

Architecture and Place: Teaching and Research Experiences in the Higher Technical College of Architecture of the University of Granada

Antonio García Bueno and Karina Medina Granados

Abstract The concept of place and feeling to the place, have changed over time and different cultural movements. Nowadays, in the new information, ecology and sustainability age, we want to create osmotic relationship between architecture and nature. When starting a new project, we must begin with a thorough knowledge of the environment and landscape, which involves identifying its constituent elements, their foreign references as well as the evolutionary and historical processes that have affected its configuration. This complex process should start from its own essence, which involve natural and cultural, tangible and intangible components. These elements have to be considered for study. They influence on their character and forms of perception. This work is part of a research and teaching experience, which is being conducted with students of architecture from different courses. Landscape and environment research is essential for the intrinsic value that they possess from the cultural point of view as a dynamic and complex reality where live many factors whose research can lead to interesting conclusions about the balance between architecture and place.

Keywords Place · Environment · Landscape

The concept of place and the sensitisation towards it have changed over time and across the different cultural movements. In Ancient Rome there was the belief that all independent beings had their *genius*, the *genius loci*, the protective spirit of the place.¹

¹A specific text on the evolution of the concepts of space and place is the one by Josep Maria Montaner, 1994. "Ensayo sobre arquitectura moderna y lugar" [Essay on modern architecture and place]. BAETSA, 18:4–11.

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Awareness about this such as it is understood in the present day, however, did not come about until the first half of the 20th century, when organic architecture paid special attention to the relationship of the discipline with this idea.

Under the new age of information, ecology and sustainability of our time, it involves creating osmotic relationships between architecture and nature. In recent times, a patrimonial character has been attributed to the landscape (natural and urban) as a morphological, functional and symbolic expression of both historical and modern relationships between society and surroundings.

The purpose of this communication is not to go over the various hypotheses formulated by philosophers and architects on space and place throughout history. It involves putting forward an experience carried out by Architectural Graphic Expression students from the Higher Technical College of Architecture of the University of Granada, in which the study of place as a conditioning factor for the origin, development and evolution of an architectural typology plays a crucial part.

1 Architecture and Place

When undertaking a new project, it is necessary to start from an exhaustive knowledge of surroundings and landscape, which means identifying their constituent elements, their external references, and their evolutionary and historical processes that have had an influence on their configuration.

This complex process must start from its essence, in which natural and cultural, material and immaterial, and tangible and intangible components are involved which, given that its character and different forms of perception are the result of the combination of these, have to be taken into account for study.

As indicated by relevant authors in the study of place, these are defined by the qualities of their elements, their symbolic, social and historical values and for their phenomenological relationship with the human body. This relationship of humans with their surroundings constitutes an instinctive habitat that is impossible to ignore.

In vernacular architecture, all of these elements can be clearly appreciated. As indicated in the Charter of the Built Vernacular Heritage (International Council on Monuments and Sites 1999), this is the fundamental expression of the identity of a community, as well as its relationships with the land, forming an integral part of the cultural landscape. This, together with its materials, structure, spaces, and its way of being utilised and interpreted, should mark the guidelines for action in these places.

The reason behind the choosing of this work is precisely the involvement and complexity that a possible action would have in this environment.

If any habitat is going to survive, it must evolve and adapt to the new times, to which it is essential for us to introduce elements of a contemporary nature in a harmonious way that contribute to its enrichment. For this task, the research of landscape and surroundings is crucial for the intrinsic value they hold from a

cultural and architectural point of view. It involves a dynamic and complex reality where multiple factors coexist, whose study could result in interesting conclusions regarding balance between architecture and place.

Through this experience, there is an attempt at proposing a starting point, to orientate students in the study of place, and to carry out both morphological and phenomenological research of the same via graphic and written approaches, and other architectural language resources.

2 The Importance of Landscape Study

The basic objective put forward is to debate about the analysis of place and surroundings, and the vision held by the student of *genius loci*, via a series of approaches to place.

Defining or describing landscapes is a difficult task that fluctuates between various currents. It has a noticeable polysemic character that reflects its social and natural diversity. We must understand this polysemy as a tool for research and knowledge.

Article 1 of the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe 2000) makes the following definition: “*Landscape* shall be understood as a part of the land as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.”

If we understand urban settlements as a social construct taking place in time, we may say that the current landscape shows us the territorial morphology and structure of the city, at the same time as it explains to us the different stages and vicissitudes that have occurred over its historical process. The landscape should be understood as a space that is lived in and used by humans, where footprints of their avatars are printed. It is essentially dynamic and the result of a number of societal interventions that have been developing it. This allows us to identify a series of characteristics and fluxes that, through their study, provide knowledge of the medium and its history.

In the case of historical cities, the importance of identity possessed by the landscape is very noticeable. As a creation of the human society that interacts with the nature that surrounds it, and of which it forms part, in a historical landscape we can see images that refer to the past and superimpose themselves on the present.

3 Landscape and Architecture. Multiscalar Study

Architecture as an element of the urban landscape is intimately linked to it, together with its territorial surroundings. Therefore, in order to study it and its environment it is extremely useful to call on a multiscalar approach that overlaps the different landscapes, and helps in our understanding. The analysis of the different scales of

landscape, together with the significant elements in each one of these, lends meaning to the study of surroundings and place.

Three levels will be defined in the study:

The first, territorial context, understood as a physical-natural support with a number of economic-cultural characteristics. The general sense of the action, its geographical location, social organisation, nodes, nuclei, networks, etc. will be studied through this.

Secondly, the urban scale conditioned by location, where connections and internal relationships are investigated. This analysis will reveal empty and full spaces, the public and the private, limits and boundaries, etc.

Lastly, the third level: the detail. This stage will involve the study of public space as a crucial and model element that encapsulates social and urban history, impregnated with a great patrimonial value. Elements such as the distribution and proportion between free and constructed spaces, their typologies, transversal profiles, textures, hierarchies, landmarks of interests, focal points, etc. amongst many others, will help in the understanding and development of those elements that provide them with identity and meaning.

All of this information will be compiled and represented graphically, although it will be of little interest if it is not interpreted and evaluated. For an effective analysis it will be necessary to carry out an exercise to synthesise the basic information and reorganise it within a value system.

4 The Case of Sacromonte

In the city of Granada we have a unique settlement, Sacromonte, where nature is colonised, with an organic structure intrinsic to the land. A site outside the city walls, where urban borders are diluted. A place where the sacred, the cultural and the picturesque coexist in an attractive blend, constituting a site that doubles as a viewpoint that takes in the Alhambra, the valley of the River Darro, the city, the fertile plain and the Sierra Nevada mountain range. For all of these reasons it was considered a good example with a high teaching capacity in terms of study and analysis of the place and its relationships with the surroundings.

We start from the hypothesis that to study the place, this cannot be done just by looking, it must be lived as well as seen. The place means living it, speaking about it, acting within it... A first contact with the surroundings is proposed from the point of view of the inhabitant. To do this a meeting is organised with the purpose of getting to know the daily flow and activities generated in the neighbourhood. Furthermore, an appointment is made with a representative of the area, such as the president of the residents' association, to obtain testimony of the concerns, preferences, lifestyles, etc. produced in the area being studied.

Table 1 Matrix with intrinsic elements and the environment that affect the place being studied

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Intrinsic analysis	Great landscape value Sustainable habitat Historical heritage	Very vulnerable Uncontrolled growth
	Opportunities	Threats
Environment analysis	Tourism City view	Staging

Via the testimony of this person, we can verify that a combination of processes and values are produced in the place, which imply opportunities and limitations for its inhabitants.

Students are asked to construct a matrix containing the premises to be taken into account when undertaking an analysis, considering both the elements that are intrinsic to the place and the environmental factors that affect it. To do so the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are shown. There is an identification of those elements that offer protection and those that are hostile, as well as those that are beneficial and vulnerable (Table 1).

To maintain these values, the essence of the place must remain. Positive aspects must be preserved, and weaknesses and threats transformed into opportunities.

Following this first contact, where students have had a first experience in the place, become aware of the social aspects and drawn a number of initial conclusions on the most relevant study aspects, the origins and history of the settlement will be studied. In order to do this a specific bibliography will be used, and graphic documentation will be analysed.

We analyse the first graphic references of Sacromonte and its caves on the Vico platform.² Then, on the Dalmau plan and then on the Contreras plan, a window appears on the corner with Sacromonte on a larger scale.

Other relevant documents are the texts of the romantic writers in the 18th century, which bear witness to the dynamic context of the era, where they describe its inhabitants, their customs and professions.

Once its origin and evolution are understood, a series of plans are elaborated in which the continuous change of scale produced in this habitat is taken into account. From the greatness of the landscape, to the cramped cave; from the strips of vegetation to the prickly pear, from the abrupt morphology of the terrain to the small plateau... Because of this a multiscale study has been carried out where the most representative elements of each category have been evaluated, using the gradient to show the different levels produced.

²Print of the city of Granada made by the architect Ambrosio de Vico in the 16th century.

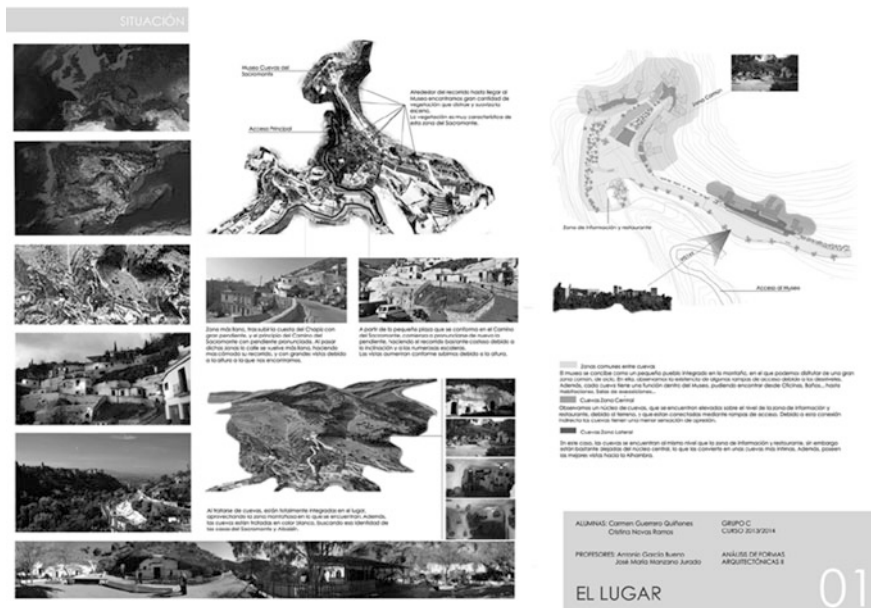


Fig. 1 Guerrero Quiñones, Carmen and Navas Ramos, Cristina. (2014) *Situación y emplazamiento del Museo Cuevas del Sacromonte*. [Location and site of the Cuevas de Sacromonte Museum]

To do so, we use the method of preferences. We identify the main value and represent it; then we continue with the secondary and tertiary values until the representation of the combination reveals the *intrinsic aptitudes* of the place.³

Work is started on the smallest scale, undertaking an initial plan with the geographical surroundings, where we can include their topography, geomorphology and hydrology, together with all of those natural or urban agents that deserve attention, appropriate for this scale. A stratification of cultural, urban, natural and scenic values and attributes is carried out.

In general, the bigger the area studied, the more pronounced the limits. However, as the scale approaches reality, the discontinuities are less noticeable (Fig. 1).

The long configuration of the River Darro and its valley organise the site in a long strip that runs along it. Its constructions are protected amongst the relief, and nature thus becomes the protagonist. They oblige one to approach the place to be able to capture images of their silhouettes.

As previously mentioned, at this level it is about studying territorial context in a physical-natural support and with a number of economic-cultural characteristics.

Because of this it is interesting to make a small mention of the socio-economic situation of the neighbourhood.

³Concept addressed by McHarg ([1992] 2000).

It is depopulated, abandoned in the 60s due to a natural disaster. In 1962 and 1963, there were a number of floods that forced its evacuation, contributing to abandonment and deterioration of the landscape of this historically much valued settlement. It transformed into “what Denis Wood calls ‘shady spaces’—those hidden, marginal, uncontrolled places where the people can allow themselves to engage in behaviours prohibited elsewhere, without hurting others—threatened on a regular basis by clean-ups and which, nevertheless, constitute a need for a flexible society.” (Lynch and Southworth [1990] 2005, 38). In this posthumous work by Kevin Lynch, in which he invites us to think about the exhaustion and deterioration of the city, our attention is especially drawn to these *back* places, used by few people, where things are neither in order nor presentable, but highly expressive. “Professional planners know that these are the places that must be observed if one is going to get to know an area... They have the simplicity and easiness of well-established customs and familiar use. In many famous cities, these parts are not just revealing to the investigating eye, they also offer longer-lasting pleasures, if we stop being tourists”. (Lynch and Southworth [1990] 2005, 38). This text recalls the situation that has been lived in this settlement outside the city, and which for a number of decades has been undergoing a process of rediscovery by present day society. There is a socio-economic turn where new inhabitants, attracted by this cave-dwelling and picturesque habitat, are searching for a sustainable dwelling and an alternative lifestyle to that in the city. However, leisure and tourism are offering a distorted image of its historical and patrimonial importance, being transformed by a series of external demands that could endanger the harmony of the landscape.

At the second level of study, the urban scale, we appreciate how the curves of level draw the street plan. Narrow paths with steep and irregular gradients that, making use of the topography, widen to form small plateaus where viewpoints towards the landscape are formed, and we find the cave-dwellings, providing a high value to the site. From here you can appreciate how the relationship of the place with the surrounding landscape is crucial in order to understanding life in the area. “From the moment we’re born we try to orientate ourselves in the surroundings and establish a certain order in the same. A common order is called culture” (Norberg-Schulz 1972, 16).

The native environment studied has generated in this setting a culture that is unique in the world. The inhabitants interact with it, taking possession of the place and the landscape they live in. Kevin Lynch, in “The image of the city” (1984), explains how an *effective environmental image* orientates the inhabitant, providing him or her with emotional security. This explains the importance of the existence of elements of reference in the landscape, such as the Alhambra monument, the city and the fertile plain or *vega*.

But these topographic gradients characterise the area and make viewpoints possible, those of a more fragile nature. Any inclusion off-scale could mean an exogenous and overwhelming element. An analysis of its silhouette, texture and border therefore acquires importance.

Its silhouette is defined by two elements: a surrounding line that often becomes blurred with the topography; and its protruding elements, vents and chimneys,

which mark a rhythm that alludes to the anatomy of the setting. On other occasions, this line is perceived as a white fringe made up of limestone façades (Figs. 2 and 3).

The texture of the landscape at this scale is uniform; the caves blend into the vegetation.

The border is made up of the landscape itself, the morphology of the land.

For the work at the third and final scale, the detail, the public space of the Cuevas del Sacromonte Museum has been analysed.

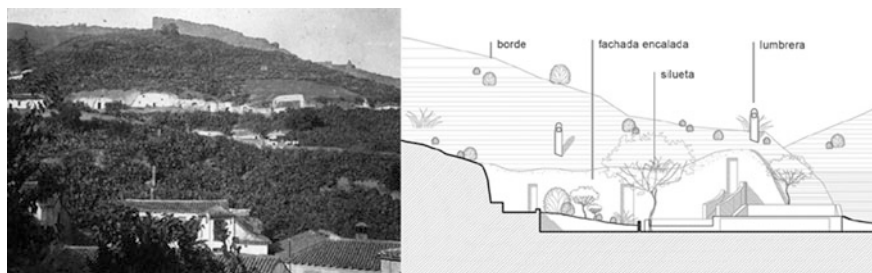


Fig. 2 Different elements that characterise this settlement. Riches, Paul. (1903) *Quartier Des Gitanes* [Photograph]. Board of the Alhambra and Generalife. Recovered from: <http://www.alhambra-patronato.es/ria/handle/10514/13487?show=full>. García, A. and Medina, K. (2015) *Sección* [Section]

SIGNIFICADOS ARQUITECTÓNICOS		RELACIONES ENTRE SIGNIFICADOS		ASOCIACIONES DE SIGNIFICADOS	
<p>Significado Asociativo El espacio está organizado en las cuevas primitivas por su forma y situación.</p>	<p>Significado Asociativo El espacio está organizado en las cuevas primitivas por su forma y situación.</p>	<p>Relación de Posición TENDENCIAS MULTILES</p> <p>BONDAS DE CAJÓN IRREGULARES</p>	<p>Asociaciones intrínsecas ASOCIACIONES INTRÍNICAS CONCRETAS</p> <p>Asociaciones intrínsecas Asociaciones intrínsecas concretas por su estructura.</p>		
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Análisis Semántico

Fig. 3 Pérez Pulido, Laura and Dávila Ponce de León, María Jesús. (2014) *Análisis Semántico* [Semantic Analysis]

Dialectics between the different elements that comprise the environment are sought. The search for dialogue between elements of a different nature, such as vegetation and buildings, near and far elements, is stimulated.

In this type of settlement, public space is formed by a number of plateaus, marked by a strong position of identity. In these areas, the gradients are moderate, forming an area of level ground that differentiates it from the rest of the complex, becoming natural balconies towards the Alhambra (Fig. 4). They are areas with great views and whose spectacular vantage points have made this landscape unique, in turn blending into the private space, dissolving its limits.

The creation of a digital model of this space allows us to carry out a formal analysis and make visible important elements in the assessment of the habitat and the sensations provoked.

Daily life can be appreciated in the *plazas* or squares. We identify it as an *open private square*, Gordon Cullen (1974, 98). Its domestic scale, in a quiet neighbourhood far from the city, in a natural landscape and in which a transition between

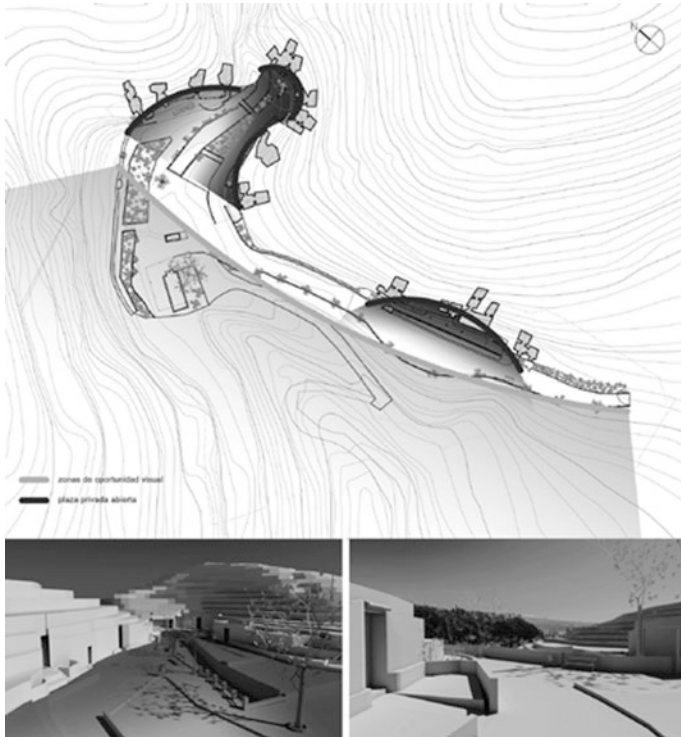


Fig. 4 García, A. and Medina, K. (2015) *Esquema en planta y fotos de maqueta de la placeta.* [Diagram and mockup photos of plateau]



Fig. 5 García, A. and Medina, K. (2015). *Vista de placeta [View of plateau]* 18th century print (1985) *Cueva Del Sacromonte [Sacromonte Cave]*. [Print] Board of the Alhambra and Generalife. Recovered from <http://www.alhambra-patronato.es/ria/handle/10514/309?show=full>



Fig. 6 García, A. and Medina, K. (2015) *Fotomontaje dualidad intimidad-libertad [Photomontage privacy-freedom duality]*

nature, public and private space is produced (Fig. 5). The open space becomes an enclosure, its inhabitant feels identified, and detail can start to be perceived, together with elements arising from human activity.

Domestic functional utensils acquire structural fortitude, drawing the observer's attention and becoming ornamental elements over the land. A land whitewashed and with a purpose; to shelter and protect its inhabitants. When one accesses this type of hypogeum, the sensation is of enclosure and seclusion in the interior, but upon going outside into the landscape the sense of freedom felt by inhabitants is reaffirmed (Fig. 6).

Erosion and the passing of time increase the expressiveness in the textures. Dirt is deposited in the exposed higher surfaces, provoking a lighting effect from below that dramatises the details. The hidden structures start to show. The rain scratches the surface. There is an increase in the differences in tonality and grain. All of these details tell a story (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7 García, A. and Medina, K. (2015) *Fotografías de texturas* [Photographs of textures]

5 Conclusions

This work is a sequential study of the place in order to know it and understand it as an interactive system, where the fundamental characteristic consists in nature, more than a setting, being the main component of the scene, defining its visual structure.

There is an attempt at creating a series of guidelines for future analyses and interventions in cultural landscapes with great historical and morphological importance.

- *The landscape* is constituted with the action of the society on the physical media that it inhabits, to which historical changes come about thanks to those who are able to establish the first stages of its creation and evolution.
- *Preserve* does not mean maintain; there must be evolution in accordance with new social demands, in a balanced and harmonious way, where the values obtained are continued and others can be added. This means understanding, valuing and respecting the surroundings and the genius loci of the place.
- *The relationship between humans and nature* is not resolved with the former using nature as a pretty decoration for their lives; it must be considered as protection and origin; it must be learnt from and, above all, rediscovered as a source of meaning in itself (McHarg [1992] 2000).
- *Places are dynamic, they have a function and development.* The study of these is crucial to a harmonious evolution amongst the different elements that compose and identify them. Via research and experimentation we can find keys to avoid their transformations being traumatic, and for them to come about in a balanced way. It is fundamental to live them through looking, walking, smelling, touching, listening...

- *Architecture should show itself to be intrinsic to the place.* There should be a total integration within the natural structure of the landscape and the creation of a complete environment to be experienced and lived in by humans.

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