

## Strollological Observations on Perception of the Environment and the Tasks Facing Our Generation (1996)

Aesthetic aspects of the environment have never before concerned people to the extent they do today. Never before were so many committees preoccupied by permit procedures; never were such powerful organizations at work to protect the environment, the landscape, monuments, and a sense of local identity; never was it so difficult to erect a new building in a historical location, or on a landscape still bearing traces of earlier gardens or agriculture. Yet despite all these safeguards, procedures, and turned down construction proposals, complaints about the “uglyfication” of the environment and the destruction of the landscape are growing louder by the day.

My science, which attempts to analyze this phenomenon, is called strollology. Strollology examines the sequences in which a person perceives his surroundings. For it is not as if we find ourselves “beamed” all of a sudden to Piccadilly Circus or to the Cancelleria; instead we find our way there, one way or the other. We leave our hotel on the Via Nomentana or the Pincio, catch a bus or flag a cab—younger people go on foot. We check out the streets, cross squares, stroll along the Corso, perhaps take in the Palazzo Vidone, Linotte and St. Andrea della Valle, and are thus sufficiently prepared for the Cancelleria to also fall into place. A parachutist who happened to land among the endless cars parked in the narrow alley in front of the Cancelleria would gain a quite different impression of the architecture than we do.

In the old world, the intact world, any context explored strollologically served as an explanatory complement to the actual object

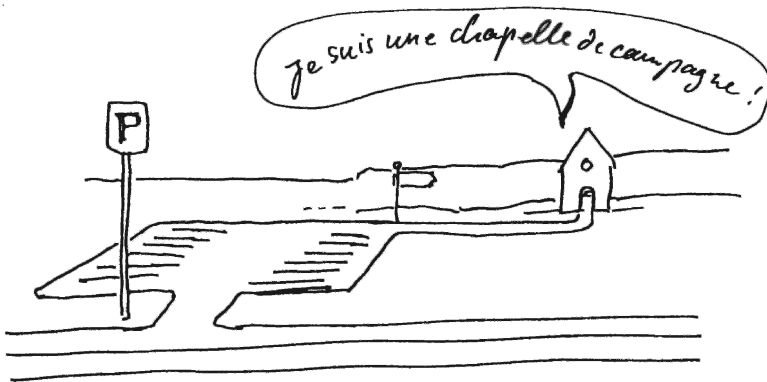
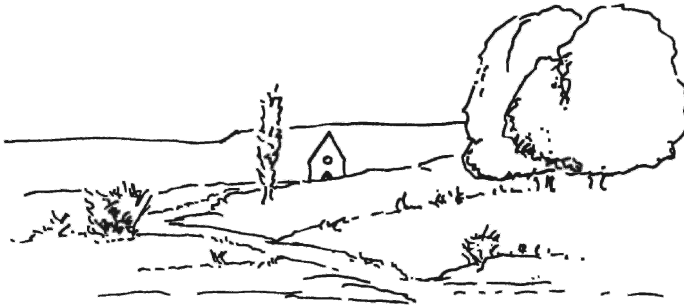


Voilà ce qu'on peut dire: nos bâtiments vont bien partout! This much one can say: our buildings work wherever one puts them! Drawing: Lucius Burckhardt

of a visit. For example, the Cancelleria is not situated just anywhere such as in a park, on a hillside or on a large square flanked by two fountains. And if the nineteenth century had ever erected an imitation Cancelleria in this way, then the context selected, its driveways, flowerbeds and fountains, would have explained the building as a Gründerzeit<sup>1</sup> replica.

A building supported thus by its context had a relatively easy time of expressing itself. And much has been clarified already: we are in Rome, in the Cardinals' Palace district; or we are on a nineteenth-century boulevard in a commercial and administrative district; or we are in a park whose genesis we are able to date, and are

1 The "Founder Epoch" refers to the early phase of industrialization and economic growth in Germany and Austria, before the stock market crash of 1873.



"I am a chapel on the landscape." Yesterday and today. Drawing: Lucius Burckhardt

arriving now at the palace. The architectural statement, the architects' message can be limited under such circumstances to the narrow field of stylistic contrivance; the architect can fulfill the stylistic ideal or, to the Classicists' horror and to Robert Venturi's delight, deviate from it. Either message is certain to be clear to the visitor, for his stroll has equipped him to read facades.

Let us speak as strollologists also of the landscape for a moment. In the nineteenth century, the age of railroads and terminals, the landscape shrank to a postcard cliché: this is Ostend, and this



A mobile bus stop would make life easier for people dependent on public transport, but has only been realized so far in form of a seminar held at Kassel University.  
Photo: Helmut Aebischer

Scheveningen, Interlaken or the isle of Mont Saint-Michel. The stroll was reduced thus to the choice of a holiday destination, the purchase of a ticket, and the rental of a hotel room with a view to match the postcard. The railroad journey was in a sense also a strollological context. Yet experience of the landscape prior to the Golden Age of railroads was a very different matter: the way was as important as the goal. Perhaps a person would have left town,



In the course of the seminar "Perception & Traffic," led by Lucius Burckhardt and Helmut Holzapfel in 1991, people walked along a busy road, holding windshields in front of their faces. The lack of the protective shell of a car prompted a peculiar perception of "place." Photo: Bertram Weisshaar

on foot or on horseback, via a brick city gateway, seen strangers at their work, forded a river, entered a forest or climbed a hill. He may have chosen another route back to his home town where, in the evening, tired and weary, he described the landscape to his dear ones: that is how things are in Saint Germain, or in the Jura near Besancon, and the forest of Fontainebleau is like this. Much of that which the stroller related at home he had never really seen, and much of that which he had seen was omitted from his account. The image he conjured was a collage of previous knowledge mixed with fragments garnered along his way. The outcome was nevertheless certain knowledge—he now knew the forest of Fontainebleau.



In 1987, "The Voyage to Tahiti" led to an abandoned military training area in Kassel. During the walk, an actor read aloud texts by George Forster, who was on Tahiti with Captain Cook in 1772. This served as a soundtrack while people gazed upon the Dönche Nature Reserve, a place for which the descriptions of a paradise isle were equally apt. Photo: Klaus Hoppe

Did he find it beautiful? Of course: for everything he saw of agriculture and natural growth on his travels was beautiful. Poetry since the days of Theocritus and Horace, and the paintings of Neapolitan and Dutch Masters had prepared him for this beauty, had schooled his eye. And, moreover, he regarded this landscape with disinterest, in Immanuel Kant's sense of the term, meaning he did not seek to derive from it any personal benefit. He was in search neither of mushrooms nor of a suitable place to till the soil. The urban dweller's lack of familiarity with the rural landscape was precisely what enabled him to appreciate its aesthetic qualities.



"The ZEBRAcrossing"—during a stroll through Kassel in 1993, the available zebra and intersection light crossings were ignored. Use was made instead of a portable striped zebra carpet (Gerhard Lang), rolled out so as to allow a six-lane highway to be crossed at any selected spot. The action drew attention to the disappropriation of city dwellers' right to walk. Photo: Angela Siever

And now I wish to describe why and to what extent our generation is the first to find itself in a novel situation vis-à-vis the object observed, be it a building or a landscape. And the explanation is once again strollological. It is not objects themselves that have changed, but the context. I'll name here some of the changes.

One actually does arrive in front of many an interesting building in much the same way as our parachutist, but from below, from the subway. I have traveled from the Gare de l'Est to the Louvre station, and find myself now in the Rue de Rivoli. Where am I? What is that? And how rapidly the picture changes: now I am in the courtyard of the Louvre, or in the Tuileries Gardens. I am at a loss without my prior knowledge, my city map or my travel guide.

I park my car and head for the city forest. Gas stations, factories (abandoned ones mostly), a second-hand rubber dealer with a stock of old tires, a farmer on a tractor who is spraying his field with a white powder or vapor and, finally, trees. Are they valiant warriors, bowed by the tide of time, or is the forest here dying? And whose fault may that be? Possibly mine, it is said, insofar as I drive a car and have a centrally heated home. And who drinks the water from beneath the sprayed field? Again, I do. So I am implicated in what is happening around me after all; and by no means alien or disinterested, as Kant would have it.

Another example: let's say I go to the park, back to the Tuileries Gardens. In historic times one used to cross the built-up city, the city in which every last square meter was exploited, and in which the king used his great wealth to plant a green oasis, the Tuileries Gardens. So I walk through the "stone city,"<sup>2</sup> cut through the Palace, and find myself gazing in delight upon this precious public park. Yet, the Tuileries Gardens have come to present a quite other aspect since the nineteenth century: we come now from the Champs Elysées, cut through the grounds that were laid out for the World Exhibitions, search between the Seine and Place de la Concorde for a way to reach the entrance, and ultimately find ourselves in a place not so very unlike the previous grounds. The experience of "I am now setting foot in the park" has been lost.

And now let us leave these anyhow still classical situations and take a look around those infinite zones we might best describe as "metropolises." These are the zones in which the city strives to be the countryside and where everyone, whether building a home or

2 A reference to Werner Hegemann's book *Das steinerne Berlin* (Berlin of Stone), Kiepenheuer, Berlin 1930.



a factory, surrounds himself with as much greenery as possible. The same is true of the zones in which the countryside aspires to be urban, and in which every small town mayor is in search of an investor prepared to make him a gift of a tower block or, at the least, of a railroad station with an underground section, a pedestrian level, and a multistory parking lot.—And now, my discovery: in these zones of our environment which the majority of people inhabit or visit, the strollological context that fosters understanding of what we see there has disintegrated completely.

Therefore we are the first generation of people for whom the aesthetic experience does not occur automatically. Instead, the place itself must explain its aesthetic intent. When we create a park, the park can no longer rely on the fact that we proceed from the town, through a gate, to a green space, and hence know we are visiting the park. Rather, the park must now substantiate by means of its interior design the extent to which it contrasts with its surroundings. So, without us even taking a single step, it must give us the strollological explanation: You have come from the city to the park.

The same holds true also for architecture. Architecture can no longer rely on us grasping its greater significance thanks to its location alone, and so must assert its singularity by deviating slightly from the stylistic ideal. For instance, a new bank must now introduce a slightly variant nuance to the banking district. Now, an acclimatized suburban cube that has been incorporated in a partly green, partly concrete-braced artificial plane must fall back on a conveniently ambivalent statement: I am in the suburbs but I am resolutely urban; I am a bank, but a bank like no other...

To reiterate: we are the first generation to have to construct a new aesthetic, a strollological aesthetic. Strollological, for the simple reason that the way or route to a place can no longer be taken for granted, but must be reproduced in, or represented by,

the object itself. The multilayered message that a building or, in another case, gardens or a cultivated landscape must deliver can no longer be supplied by a flash of genius on the part of its creator. The enterprising architect's statement, "Where there is no place, I will create a place myself" is not enough: there are enough such aesthetic cactuses dotted about already and indeed, it is they which have contributed so decisively to the much lamented deterioration of the natural environment. What is required here rather, is design intelligence, intelligence that conveys a dual message: information about the context as well as about the object in question.

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Coverphoto: Lucius Burckhardt painted a fly on a grape, in emulation of the artist Apelles.  
Is a realistic simulation of nature the very best art can do? Photo: Annemarie Burckhardt

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# Content

Preface: The Work of Lucius Burckhardt	7
Urban Planning and Democracy (1957)	27
Ulm Anno 5. The Curriculum of the Ulm School of Design (1960)	35
Building—A Process with No Obligations to Heritage Preservation (1967)	44
On the Value and Meaning of Urban Utopias (1968)	63
From Design Academicism to the Treatment of Wicked Problems (1973)	77
Who Plans the Planning? (1974)	85
Family and Home—Two Adaptable Systems (1975)	102
Urban Design and Its Significance for Residents (1975)	115
Gardening—An Art and A Necessity (1977)	123
Why Is Landscape Beautiful? (1979)	133
On the Design of Everyday Life (1979)	142
Design Is Invisible (1980)	153
Dirt (1980)	166

What Is Livability? On Quantifiable and Invisible Needs (1981)	170
The Night Is Man-made (1982)	179
Architecture—An Art or A Science? (1983)	189
A Critique of the Art of Gardening (1983)	195
Fake: The Real Thing (1987)	204
Aesthetics and Ecology (1990)	212
A Walk in Second Nature (1992)	226
The Sermon (1994)	232
Strollological Observations on Perception of the Environment and the Tasks Facing Our Generation (1996)	239
Wasteland As Context. Is There Any Such Thing As The Postmodern Landscape? (1998)	249
On Movement and Vantage Points—the Strollologist's Experience (1999)	264
Biography	281
Bibliography	283
Index	287