

# Landscapes of the Dispersed City-Region

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## INTRODUCTION

*The way city regions have developed over recent decades appears to augur an overall transformation in our evaluation of space.*

—Angel Martín

Issues at the scale of landscape exert a significant influence on urban and architectural design of cities and urban settlements on multiple levels: from ecological to socio-political to formal. The influence is so pronounced that Paris-based urbanist Christian de Villars has proposed a theoretical function of landscape architecture. He suggests that landscape should be considered the founding discipline of the triad, based on the *projet*, that includes architecture and urban design.<sup>1</sup> The workshop, or *Taller*, titled, *Transformations of the populated area, the landscapes of the social foundation*, held at the cultural centre *Arteleku* can be regarded as an instance of this approach, emerging in the design arena of architecture and urbanism in France, Spain, Italy, Portugal; where architectural propositions derive from an understanding of the characteristics of landscape and city regions at the scale of the territory.

The six-week long workshop, directed by Angel Martín, Professor of Urbanism at the School of Architecture in Barcelona, took place in Loiola, a suburb of San Sebastian in autonomous Basque territory of northern Spain. Martín introduced the topic to the participants, selected a series of speakers and structured the design research. The participants, a group of sixteen architects and five artists (working in photography, graphic design, digital media, etc.) examined the relation between the landscape morphology of the Urumea - Oria river valley system extending from the network of urban and rural settlements from the coast along the valleys some 60 kilometres into the mountains, an area with a population of about 500,000. The study investigated existing and proposed development, particularly large scale and infrastructural in nature, in the suburban corridors connecting the urban cores. The workshop not only analyzed and critiqued but also proposed design schemes. It was an opportunity to conduct design research with the aim to identify and formulate possible urban propositions in the region, and to draft spatial proposals. However, with no commissioning agent, one unanswered question was how to use the range of proposals generated by the design teams.

In this paper several engaging proposals are discussed as a follow-up to the intense, productive activity of the workshop. The proposals generally observe how suburban space appears incomplete, whether in a formative state or merely under-designed. These areas are not necessarily destined to become more densely occupied, to reach the status of urban space. Remaining at low densities, suburban areas tend to lack in structure and offer inconsistent services, as well as a scarcity of overall publicly-oriented design. These conditions contribute to the sense of placelessness and lowered perceived value that is typically associated with the diffuse city. Yet these suburban areas with their

spatial looseness are sites of economic growth: the preferred location for emerging dynamic small industries. The design solutions acknowledge the specificity of the suburban quality of built urban form: such aspects as a fragmented, discontinuous nature, simple components and open-ness, while proposing solutions which refine, diversify, intensify, or render the areas more coherent and ecologically or functionally responsive.

## ADDRESSING THE DIFFUSE CITY TENDENCY

The workshop argued that the mobility of inhabitants and the de-urbanized, relatively arbitrary location of recent larger scaled developments are two factors in the creation of a new diffused urbanization.<sup>2</sup> The area of study selected diffuse settlements in a corridor beginning at the coast and stretching up first the Urumea river valley, and then the Oria river valley, to the mountains where a cluster of towns such as Beasain and Segura are located. The distance represents a travel path of a daily commute.

A series of talks by invited speakers introduced the range of contemporary theoretical premises on which the workshop was based. They identified globalization as a key influence in the changing patterns of urban settlements. Giuseppe Dematteis, professor of urban geography at the Polytécnico de Turin, used schemas to describe the changing relationships between outlying suburban settlements. For Dematteis, the era of the radial city has passed. Now movement shows the stronger links between peripheries in terms of exchange of goods, commercial travel, interchange between productive small industries, etc.<sup>3</sup> This applies to the territory under study: San Sebastian, an aristocratic resort town, is of minor commercial relevance to its own industrial region.

Nuno Portas, professor at the Faculty of Architecture, Porto, outlined a recent urban logic using a vocabulary of terms describing a contemporary developing diffuse city as a mosaic, nebula, or labyrinth, to explain its discontinuous linear and nodal character. For example, an autoroute works spatially as if it were a tunnel; the characteristic node is located at a highway off-ramp. He recommended creating flexible urban planning tools such as variable regulation for a developing industrial city. Using Porto as a case of a particularly discontinuous city, both spatially and economically, he identified potential sites of urban development emerging from micro-industries in the local textile trade.

Bernardo Secchi, professor of urbanism at the *Istituto Universitario di Architettura de Venezia* presented a recent design project which used a sequence of open public natural landscapes to complete the urban amenities of a small Italian town.<sup>4</sup> Mario Gandelsonas of Princeton University spoke on the relation between popular American culture, as represented by mass media, and contemporary architectural and urban design tendencies. Edward W. Soja of the University of California, Los Angeles, discussed globalization as an influence at the macro-level. Using a term that echoes Françoise Choay's *le post-urbain*, he suggested that in

this *post metropolitan* era, a continuous process of re-industrialization jumbles urban and suburban settling patterns. His discourse used Los Angeles as a spatial model for places where small dynamic new light industry, characterized by flexibly specialized production, congregates in suburban industrial sites. The new clusters lead to new agglomerations which re-shape the city according in poly-centric terms.<sup>5</sup>

Globalization of capital has instant far-reaching effects, including the Guggenheim phenomenon in Bilbao, now considered globally successful contemporary architecture. Arguably there has been a limited immediate large-scale effect on the San Sebastian urban area, whose conservative nineteenth-century downtown effectively resisted even McDonalds fast food outlet until October 2000. Still the recent *Kursaal* by architect Rafael Moneo is an effective, evocative insertion of contemporary glass architecture on a stunning waterfront pier, set into the traditional stone urban fabric of San Sebastian. Few of the invited speakers were familiar with the Basque region. The *Taller* was an opportunity to learn about the specificity of Basque territory, landscape and culture of its inhabitants - in particular an historic culture of resistance. This has protected the region somewhat from the post-urban metropolis. Still, contemporary cities and particularly the diffuse city, import forms from the metropolis. One of the aims of workshop was to generate new ideas about built form at the urban and landscape scale conceived to recognize, improve and even embellish the reality of the mobile, diffuse cityscape.

### THE SPECIFICITY OF THE TERRITORY

The Urumea-Oria river valley system displays pronounced topography typical of Basque country, becoming more exaggerated in mountains. The countryside is punctuated with sheer rock faces. Steep slopes form long, irregular continuous ridges. Vernacular Basque architecture and urbanism traditionally make pragmatic and inventive use of slope, locating structures on a wide range of sites.



figure 1 Basque country landscape

One effect of the steep hillsides and winding roads is the perception of the city as a picturesque labyrinth. One finds ingenious bridging and sloping construction in the vernacular built form and in the infrastructure to navigate the discontinuous slopes. Another phenomenon is a prototypical stacking of public urban, suburban or rural systems: public transit passing over freight train lines over pedestrian and vehicular road system. Roads leading to the ridge high points often are constructed on concrete bridges, the undersides of which serve as parking. The undersides of the expressway become places of leisure during rainy and sunny weather, or at siesta time.

The topography has led to a tendency to locate factory and commercial centre projects at larger, regional scales on the valley bottom, alongside the highway. Super-flat big box-type sites are rare, for except along coastal plateaux, as level ground is scarce. Another tendency has been for industrial and larger scaled developments to locate adjacent to the river, consuming arable land on the most fertile flood plains.

### LANDSCAPE AND METHOD OF WORK

The workshop addressed first the whole region, participants working collectively over the full breadth of the territory, examining the dispersed city corridors, built-up areas located in valley systems and the linear settlements, strips and nodes, outside of the historic, dense urban centres of San Sebastian, Hernani, Tolosa, Ordizia, etc. After three weeks they concentrated on particular sites. One-third of the participants were native to the Basque territory and brought the group to events which structure daily life: markets on particular days of the week, regular monthly events, the seasonal street fair and fiesta. These events demonstrate a coherence and permanence of traditional agriculture-based Basque civilization and testify to its resistance to global metropolitan mono-culture.

### PROPOSALS FOR THE TERRITORY

Proposals responded to individual synthesis in response to empirical observation, statistical data, and an inventory of major new urban and regional developments such as the new high-speed train or TGV station location, and the construction of a new regional expressway south of the existing regional A8 autoroute.

The nature of the proposals fell into the several categories of scale and were either linear or sectional in nature. At the scale of the settlement cluster, one approach was the analysis and proposition for a large coherent territory. Clara Eslava (Spain, Pamplona) developed a mapping exercise as a method to conserve the specific rural landscape headland of coastal/port territory between Irun and the port of Pasajes, without limiting reasonable economic growth. Similarly, Monica del Arenal (Mexico) worked with the large area to the south of San Sebastian, designated as the zone for new expressway corridor, and attractive to new development for a number of reasons. This area now contains a significant art park preserving a large body of work by sculptor Eduardo Chillida, the *Chillida-leku*, and its technological park will be likely to expand in size and importance. This areas faces the most intense pressure to urbanize.

A more focused example of this approach identified an embryonic urban node, and developed a collective urban space with a specifically public character. Working as a team, Ayelet Nahary (Israel) and Cedric van Laer (Belgium) located a central zone where two autoroutes, N1 and A8 almost converge, and between them enclose and define a key spatial configuration forming a crux with two commercial centres, on the perimeter of Renteria. The area needed structured public space bridging residential and commercial functions. The axial location of the two major commercial centres location needs urban repair. The area lacked a richness both in new building types and open space shaped by public structures to reach its potential as a new urban node.

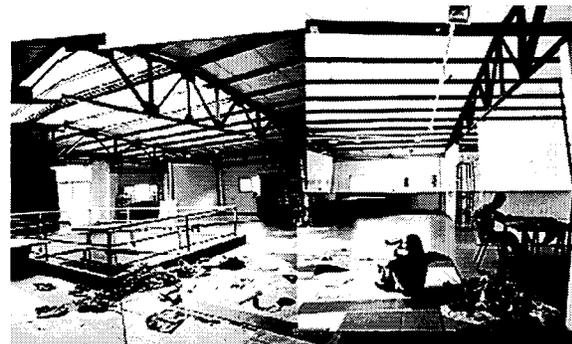


figure 2 Ayelet Nahary, Cedric van Laer, working adjacent to larged scale site model by Monica del Arenal.

A second kind of approach used a linear scheme to define and limit urban growth. Elisa Battezzato (Italy) designed a new road prototype whose character incorporates a limiting device for development control, using controlled views and use of the adjacent ground.

Ibon Salaberria (Spain, Gipuzkoa) proposed an infrastructure for river valley development. He viewed the tidal Urumea river as a series of spatial islands. His project proposed to connect and protect the riverside territory. His proposal concentrates the transport infrastructure, lifting travel off of the ground and preserving grade level, allowing the fertile soil to be cultivated by a population traditionally skilled in agriculture.

The scenario for an intensive new built form typology, a hybrid of landscape, infrastructure, architecture, technology and engineering must sit more sensitively on the land than the precedent of the megastructure.

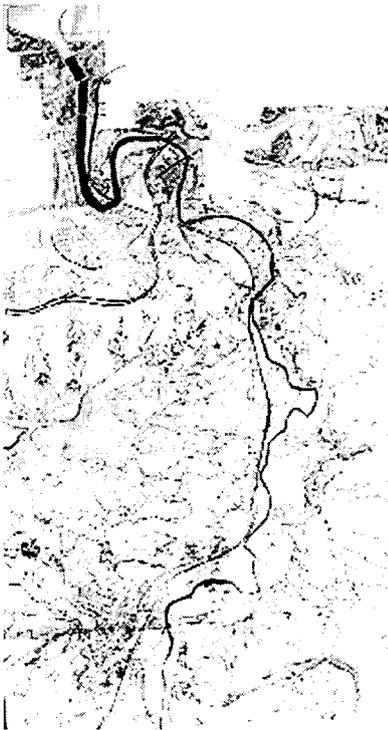


figure 3 Linear river analysis, drawing by Ibon Salaberria

A similar proposal by Helena Garcia Perez (Spain, Canarias) and Koldo Telleria Andueza (Segura/Bilbao), proposed a linear urban infrastructural strip of intense development that would bundle systems comprehensively (electrical, communications, collective transport, water, sewer) maintain rural character even installed in rural contexts. In a similar, more analytical approach, Iñaki Arbelaz (Spain, Renteria) proposed a morphological classification of settlements in the landscape as a system of elongated linear plates.

A hybrid proposal by Juan Luis Rivas Navarro (Granada) examined a comprehensive restructuring of the Andoin nexus, and proposed interventions high in the landscape as visual points of reference. Another example of a hybrid project, proposing new linear public space, transformation of existing infrastructure and outlining a new urban block system on under-occupied land adjacent to Loiola was drawn up by Marie-Paule Macdonald (Canada). The first phase recognized the structuring role played by the Urumea river potentially as a continuous park. The tidal waterway is already used as for rowing practice, and the river edge is cultivated in small plots. The sinuous form of the river prompted a consideration of a direct trajectory. Suspension footbridges at regular intervals, could cross the river repeatedly and overlay a linear path system. A series of light pedestrian and bicycle bridges

would set up quick direct lines traversing the suburban space from Loiola to San Sebastian. The obvious pedestrian/bicycle shortcut includes a crossing to connect the park *Cristina Enea* with nearby Loiola.

Another aspect of the proposal created a gateway from suburb to city, to articulate the road leading into San Sebastian, and transform the existing elevated expressway. This structure is slated for replacement by the construction of a new autoroute to the south. At the entrance to the *Egia* district on the southeast edge of San Sebastian, the autoroute passes through a tunnel set on a south-facing hillside designated as a park, *Lau Haizeta*, and crosses high over the river next to the bridge *Puerta Sarasola*, creating a node of significant landscape features.

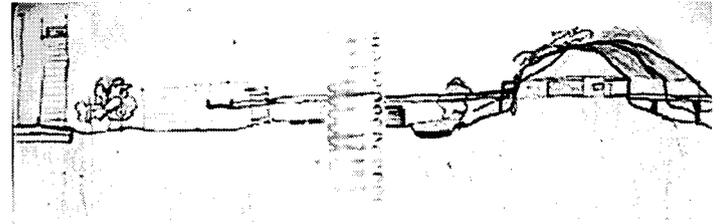


figure 4 Site sketch section showing elevated A8 autoroute over Urumea River, and through tunnel at Puente Sarasola.

This conjunction, already regularly traversed by pedestrians, becomes an articulated entrance with new public space. The point at the north river end of the road *Sierra del Aralar* is now a collective space since the construction of a rowing club under the concrete structure. The modern building by architect Iñaki Begiristain uses the underside of the expressway as ceiling for a *fronton* court and rowing practice pool; its location beside the river capitalizes on the potential of the site for rowing and river based sporting activity.

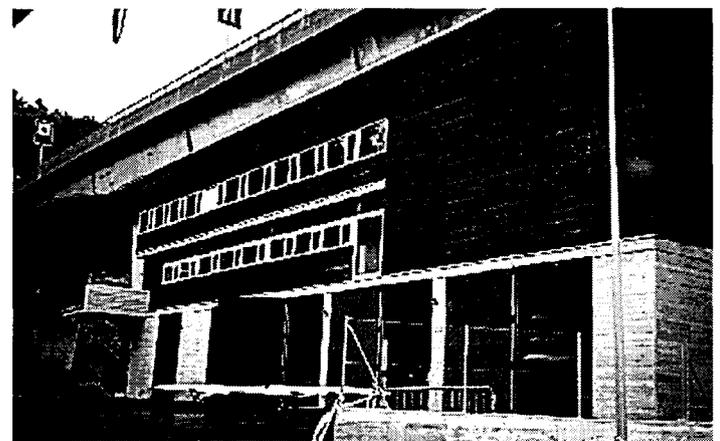


figure 5 New rowing club below elevated A8 autoroute, architect Iñaki Begiristain.

The scenario proposes to retain one tunnel for vehicular traffic, and transform the other tunnel into public space, use the interior of the tunnel as pedestrian way and for events requiring sun/rain protection - cinema, sports, fiesta.

The proposal recognized the public significance of the school and residence, *La Salle*, sited on a high point of a ridge, a landmark poised between the dispersed city and the historic core. A local transit train passes below the building in a tunnel beneath the site. Adjacent, the expressway runs too close, almost surrounding the institution to the west, south and east of the south wing of the building. A vehicle/pedestrian tunnel is located in the vertical section. Here the A8 expressway creates a public nuisance as it channels a steady stream of industrial truck traffic, noise and exhaust through inhabited areas.

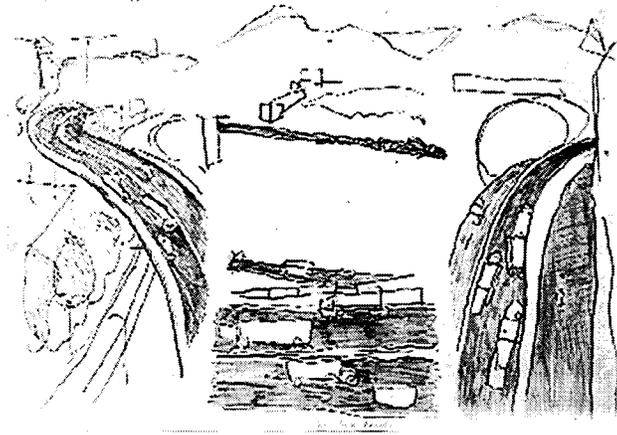


figure 6 Triptych showing existing A8 autoroute surrounding La Salle school; Proposed atelier building type and elevated structure

The proposal transforms the most poorly located segment, and suggests a use for the expressway once it is replaced by the new regional autoroute to the south. The proposal intends to close one leg and remove its concrete structure completely, while transforming the remaining leg into a two-way traffic local elevated road. This eliminates some of approach roads, which are replaced by a set of urban blocks incorporating light industrial uses. Plugged into the top of the reused concrete expressway structure is a new building type derived from the ateliers found in the area, with a working truck dock and yard area at the base. An artisanal fabrication tradition in local architecture provides examples of ateliers both current and disused: buildings with large collective rooms and adjacent yards connected to multiple levels, and innovative spatial programmatic forms. The block system is set at a scale drawn from the older city, with dimensions deriving from the *Parte Vieja*; small blocks of less than 50 metres in length, and including a system of urban spaces, one of which would use the proportions of the *Plaza de la Constitution*, 50 x 35 metres. Other new insertions at a larger contemporary scale would include commercial towers, oriented to frame vistas of major landscape reference points, positioned on a plinth in the manner of the miesian office tower complex. The plinth would be traversed by the pedestrian/bicycle path system to provide an additional collective space, following an existing ramped precedent in San Sebastian, and to connect the new urban fabric with the cluster of towns.

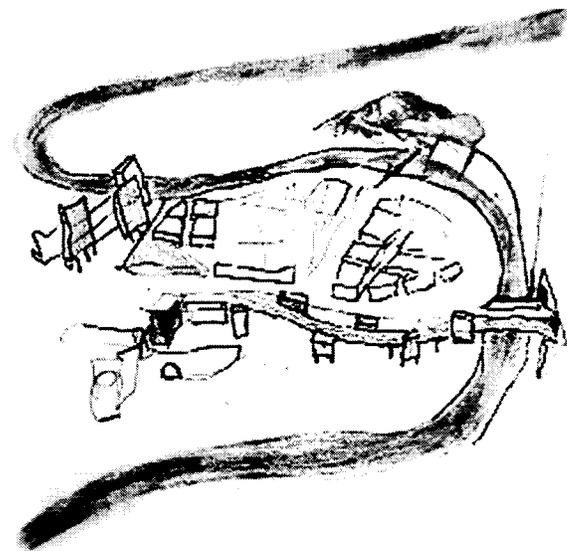


figure 7 Sketch of riverside park and development proposals



figure 8 View to north showing transformed expressway. Drawings and photographs by M.-P. Macdonald except as noted.

An approach less concerned with design of urban form, and more involved with popular perception of public space, was the publication of a sample guide, based on the *Guia de Ocho*, by artist Saioa del Olmo Alonso. Her proposal used graphic design and incorporated aspects of all the participants' work as a kind of marketing of ideas about the value of practices of the diffuse city in a brochure.

## CONCLUSION

When urban or rural settlements transform into a diffused cities, can they still incorporate the advantages of the centralized city or the untouched natural landscape? The process of design for a coherent urbanized culture requires the designers to integrate many autonomous, even contradictory objectives and strive for a synthetic outcome. Three key requirements are to first, permit the mobility that inhabitants expect and at the same time organize the city at the intimate scale of the pedestrian; similarly provide comparable access to rural regions without destroying the rural character of the landscape; and thirdly continue to create spatial conditions for dynamic and sympathetic commercial and industrial growth. The proposals address scale, reference points, and especially a desire to preserve the rural quality of the landscape. The specific culture of Basque country and the topography of the region, using vertically stacked infrastructure, suggest solutions that may be technologically possible. In this geography the character of landscape is a primary decisive factor. These proposals were theoretical test runs for future projects. They are perhaps what director of *Arteleku*, Santiago Eraso Beloki, has described as attempts to create small utopias.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Christian Devillars, *Le Projet Urbain Paris: Le Pavillon de l'Arsenal* 1994
- <sup>2</sup>Indovina, Francesco, et al. *La Citta diffusa Venezia* DAEST-IUA V 1990
- <sup>3</sup>Giuseppe Dematteis, *Le metafore della Terra* Milan: Feltrina 1985, — *Progetto implicito* Milan: Franco Angeli 1995
- <sup>4</sup>Bernardo Secchi, *Un Progetto per l'urbanistica* Turin: Einaudi 1989
- <sup>5</sup>Edward Soja, *Thirdspace* Oxford: Blackwell 1996—*Postmetropolis* Oxford: Blackwell 2000