



# ARQUITECTURA Y PAISAJE

transferencias históricas  
retos contemporáneos

VOLUMEN II

A B A D A E D I T O R E S





**ARQUITECTURA  
Y PAISAJE**  
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**VOLUMEN II**

## LECTURAS

Serie **H.<sup>a</sup> del Arte y de la Arquitectura**

DIRECTORES Juan Miguel HERNÁNDEZ LEÓN y Juan CALATRAVA

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<b>PRESENTACIÓN</b> .....	XIX
Juan Calatrava	

## VOLUMEN I

### 1. PAISAJE URBANO Y CULTURA ARQUITECTÓNICA

<b>ARCHITECTURE AND THE URBAN LANDSCAPE, PUBLIC SPACE AS A TRANSFORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY CITIES (1945-1970)</b> .....	25
Adele Fiadino	
<b>“LES RUINES D’UNE RAISON...”</b> . DESONTOLOGIZACIÓN DEL PENSAMIENTO Y DESTRUCCIÓN DE LA ARQUITECTURA Y EL PAISAJE .....	37
Federico L. Silvestre	
<b>MENDELSON Y AMERIKA: DOS VISIONES DE LA CIUDAD ILUMINADA</b> .....	55
José Manuel Pozo Municio	
<b>PAISAJE O ARTIFICIO: LA IMPLANTACIÓN DE JARDINES EN LAS PLAZAS DE GRANADA EN EL SIGLO XIX</b> .....	69
Fernando Acale Sánchez	
<b>EL TERCER ESPACIO DE LA CIUDAD: LA IDENTIDAD URBANA DE LOS PAISAJES INTERMEDIOS</b> . .	81
Luisa Alarcón González, Francisco Montero-Fernández	
<b>EL BLOQUE: INSTRUCCIONES DE USO</b> .....	91
Mónica Aubán Borrell	



<b>ARCHITECTURE, CITY, AND LANDSCAPE IN THE SABAUDIA PROJECT IN THE AGRO PONTINO . .</b>	103
Gemma Belli	
<b>THE LANDSCAPE IN THE ITALIAN PUBLIC SOCIAL HOUSING DURING THE '50S: ROBERTO PANE AS AN ARCHITECT FOR THE INA-CASA PLAN . . . . .</b>	117
Ermanno Bizzarri	
<b>PERCEPTION OF URBAN SPACE AND ARCHITECTURE IN THE NORTHEAST OF ITALY BETWEEN THE 15TH AND 16TH CENTURIES: THE ROLE OF COLOR AND LIGHT . . . . .</b>	129
Federico Bulfone Gransinigh	
<b>A CITY OF MARBLE. URBAN READINGS THROUGH THE LENS OF A MATERIAL. . . . .</b>	141
Charlotte Bundgaard	
<b>APERTURISMO ESPACIAL FRENTE AL LUGAR. EL CONCEPTO REDEFINIDO DE VENTANA COMO MECANISMO EVASOR . . . . .</b>	153
Emilio Cachorro Fernández	
<b>DAMAGED IDENTITIES. EARTHQUAKES, HISTORICAL CENTRES AND RECONSTRUCTIONS BETWEEN ABANDONMENT AND URBAN REGENERATION . . . . .</b>	171
Stefano Cecamore	
<b>MEMORIAS FRANCISCANAS: UNA VISIÓN SOBRE LOS PAISAJES DE LAS CIUDADES DE LIMA (PERÚ) Y SALVADOR (BRASIL) A PARTIR DE LOS CONVENTOS SERÁFICOS . . . . .</b>	179
Maria Angélica da Silva, Katherine Edith Quevedo Arestegui	
<b>MAKING THE CITY. . . . .</b>	191
Martina D'Alessandro	
<b>LAS CASAS DE ALQUILER DE LUJO ENTRE MEDIANERAS EN EL PRIMER TRAMO DE LA GRAN VÍA DE MADRID. 1910-1920: PEDRO MATHET Y SEGUROS LA ESTRELLA . . . . .</b>	205
Juan de Andrés Martínez	
<b>CONTEMPORARY URBAN LANDSCAPES: THE CONSTRUCTION OF PUBLIC HOUSING IN THE 1950S IN SOUTHERN ITALY . . . . .</b>	217
Carolina De Falco	
<b>UNIDAD EN LA VARIEDAD: ARQUITECTURA DE PAISAJE EN BERLÍN HANSAVIERTEL. . . . .</b>	229
Manuel Rodrigo de la O Cabrera	
<b>PAISAJES FORTIFICADOS EN CLAVE CONTEMPORÁNEA: UNA PUESTA EN VALOR PATRIMONIAL DE LA SIERRA SUR DE JAÉN A TRAVÉS DEL PROYECTO DE ARQUITECTURA. . . . .</b>	241
Rafael de Lacour, Manuel Sánchez García	
<b>PRECURSORES DE LA MOVILIDAD URBANA . . . . .</b>	253
Miguel Ángel Díaz González, Daniel Gómez Magide	
<b>RENZO PIANO ENTRE EL MAR Y LA CIUDAD. ANÁLISIS DEL CENTRO BOTÍN Y LA TRANSFORMACIÓN DEL FRENTE MARÍTIMO DE SANTANDER . . . . .</b>	267
Daniel Díez Martínez	

LA CIUDAD Y EL OASIS: DOS CAMPUS DE DAN KILEY EN NUEVA YORK Y CALIFORNIA . . . . .	281
Marta García Carbonero, Laura Sánchez Carrasco	
UNA MIRADA DE VUELTA. A PROPÓSITO DE ANTONIO JIMÉNEZ TORRECILLAS . . . . .	291
Alba Jiménez Navas, Mario Martínez Santoyo	
PAISAJE CULTURAL URBANO E IDENTIDAD TERRITORIAL. CEMENTERIO, MEDINA Y ENSANCHE DE TETUÁN . . . . .	303
Bernardino Líndez Vílchez	
LA TRANSFORMACIÓN URBANA DE LA CIUDAD DE LUGO A PARTIR DE LA IMAGEN FOTOGRÁFICA . . . . .	317
Francisco Xabier Louzao Martínez	
(RE)CONSTRUIR LA CIUDAD SEGÚN SU CARTOGRAFÍA Y ARQUITECTURA: DEL MEDIO NATURAL AL TEJIDO URBANO INDUSTRIAL . . . . .	329
Miriam Martín Díaz, Enrique Castaño Perea	
LA METAMORFOSIS DE CUSCO ENTRE CAMBIOS DEL PAISAJE URBANO Y CONSERVACIÓN DE IDENTIDAD CULTURAL . . . . .	339
Claudio Mazzanti, Vianey Bellota Cavanaconza, Crayla Alfaro Auca	
LAS CASAS DE MIES VAN DER ROHE: DEL ESPACIO CONTINUO AL PAISAJE ENMARCADO . . . . .	351
Ricardo Merí de la Maza, Clara E. Mejía Vallejo	
UNA CIUDAD DENTRO DE UN JARDÍN: EL LAGO DEL OESTE DE HANGZHOU . . . . .	363
Antonio José Mezcua López	
UNA ARQUITECTURA DEL OLVIDO: EL PAISAJE PATRIMONIAL DEL CASTILLO Y FORTALEZA DE LA VILLAVIEJA EN BEAS DE SEGURA (JAÉN) . . . . .	371
Pablo Manuel Millán-Millán, José Miguel Fernández Cuadros	
RHINOCEROS ESPERIMENTI: LA REPROGRAMACIÓN URBANA DESDE EL CONTEXTO HISTÓRICO . . . . .	383
Fernando Moral Andrés, Elena Merino Gómez.	
“DES RACINES POUR LA VILLE”: REFLEXIONES DE RENÉE GAILHOUSTET EN TORNO AL PAISAJE URBANO. . . . .	397
María Pura Moreno Moreno	
ESO PARECE UNA IGLESIA. SOBRE EL LENGUAJE MODERNO Y LA IDENTIDAD DE LA ARQUITECTURA DEL TEMPLO . . . . .	409
Juan M. Otxotorena	
THE PORTICOES OF BOLOGNA BETWEEN URBAN SPACE AND ARCHITECTURAL CULTURE. FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE UNESCO NOMINATION . . . . .	421
Daniele Pascale-Guidotti-Magnani, Elena Ramazza	
ABANDONO Y REGRESO. REHABITAR PEQUEÑOS PUEBLOS HISTÓRICOS ITALIANOS . . . . .	435
Claudia Pirina	

TRES CARTOGRAFÍAS AMBIENTALES EN USA 1963-1975 . . . . .	449
Fenando Quesada López	
GEOGRAPHICAL FORMS AS ETYMOLOGY OF THE URBAN LANDSCAPE: A CONTRIBUTION TO THE (RE)DESIGN OF ARRABIDA (PORTO, PORTUGAL) . . . . .	461
Sílvia Ramos	
EL TRÁNSITO ENTRE ALCÁZAR Y MEZQUITA EN LA CIUDAD DE MADINAT AL-ZAHRA: EL SABBAT	473
Manuela Rodríguez Bravo	
LOS PROYECTOS PARA LA FINCA EL SERRALLO EN GRANADA: CRÓNICA DE UN PAISAJE . . . . .	487
Marta Rodríguez Iturriaga	
LLEGANDO A MADRID. MEMORIA DE UNA SILUETA . . . . .	503
Eva J. Rodríguez Romero, Rocío Santo-Tomás Muro, Carlota Sáenz de Tejada Granados	
EL PAISAJE COTIDIANO: NARRACIONES Y CARTOGRAFÍAS DEL SUR DE MADRID . . . . .	515
Carlota Sáenz de Tejada Granados, Eva J. Rodríguez Romero, Rocío Santo-Tomás Muro	
CONTRA LA DESMEMORIA. LA TRANSFORMACIÓN DEL PAISAJE PORTUARIO DE SEVILLA . . . . .	527
Victoriano Sáinz Gutiérrez	
DE LA GRIETA DE ASFALTO A LA COSTURA VERDE: TRES EJEMPLOS DE RECONVERSIÓN URBANA	539
Laura Sánchez Carrasco, Marta García Carbonero	
CONSERVACIÓN EN LOS ESPACIOS PÚBLICOS HISTÓRICOS: ACTUACIONES EN LOS ESPACIOS GENÉRICOS DE LA CIUDAD HISTÓRICA . . . . .	551
Silvia Segarra Lagunes	
ESCALERA Y PAISAJE. LUGARES INTERMEDIOS ENTRE LO URBANO Y LO DOMÉSTICO. . . . .	561
Juan Antonio Serrano García	
THE RURAL ITALIAN VILLAGES OF THE 1950S: PLACES TO KNOW AND RELIVE . . . . .	573
Simona Talenti, Annarita Teodosio	
PAISAJE COLLAGE. LA INTEGRACIÓN DE LAS QUINTAS DE RECREO DEL CAMINO DE ARAGÓN EN LA CIUDAD DEL SIGLO XXI. . . . .	587
Carmen Toribio Marín, Rosana Rubio Hernando, Rafael García García	
EL PAISAJE DE LAS MEDINAS MARROQUÍES TRAS EL PROTECTORADO ESPAÑOL DE MARRUECOS (1912-56): EL LEGADO DE ALFONSO DE SIERRA OCHOA. . . . .	601
Jaime Vergara-Muñoz, Miguel Martínez-Monedero	
EL PAISAJE HISTÓRICO URBANO COMO RECURSO PARA EL PROYECTO DE ARQUITECTURA. ESTRATEGIA DE REGENERACIÓN URBANA PARA EL CONJUNTO SANTA CLARA-DON FADRIQUE EN SEVILLA . . . . .	613
Cristina Vicente Gilabert, Marina López Sánchez, Mercedes Linares Gómez del Pulgar	
ARCHITECTURE IS <i>OUTIL</i> . . . . .	625
Luca Zecchin	

REMIRAR PAISAJES HABITABLES: ESPACIOS DE CENTRALIDAD Y DE PROXIMIDAD URBANA. CONJUNTO PEDREGULHO Y EQUIPAMIENTOS DE BARRIO SESC EN BRASIL . . . . .	639
Carla Zollinger, María Pía Fontana, Miguel Mayorga	

## 2. EL PATRIMONIO PAISAJÍSTICO ANTE LOS DESAFÍOS DE LA CONTEMPORANEIDAD

REPERCUSIONES DE LA ENAJENACIÓN DEL PATRIMONIO REAL EN EL PAISAJE DE LOS REALES SITIOS. EL CASO DE ARANJUEZ (MADRID, ESPAÑA) . . . . .	651
Pilar Chías, Tomás Abad	
LA DEFINICIÓN DEL PAISAJE Y SU PROTECCIÓN: EL DEBATE ITALIANO ENTRE 1904-1939 . . . . .	663
Fabio Mangone	
PAISAJES DE RUINAS. UNA MIRADA SOBRE EL VALOR MEMORIAL DEPOSITADO EN LOS ASENTAMIENTOS URBANOS ABANDONADOS EN EL TERRITORIO EUROPEO CONTEMPORÁNEO . . . . .	671
Carlos Bitrián Varea	
TRES FALLIDAS INTERVENCIONES EN EL PAISAJE: LO INAUTÉNTICO, EL ESPECTÁCULO TECNOLÓGICO Y LA PRESERVACIÓN ENCARECIDAMENTE PERVERSA. . . . .	679
Joan Casals Pañella	
WRIGHT'S INFLUENCE IN NAPLES. . . . .	687
Vincenzo Esposito	
CONSIDERACIONES DESARROLLISTAS GEOGRÁFICO-ESTRATÉGICAS DE LA ALPUJARRA. PROGRESIÓN TRADICIONAL ALPUJARREÑA Y EFECTOS ADVERSOS MEDIANTE UN EJEMPLO REPRESENTATIVO . . . . .	697
Juan Luis Fernández-Quero	
<i>HABITAT ÉVOLUTIF</i> : LA CIUDAD VERTICAL DE ATBAT-AFRIQUE. . . . .	707
Cristina Quiteria García Dorce	
PARQUES PERIURBANOS EN ÁREAS METROPOLITANAS: DE PAISAJES PERIFÉRICOS A ESPACIOS DE SOCIALIZACIÓN . . . . .	717
Francisco José García Fernández, Blanca del Espino Hidalgo	
PAISAJE EMPAQUETADO . . . . .	731
Iñigo García Odiaga, Iñaki Begiristain Mitxelena, Ibon Salaberria San Vicente	
LA ARQUITECTURA DEL TURISMO DE MONTAÑA Y LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE SU PAISAJE: DEL REFUGIO RURAL A LA ESTACIÓN DE ESQUÍ. EL CASO DE SIERRA NEVADA (GRANADA) . . . . .	743
José V. Guzmán Fernández	
EMERGING LINKS BETWEEN ALPINE LANDSCAPE HERITAGE AND MEGA-EVENTS IN THE MILAN-CORTINA 2026 WINTER OLYMPICS . . . . .	755
Zachary Mark Jones, Francesca Vigotti	

EL PATRIMONIO CULTURAL DEL VALLE DE RICOTE (MURCIA) Y LA CARTOGRAFÍA DEL <i>GENIUS LOCI</i> . BASES TEÓRICAS Y METODOLÓGICAS PARA LA ELABORACIÓN DE UN MAPA CULTURAL A PARTIR DE ACCIONES DE PARTICIPACIÓN SOCIAL . . . . .	765
Joaquín Martínez Pino, Marta Ruiz Jiménez	
THE BUILT LANDSCAPE OF THE CINQUE TERRE . . . . .	775
Mauro Marzo, Viola Bertini	
CHALLENGING THE ARCHITECTURAL LANGUAGE: THE BAMBOO CASE. . . . .	787
Giulia Pezzullo	
PATRIMONIO PAISAJÍSTICO Y ASENTAMIENTOS RURALES. REGENERACIÓN Y RECUPERACIÓN SOSTENIBLE DE LOS POBLADOS AGRÍCOLAS MODERNOS EN ITALIA Y ESPAÑA. . . . .	797
Raffaele Pontrandolfi, Jorge Moya Muñoz, Manuel Castellano Román	
PAISAJES PRODUCTIVOS Y ESPACIO PÚBLICO. CUANDO LA CIUDAD QUIERE SER MÁS CAMPO. . . .	809
Juan Carlos Reina Fernández	
PAISAJE Y ANTIGUAS INFRAESTRUCTURAS. UN LAZO IDEAL ENTRE AFINIDADES Y DIVERSIDADES CULTURALES . . . . .	819
Emanuele Romeo	
EL PROYECTO PAISAJÍSTICO COMO INSTRUMENTO PARA SOLVENTAR LA PRECARIEDAD EN EL BARRIO HISTÓRICO DE BAJO DE GUÍA DE SANLÚCAR DE BARRAMEDA . . . . .	829
José Antonio Romero-Odero	
THE CASTLES OF <i>PAYS CATHARE</i> . A MULTI-LAYERED HERITAGE? . . . . .	841
Riccardo Rudiero	

## VOLUMEN II

### 3. OTROS PAISAJES, OTRAS ESCALAS: EL PROYECTO ARQUITECTÓNICO EN EL TERRITORIO DISPERSO

LA TRANSFORMACIÓN MUDA DEL PAISAJE URBANO . . . . .	857
Antonella Falzetti, Veronica Strippoli	
CAMBIAR EL PAISAJE: LA OBRA DEL INSTITUTO NACIONAL DE INDUSTRIA (1941-1975). . . . .	869
Ángeles Layuno	
DISEÑO Y CONSTRUCCIÓN DE UN PAISAJE AGRÍCOLA MODERNO. EL AGRO PONTINO EN LA “BATTAGLIA DEL GRANO”. . . . .	887
David Arredondo Garrido	

THE HUMAN ECODYNAMICS OF THE ARCHITECTURAL ICELANDIC LANDSCAPE: THE HISTORICAL EXAMPLE OF TURF HOUSES AND EARTHWORKS . . . . .	903
Pablo Barruezo-Vaquero	
THE SOTTOBORGO AND THE CAPILLA-ESCUELA: THE SERVICES OF THE PLANNED DISPERSED SETTLEMENT OF THE 20TH CENTURY IN ITALY, PORTUGAL AND SPAIN. . . . .	913
Tiziana Basiricò, Rui Braz Afonso, Luis Santos y Ganges	
EL PAISAJE Y LOS PRIMEROS PUENTES DE HORMIGÓN ARMADO DE ANDALUCÍA ORIENTAL, 1920-1945	925
Antonio Burgos Núñez, Juan Carlos Olmo García	
ARQUITECTURA DEL OLIVAR EN LA VEGA DE SEVILLA. FRAGMENTOS DE UN PAISAJE EXTINTO	939
Manuel Chaparro-Campos, José-Manuel Aladro-Prieto	
REGENERACIÓN, PAISAJES Y ARQUITECTURAS: ESTRATEGIAS DE INTERVENCIÓN EN EMPLAZAMIENTOS MINEROS ABANDONADOS EN CERDEÑA . . . . .	953
Pier Francesco Cherchi, Marco Lecis	
EL VÍNCULO AFECTIVO ENTRE ARQUITECTURA Y TERRITORIO. . . . .	963
María Fandiño Iglesias	
EL UNIVERSO ATRAPADO EN UN FRAGMENTO DE CIELO: LA INTERPRETACIÓN DEL PAISAJE LLEVADA A CABO POR JAMES TURRELL A TRAVÉS DE LOS SKYSPACES. . . . .	975
Tomás García Píriz	
JUAN BORCHERS, UNA MIRADA SOBRE EL ESCORIAL . . . . .	987
Ignacio Hornillos Cárdenas	
THE TREND OF SPANISH-STYLE ARCHITECTURE IN JAPANESE HOUSES, HOTELS, SHOPPING CENTRES, OUTLETS, AND THEME PARKS IN THE 20TH CENTURY . . . . .	1001
Ewa Kawamura	
THE PERTINENCE OF PERCEIVING THE VISIBLE: THE OPTICAL TELEGRAPH TOWERS OF THE CASTILLA LINE IN THE LANDSCAPE . . . . .	1015
Laura Lalana-Encinas	
ARQUITECTURAS DE LA LLANURA, POÉTICAS DE LA INMENSIDAD . . . . .	1027
Alejandro Lapunzina	
EL ESTABLO-GRANERO DEL DOTTI, UN MODELO DE AUTOR . . . . .	1039
Fabio Licitra	
DE HABITAR UN TERRITORIO A CONSTRUIR UN PAISAJE: SAN JULIÁN DE SAMOS . . . . .	1053
Estefanía López Salas	
ARQUITECTURA Y PAISAJES DEL PROGRAMA INDUSTRIAL DEL FRANQUISMO PARA EL BIERZO Y LACIANA (LEÓN, ESPAÑA) . . . . .	1063
Jorge Magaz Molina	

<b>ESCAPE FROM AVANT-GARDE: ARCHITECTURE AND LANDSCAPE IN HANNES MEYER'S KINDERHEIM IN MÜMLISWIL (1938-39)</b> . . . . .	1075
Andrea Maglio	
<b>LAS “TIERRAS ALTAS” Y LA LECCIÓN DEL PAISAJE</b> . . . . .	1087
Paolo Mellano	
<b>COLONIZACIÓN DEL TERRITORIO Y CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL PAISAJE</b> . . . . .	1099
Plácida Molina Ballesteros, Rui Manuel Braz Afonso, Rui Alves	
<b>DEL COUNTRYSIDE AL TESLA WALD: EL COMPROMISO DEL PROYECTO ARQUITECTÓNICO EN UN BOSQUE DEGRADADO</b> . . . . .	1111
María Ocón Fernández	
<b>NUEVOS MODELOS DE ASENTAMIENTO EN LA TRANSFORMACIÓN DEL PAISAJE RURAL ENTRE LA TRADICIÓN Y LA MODERNIDAD. LOS PUEBLOS DE LA REFORMA AGRARIA EN ESPAÑA E ITALIA A MEDIADOS DEL SIGLO XX</b> . . . . .	1123
Raffaele Pontrandolfi, José María Guerrero Vega, Francisco Pinto Puerto	
<b>LA TORRE ALQUERÍA DE MÁGINA. CARTOGRAFÍAS Y ARQUITECTURA DE LA ALQUERÍA DE DÚRCAL</b>	1137
David Raya Moreno	
<b>EL PAISAJE DEL RÍO MAGDALENA, DISPOSITIVO INTEGRADOR DE CIUDAD</b> . . . . .	1149
Luz Mery Rodelo Torres	
<b>HÁBITAT RURAL DISEMINADO Y NUEVAS FORMAS DE EXPLOTACIÓN DEL TERRITORIO EN LA SIERRA DE LA CONTRAVIESA (GRANADA - ALMERÍA)</b> . . . . .	1157
Luis Miguel Sánchez Escolano, Noelia Ruiz Moya	
<b>GEOMETRÍA. LO QUE EL HORIZONTE MIDE</b> . . . . .	1169
Rafael Sánchez Sánchez	
<b>LA PARTICIPACIÓN COMO PRÁCTICA DE MEDIACIÓN ENTRE EL PROYECTO ARQUITECTÓNICO Y EL PAISAJE RURAL: EL CASO DEL MÁSTER UNIVERSITARIO EN ARQUITECTURA ETSAV-UPC</b> . . . . .	1179
Marta Serra-Permanyer, Roger Sauquet Llonch, Isabel Castiñeira Palou	
<b>THE MYTH OF THE CAUCASIAN SOUTH: HOLIDAY DESTINATION OF THE WRITERS DURING THE SOVIET REGIME</b> . . . . .	1191
Chiara Simoncini	
<b>LOS PROGRAMAS DE REHABILITACIÓN ARQUITECTÓNICA E INTEGRACIÓN SOCIAL DEL TERRITORIO RURAL ANDALUZ. ALAMEDILLA COMO CASO DE ESTUDIO.</b> . . . . .	1203
María del Carmen Vílchez Lara	
<b>TERRITORIOS INVISIBLES, PAISAJES IMAGINADOS: ANÁLISIS Y ALTERNATIVAS SOBRE LA PROBLEMÁTICA DEL NO-LUGAR EN EL LEVANTE ALMERIENSE, SIGLOS XIX-XXI.</b> . . . . .	1215
María Zurita Elizalde	
<b>PAISAJES AGRARIOS EXCAVADOS: EL CASO DE LA COMARCA DE HUÉSCAR</b> . . . . .	1237
Eduardo Zurita Povedano, Ángel Aguilera Delgado	

LOS CULTIVOS DEL AZÚCAR DE CAÑA, PAISAJES PRODUCTIVOS DE IDA Y VUELTA: EL CASO DEL LITORAL GRANADINO Y LAS FUNDACIONES CARIBEÑAS. . . . .	1251
Eduardo Zurita Povedano, Carmen Zurita Sánchez, Elías Mhend Cabrera	

#### 4. DESCRIBIR EL TERRITORIO, COMUNICAR EL PAISAJE

PAISAJE Y POLÍTICA EN LA OBRA DE JOSÉ MARÍA DE PEREDA. . . . .	1265
Juan Calatrava	
EL CIELO NOCTURNO COMO PAISAJE . . . . .	1279
Marta Llorente Díaz	
LA VENTANA INDISCRETA. LE CORBUSIER Y LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL PAISAJE. . . . .	1295
Jorge Torres Cueco	
51° 30' 46.20" N, 7° 1' 08.85" E . . . . .	1311
Francisco Arques Soler	
PAISAJE Y MEMORIA. LA VEGA DE GRANADA EN LA OBRA DE FEDERICO GARCÍA LORCA. . . . .	1323
Paloma Baquero Masats	
ESTÉTICA PINTORESCA VERSUS DESARROLLISMO. LA DESTRUCCIÓN DEL PAISAJE Y EL AMBIENTE HISTÓRICO-ARTÍSTICO EN ESPAÑA . . . . .	1335
Juan Manuel Barrios Rozúa	
LA DISTANCIA DEL PAISAJE EN EL SENTIDO TERRITORIAL DEL CUERPO. . . . .	1349
Aarón José Caballero Quiroz	
FROM SCANDINAVIAN SATELLITE TOWNS TO NEW TOWNS IN THE DESERT: ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE'S OVERSEAS REPORTAGES, 1965-1969. A TRAVELING ARCHITECTURE CRITIC'S PERSPECTIVE FOR CULTURAL MEDIATION . . . . .	1359
Valeria Casali	
PAISAJES INVENTADOS: DEL HOTEL COMO PROMESA DEL HOGAR EFÍMERO, AL <i>BLING</i> DE LOS OBJETOS COTIDIANOS. CONVERGENCIAS ENTRE LA ALTERIDAD DE LO DOMÉSTICO EN EL CINE DE SOFIA COPPOLA Y LA INVASIÓN A LOS OTROS, EN LA OBRA DE SOPHIE CALLE. . . . .	1371
María de los Ángeles Castillo Soriano, J. Alberto Canavati Espinosa	
RECUPERAR LA LECTURA PARA COMUNICAR EL PAISAJE . . . . .	1383
Antonio Alberto Clemente	
ONE YEAR FROM VENICE TO INDIA LEARNING FROM THE LANDSCAPE: THE "SLOW JOURNEY" OF DOLF SCHNEBLI . . . . .	1393
Alessandra Como, Isotta Forni, Luisa Smeragliuolo Perrotta	
PAISAJES DE EXPORTACIÓN. EL RELATO BIDIMENSIONAL DE LA ARQUITECTURA CHILENA CONTEMPORÁNEA. . . . .	1405
Felipe Corvalán Tapia	



CONTROL SOCIAL DESDE LA CIUDAD BASURAL EN <i>ISLA DE PERROS</i> DE WES ANDERSON. . . . .	1417
Bernardita Cubillos	
LA CONSTELACIÓN DE TUSCIA: EL MANIFIESTO PAISAJÍSTICO DE PIER PAOLO PASOLINI. . . . .	1429
Ana del Cid Mendoza	
DRAWING THE WATER TO SEE ROME. CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AND FLUIDITY. . . . .	1443
Francisco J. del Corral del Campo, Carmen M. Barrós Velázquez	
VER EL PAISAJE SIN LOS OJOS. SENTIR EL TERRITORIO A CIEGAS . . . . .	1453
Francisco J. del Corral del Campo, Laura Muñoz González	
DE VALPARAÍSO A SACROMONTE. IMÁGENES DE UN PAISAJE ENCRIPADO EN LA GRANADA DE FINALES DEL SIGLO XVI. . . . .	1467
Francisco A. García Pérez	
LA POESÍA VISUAL COMO METODOLOGÍA DE APRENDIZAJE Y ENSEÑANZA DE LA CIUDAD . . . . .	1479
Rafaele Genet Verney, Antonio Fernández Morillas, Xabier Molinet Medina	
OTEANDO LA PALABRA. APROXIMACIONES A LA IDEA DE PAISAJE EN LA POESÍA HISPÁNICA DEL SIGLO XX . . . . .	1489
José Miguel Gómez Acosta	
ESCALAS DEL PAISAJE EN LA NARRATIVA CINEMATOGRAFICA DE PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON . . .	1499
Agustín Gor Gómez	
THE ANCIENT CITY OF PAESTUM. THE EVOLUTION OF AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE REFLECTING THE VARIOUS SHAPES OF CIVILIZATIONS . . . . .	1515
Ludovica Grompone	
(RE)PRESENTAR UN PAISAJE PRESENTE: SOBRE LA CONDICIÓN ENVOLVENTE DE LA ARQUITECTURA	1527
María Elia Gutiérrez Mozo, Ángel Cordero Ampuero	
LOS SUBURBIOS DE BARCELONA EN LOS AÑOS SESENTA A TRAVÉS DE LA LENTE DE ORIOL MASPONS Y JULIO UBIÑA . . . . .	1539
Arianna Iampieri	
GRANADA: LOS ALREDEDORES DE LA CIUDAD CRISTIANA A LA LUZ DE SU REPRESENTACIÓN GRÁFICA. . . . .	1551
Carlos Jerez Mir	
NUEVAS LECTURAS PATRIMONIALES DE LA CIUDAD DE CÓRDOBA. EL PAISAJE URBANO A TRAVÉS DE SU DIFUSIÓN HISTÓRICA . . . . .	1563
Ángela Laguna Bolívar, Lourdes Royo Naranjo	
ENTRE VIENA Y SICILIA: ESPACIOS Y PRÁCTICAS DEL SABER CARTOGRAFICO EN EL SIGLO XVIII	1575
Valeria Manfrè	
EL COLOFÓN DEL VIAJE: NARRACIÓN Y PAISAJE DE ESTADOS UNIDOS EN EL SIGLO XIX . . . . .	1587
Nicolás Mariné	

<b>CARTOGRAFÍAS DE LEYENDAS: UNA APROXIMACIÓN GRÁFICA AL CAMPO TRANSILVANO A TRAVÉS DE SU PAISAJE LITERARIO</b> . . . . .	1597
Mario Martínez Santoyo, Alba Jiménez Navas, Tomás García Píriz	
<b>TERRITORIOS REHABILITADOS: EL IMAGINARIO PAISAJÍSTICO A TRAVÉS DE INSTALACIONES ARTÍSTICAS CONTEMPORÁNEAS</b> . . . . .	1611
José Luis Panea	
<b>VALE DO AVE. PERCEPCIONES CONTEMPORÁNEAS DEL PAISAJE</b> . . . . .	1623
Júlia Cristina Pereira de Faria	
<b>LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL ESPACIO FÍLMICO A TRAVÉS DEL CAMINAR EN ERIC ROHMER.</b> . . . . .	1635
Yolanda Pérez Sánchez	
<b>EXCAVAR EL TERRITORIO A TRAVÉS DEL MAPA.</b> . . . . .	1647
Ana Isabel Rodríguez Aguilera, Elena Rocchi	
<b>“EL MARIDAJE DE LO BELLO CON LO ÚTIL”: EL PAISAJE EN LA CUENCA DEL NOGUERA RIBAGORZANA, 1946-1962</b> . . . . .	1661
Isabel Rodríguez de la Rosa	
<b>PAISAJES INESCRUTABLES: LOS AUTOCROMOS DE LA GRAN GUERRA DE JULES GERVAIS-COURTELLEMONT.</b> . . . . .	1673
Carmen Rodríguez Pedret	
<b>MIRANDO MADRID. VISIONES DESDE EL CONTORNO DE LA CIUDAD</b> . . . . .	1687
Rocío Santo-Tomás Muro, Eva J. Rodríguez Romero, Carlota Sáenz de Tejada Granados	
<b>THE RADICAL TRAVERSE OF SPACE-TIME IN THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY PICTURESQUE GARDEN</b>	1697
Rebecca J. Squires	

## El mito del sur del Cáucaso: destino de vacaciones de los escritores durante el régimen soviético

### *The Myth of the Caucasian South: Holiday Destination of the Writers during the Soviet Regime*

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#### **Abstract**

El Cáucaso, una región profundamente hermosa y fascinante, donde las altas montañas rodean un lago azul espejo, casi negro. A veces refleja el color oxidado de la toba roja porosa, una piedra que se utilizó en el monasterio armenio que se levanta sobre las rocas de lo que una vez fue una isla.

En la pequeña península que domina el lago armenio de Sevan, subiendo al afloramiento rocoso más alto, se encuentra lo que una vez fue la casa de vacaciones para escritores, un lugar de búsqueda de inspiración, dedicado a una de las profesiones consideradas más estratégicas desde la perspectiva de la propaganda del régimen. Un *balneario*, como se definiría en la tradición occidental, o mejor llamado *dom otdykha*, teniendo en cuenta el tipo de control impuesto por el régimen soviético sobre el tiempo libre, que podría ofrecer un descanso culto, profundamente diferente al del conocido sanatorio proletario.

*Caucasus, a deeply beautiful and fascinating region where the high mountains surround a mirror blue, near black, lake. At times it reflects the rusty color of the red porous tuff, a stone which was used in the Armenian monastery that stands on the rocks of what was once an island.*

*On the small peninsula overlooking the Armenian Lake of Sevan, climbing upon the highest rocky outcrop, there is what was once the holiday home for writers, a place of inspiration research, dedicated to one of the professions considered most strategic from the perspective of the regime's propaganda. A resort, as it would be defined in the western tradition, or better called dom otdykha, bearing in mind the kind of control enforced by the Soviet regime over the free time, which could offer a cultured rest, profoundly different from the well-known proletarian sanatorium.*

#### **Keywords**

Turismo soviético, escritores, *dom otdykha*, lago Sevan, Armenia  
*Soviet tourism, writers, dom otdykha, Sevan Lake, Armenia*

## Introduction

The term ‘tourism’ still indicates an activity of leisure and rest, but to understand the meaning it had in the USSR it becomes necessary to release those aspects connected to the Western meaning that so spontaneously come to mind.

In fact, the soviet tourism indicates an energetic physical recreational activity in which a controlled leisure time and a new imposed daily ritual aimed to transform citizens into a modern industrial force through the regeneration and the rational rest.

The counter-revolutionary implications of leisure put the Soviet Union to face the need of an ideological revision to defuse the anti-socialist pitfalls of traveling as freedom of movement and recreation intended as idleness, gradually defining a tourism that assumed more and more a fundamental role in the realization of government policies.

After the serious economic crisis, caused by the policy of the ‘war communism’ in which the state had assumed total control over the means all production, communication, and exchange, during the years of the Civil War 1918-1921, the beginning of a new historical phase, with the Leninian proposal of the NEP (Novaya Ekonomiceskaya Politika), saw outlining for the first time a series of decrees whose subject was the tourism, within the social Soviet republics. Regime policies thus began to define the tourist flow, frequently covered by ordinances that sought to increase its importance, having recognized its ability to be the cornerstone of state politics as the skilled instrument of ideological control.

So, it is not surprising that the political strategy adopted after Stalin’s death in the period from the 1950s to 1960s under the new leadership of Nikita Chruščëv, first secretary of the Communist Party, focused particularly on the location of cultural activities and tourist centers that became increasingly widespread within the territories of the Soviet Union.

However, it is necessary to define the contours of what was the Soviet tourism introducing a distinction between what in Russian is called *Turizm*, paronym of our word tourism, which considered traveling vigorous and uplifting activity, and that tourism of proper rest, which took the medicalized expression of rehabilitation. The common philosophy underlying the two types of holidays was aimed at leaving no room for bourgeois idleness and unproductive entertainment, typical of imperial Russia. The holiday was then a productive moment, both physically and culturally, due to the ever-present dimension of political activism and far from the typical inactivity of the Western world holiday.

In its second connotation, the Soviet holiday, obliged to the requirements of the regime, makes it compulsory to further differentiate between those which were medical and curative centers, the sanitariums for proletarian workers (*kurort*) and those that were the holiday facilities (*dom otdykha*) intended for a type of rest seized by a certain élite.

This second category was in fact free from the curative aspect and reserved the attention that the regime paid to some representatives of those activities and trades that were considered influential and strategic for the realization of the image of the Soviet regime, especially those associations of creative workers, including writers, architects, and artists, which were created by the Stalinist decree of 1932.

Soviet tourism thus became a fundamental ideological tool capable of generating and allowing to rediscover that identity so strongly sought-after in that new society formed by peoples of many different places, suggesting a strong attachment to the native land and its landscapes each time different.

“Turning to nature”<sup>1</sup> was then one of peculiar aspects of the Soviet culture, although marked by apparent intrinsic tensions (fig. 1).

If nature could in fact be antidote to the modern city and cure for the “diseased of civilization”<sup>2</sup> in its ability to alienate man from urban life becoming refuge from the tight working rhythms of the new socialist society, at the same time it was contradicted by that imperative of transformation, rapid industrialization, and urbanization, which were fundamental pillars of the Soviet socialist project.



Figure 1: Unknown photographer, *Photograph of the entire complex on a foggy day on the lake*, 1965 (National Archive of Armenia, Yerevan).

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<sup>1</sup> Johanna Conterio Geisler, *The Soviet Sanatorium: Medicine, Nature and Mass Culture in Sochi, 1917-1991* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Geisler, *The Soviet Sanatorium...*, 2.

Nature was therefore the solution to the evils of the new socialist man. It is not surprising then that the idealized nature in its ‘wild’ meaning had become the object of desire, close to that Neo-Romantic embrace already part of the Soviet culture. Anyone should then dedicate and devote to nature as a source of spiritual and cultural renewal of the individual, which in a holistic conceptualization would then involve an improvement in physical health, recovering the energies and forces necessary to face the new working years to come.

The romantic socialist approach consequently assumed a cultural function of control of the new modern society, encouraging in everyone that emotional attachment to the irreplaceable homeland and, by extension, to the general Soviet project<sup>3</sup>.

Therefore, landscapes narrated the economic triumphs of the new regime, capable of bending nature according to it will demonstrating its infallibility and at the same time rediscovering in it that feeling of active participation in the construction of the regime to which the new socialist man had to take part.

Thus, among the most prestigious destinations, prerogative of the nomenklatura, was the western shore of Lake Sevan, chosen by the Soviet government for the construction of the holiday home for writers who, with a view to the construction of the socialist project, carried out a very influential activity in the propaganda of the regime itself.

Following the shore of the lake, a narrow isthmus of land connected what was once an island to the north-west coast of the Sevan (fig. 2).



Figure 2: Hovik Charkhachyan, *Photo of the Sevan Island*, 1920 ca. (Private Archive of Hovik Charkhachyan).

<sup>3</sup> Geisler, *The Soviet Sanatorium...*, 14.

The survival of the small atoll was compromised by the ferocious exploitation of the lake's waters during the Soviet period. What is now called the "Sevan problem"<sup>4</sup> has, in fact, defined a completely different coastline over the course of just over 70 years, turning the perched monastery island into a lake-washed peninsula.

At the beginning of 1910, before the Soviets came to power, Armenian engineer Surgias Manasseryan saw the lake's potential water supplies as a key resource for the Armenian economy. The elevation of the basin to the fertile but arid Ararat Valley and the country's limited energy resources were issues of great debate for the engineers dedicated to exploring new methods of intensive exploitation of water, the largest natural resource in this territory.

Considering the water balance, with the evaporation (800 mm/year) far exceeding the direct precipitation (360 mm/year), it seemed possible to use the water not just to irrigate, but also as an energy source for electricity supply, within a cascade hydro-electric system.

The plan proposed in 1910 established lowering the water level by 50 m which would have reduced the evaporation by almost six times leading to a roughly totally dry lake, a small portion of which was left alive - just over 240 km<sup>2</sup> with a volume of 5km<sup>3</sup>, compared to 1416 km<sup>2</sup> and 58 km<sup>3</sup> of the large basin in the early 1900s.

Manasseryan's proposal, made explicit in his paper "The Evaporating Bilions and the Stagnation of Russian Capital"<sup>5</sup>, soon became an important Soviet project supported by the central authorities of Moscow and officially approved by the government of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia.

In 1933 excavation began starting with the riverbed of Hrazdan river, and later of the tunnel that was to pass about 40 m below the high-altitude lake. The 1949 inauguration, delayed due to the outbreak of World War II, was an important achievement of the Socialist era, which saw the level of the lake drastically decline at a speed of more than 1 m/year. The water was used in the irrigation process and exploited within a cascade system formed by numerous hydroelectric power station to produce about 500 million KWh of electricity<sup>6</sup>.

By the end of the 1950s the level of the lake had dropped by 19-20 m and the area had shrunk to 1250 km<sup>2</sup>. The results of the Soviet water exploitation, predicted by the NEP - new economic policy initiated in the spring of 1921 by Vladimir Ilic Lenin, turned out to be catastrophic. But only after the death of J. V. Stalin in 1953 it became apparent what kind of natural disaster was occurring.

A Sevan Committee and ecosystem recovery program was established, based on raising water levels and transforming powerplants from hydroelectric to thermoelectric. In 1962 the water level stabilized at 18 meters below the original altitude (fig. 3), making it essential that the lake's water was protected and rationalized<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Araik Babayan, "Lake Sevan. Experience and Lessons Learned Brief", in *Inlearn (website)*, 30th November 2010, accessed 22nd May 2021, <https://iwlearn.net/resolveuid/6af5017fa3a56bc7b8428f71c100362e>.

<sup>5</sup> Babayan, "Lake Sevan...".

<sup>6</sup> Babayan, "Lake Sevan...".

<sup>7</sup> Françoise Ardiller-Carras and Ashot Khoetsyan, "Lac Sevan (Arménie): des héritages soviétiques aux réalités d'aujourd'hui", *Bulletin de l'Association de géographes français* 82, no. 2 (2005): 199-212.



Figure 3: Unknown photographer, *Summer holiday on the Sevan Lake* (Mediamax 2018), 1974 (Online Archive Mediamax).

In the 1964 the construction of a new tunnel was promoted to draw water from the Arpa River, diverting it to reinvigorate the lake. The engineering intervention soon began to get damaged, hence a second operation led to construction of another tunnel, this time connected to the Vorotan River, which saw no end to its construction until April 2004 due to the serious economic crisis caused by the break-up of the Soviet Union and subsequent conflicts over control of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The issue of the lake and its waters, the exploitation of which has revealed long tongues of sand place of summer tourism and at the same time a symbol of socialist economic triumph, remains open.

What better place then to celebrate the economic success of the regime and what better landscape to dedicate to those writers who had to align themselves with the unwritten norm of a literature celebrating the success of the Soviet Union?

The Sevan with the slow pace of the walks in the high mountains landscape brightened by the morning sun as narrated by Osip Mandel'shtam, or on the thick layer of snow on the shores of the lake, well described that cultured rest intended for writers, whose House of Creativity became so connected to that nature surrounding it, encouraging the sentiment of admiration that closely connected to the new social man to that landscape designed and built by the Soviet Union.



Thus, the beauty of the Caucasus, manipulated and modified in line with the Neo-Romantic Stalinist sentiment at the time, became an instrument of control sustained by one of the most strategic professions in terms of propaganda of the regime.

The nature, described in its transformations, was therefore a system of cultured landscapes to celebrate as a capable of accompanying a healthy mind, a healthy body and consequently a whole series of cultured behaviors, essential to the construction of socialism itself

*Mens sana in corpore sano* or in Russian “в ЗДОРОВОМ ТЕЛЕ, ЗДОРОВОМ ДУХ (Zdorovyy dukh v zdorovom tele)”.

The transformation of the natural environment was part of a larger project of the Stalinist state. By eliminating and replacing swampy and uncultivated lands with cultivated and cared for landscapes it was in fact demonstrated the benefit of socialist ruling over the territory. In the early 1930s the domestication of the landscape and its construction was emphasized, already in the late 1930s there was never any mention of a cultivated nature, but of a primordial and wild world devoid of the influence of the human hand and natural spectacle of that “imperial sublime”<sup>8</sup> that already belonged to the social culture.

The new socialist man had to look at this new monumental and suggestive nature and at the same time be able to find benefit from the aesthetic and sublime pleasure deriving from it: architecture must be thought of in such a way that anyone who rides or walks around it can unwittingly look the place emphasized by its composition.

Therefore, the architecture of the dom for writers, articulated in its two distinct volumes, became a window offering a glance over that body of water through its large openings, able to inspire those sublime feelings so sought after (fig. 4).

The first volume of the 1930s follows the line of the mountain and the guidelines of that early Armenian modernism, close to the experiments conducted during the Muscovite years by the two Armenian architects G. Kochar and M. Mazmanyan. It is divided into a series of roof-terraces facing the opposite shore of the lake placing of colors and reflections, as described in the writings of those who visited the place.

Numerous changes followed on this first volume, perhaps dictated by that sudden lowering of the water level of the lake which determined a new relation between the House of Creativity and the slope and made it necessary to posthumously add two more basal planes, trying to reach the inexorable descent of water.

The 1960s were years of great transformations during which the glazed berceau beside the first volume also found its final form in that large new dining room extended to the waters of the lake. It was a large terrace with an inclined flat roof, outcome of the new architectural season of the second Armenian modernism.

Large openings were still present, as well as a new circular terrace embracing the whole panorama of the lake.

In a continuous exchange, nature entered in the architecture that merged with it, blurring the clear line between inside and outside, between room and landscape. The architecture with its balconies and terraces became indissolubly bounded to the nature around.

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<sup>8</sup> Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism and the Evolution of Soviet Culture 1931-1941* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 180.



Figure 4: Unknown photographer, *Photograph from the lake of the first volume of the 1930s and of the monastic complex of Sevanavank*, 1950 (Archive Mikael Mazmanyanyan).

A way of living that already belonged to the vernacular Caucasian world, made up of gardens that like light wells reached the sky, or even balconies and verandas overlooking to be looked at. The spaces of the Armenian residential architecture were of a type capable of living in the historical architectural inheritance and bridging to the Soviet period: as in the terraces of the House of Creativity which, following the line of the slope down to the lake, became part of the surrounding landscape and at the same time unconscious stopovers from which the visitor could contemplate the spectacle of the nature surrounding it.

A return to types and form and their analogy, their common matrix of shapes, and idea of architecture that repeats itself, albeit layered and modified by experience. And so, we find a terrace protruding on the lake as a continuation of the rooms built in the 1930s, and also a veranda in the large dining room that, despite being more protected, is still facing the surrounding mountain landscape. Spaces paraded and hidden through a series of glances that follow and describe the way of living of the meridian Caucasus.

Exterior and interior are continuously connected. The terrace, the veranda and the covered loggia become the extension of the Armenian rural domestic landscape, belonging to the historical architectural inheritance to which the Soviet period overlapped.

The architecture is a panoramic viewpoint or a simple window, offering those views, sometimes hidden sometimes displayed, that have always belonged to Armenian domestic life, embraced by its surrounding landscapes.

Therefore, there is no longer a clear division between inside and outside, but another space defined, space which Foucault would have called the place of heteropia<sup>9</sup>. In a unique real place several incompatible spaces are juxtaposed, but as no boundaries are defined, they become a whole made of many “A whole series of places that are strangers to each other are realized in the same scene”<sup>10</sup>

The windows and infrastructure are not simply designated to the aesthetic contemplation and perception, but have the intentionality to adhere to the project of the greater Soviet Union.

This is therefore the sublime nature of the South, the object of worship of psycho-physical renewal of the new socialist man: “People get to know the land, the waters, the sky, the plants and the robes; then they know the light of the calm days, the light of rains and thunderstorms; the colors of the sunrises and sunset and know how, for each season, meadows change, and the harvests, the orchards, the woods and the paths, even the animals in the woods and the air. Eventually, they understand the meaning of the landscape, which sometimes has a quick and even annoying motion, and some other is slow and sweet or in other ways”<sup>11</sup> (fig. 5).

The beauty of this connection between architecture and nature was able to inspire a joyful feeling of attachment to the native land and at the same time of emotional participation in the idea of building socialism and the general Soviet design.

This was therefore the view intended for those writers who, especially after the renewed political climate established in the USSR in the late 1950s and the late 1960s, went on to define what in cinema was called the season of the clean skies, or the thaw in literature. A new time aligned with the hopes of the French philosopher J. P. Sartre who condemned “the line of fire”<sup>12</sup> that separate the two cultural realities, the Soviet and the Western, whose only survival could lie solely in their “conflicting unity”<sup>13</sup>. If in fact the objective of the socialist state was the construction of a society based upon a higher human plane, in other words capable of expressing higher values, it could have only been realized eliminating the “defensive reflex of the Soviet culture, which had almost become a *reflection of war*, because if culture is made by men for men, it must be *demilitarized*”<sup>14</sup>.

Therefore, the partial democratization of domestic policy followed by the light reduction of international tension, had, albeit in its limited manifestations, a significant impact on the cultural environment of the country. The iron curtain separating the Soviet Union from the West had been scratched, pointing out the need for interaction with the outside world. One after another, delegations of intellectuals from different countries began to arrive in the USSR (fig. 6), promoting a series of meeting which, although mainly of acknowledgement and letting contacts, were able to leave behind new paths of thoughts.

<sup>9</sup> Marco Vegetti, “La macchina da cura. L’eterotopia ospedaliera di Foucault”, in *Utopiae finis? Percorsi tra utopismi e progetto*, ed. Alessandro De Magistris and Aurora Scotti (Turin: Accademia University Press, 2018), 99-116.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *Utopias. Heterotrophies* (Naples: Cronopio, 2006), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ettore Sottsass, *Per qualcuno può essere lo spazio* (Milan: Adelphi, 2017), 35.

<sup>12</sup> Vieri Quilici, *Architettura sovietica contemporanea* (Bologna: Cappelli Editore, 1965), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “The Cold War and the Unity of Culture”, *Rebirth* (October 1962), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, “Demilitarizing of Culture”, *Rebirth* (July 1962), 12.



Figure 5: Francois Dupuy, *Analogic photograph of the second volume of the 60s. Armenia Lake Sevan*, 2014 ca. (Private Archive Dupuy Francois).

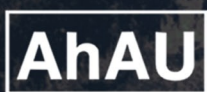


Figure 6: Eduard Topchyan, *Photograph of J. P. Sartre's stay with his wife Simone de Beauvoir on Lake Sevan*, 1963 (Archive Alexander Topchyan).

Thus, many intellectual, guest of the House of Creativity on the lake, visited the landscapes of the Soviet Armenia giving us some of the most evocative descriptions of that sublime nature of the South, able to rediscover that feeling of national identity of that new reality that the Soviet Union was with its nine different time zones.

El paisaje es hoy un tema crucial en el debate arquitectónico, urbanístico, artístico, territorial, político, ecológico y antropológico. En la pregunta sobre qué es un paisaje se entrecruzan muchas de las grandes cuestiones que tienen que ver con la construcción y con la percepción de nuestro entorno, en un momento determinado por una crisis global que convierte a la mirada sobre nuestro hábitat en un asunto marcado por la urgencia. La centralidad del paisaje en la cultura contemporánea es un fenómeno tan reconocido que ha dado lugar a elaboraciones teóricas específicas tendentes a dar cuenta del mismo. Está claro que hoy las cuestiones relacionadas con el paisaje, en su sentido más amplio, constituyen uno de los núcleos conceptuales en los que en mayor medida se entrecruzan naturaleza, cultura, historia y contemporaneidad.

La complejidad y variedad de temas que el paisaje convoca solo puede abordarse desde una mirada transversal y desde la complementariedad de diferentes saberes y disciplinas. Tal fue el objetivo que se propuso el Congreso Internacional *Arquitectura y paisaje: transferencias históricas, retos contemporáneos*, celebrado en Granada del 26 al 28 de enero de 2022, cuyas aportaciones se recogen en el presente volumen.



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