaments to the ability of landscape design to transcend mere aesthetics and foster a deeper connection between people and place.

Through these spaces, designers have sought to create environments that reflect and actively engage with the nuances of human experience, allowing visitors to gain a deeper understanding of local cultures and historical narratives. By doing so, they facilitate a more im-

mersive and emotionally resonant experience, demonstrating Schama's work's enduring relevance and transformative power in connecting landscape, memory, and emotion in meaningful and innovative ways.

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