

Miodrag Mitrašinić

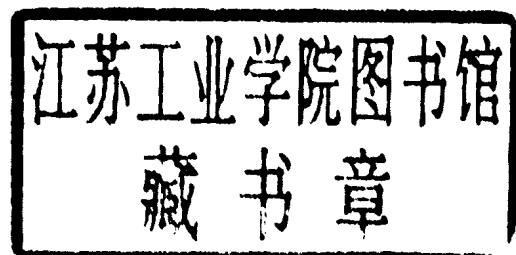
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# TOTAL LANDSCAPE, THEME PARKS, PUBLIC SPACE



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THEME PARKS,  
PUBLIC SPACE**





Miodrag Mitrašinić

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**ASHGATE**



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**This book is dedicated to my father Milan Mitrašinić (1928–2001) whose example and extraordinary humanism will nurture my being forever, and to Maja, Jilly, Dorotea, and Jasna who make my life worth living.**

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The happiest living soul, when this is all over, will be our daughter Maya who patiently waited for dad to start playing with her. Much of this book was written with Maya sitting in my lap and writing her own

'books'. I am grateful to you, my love, for helping me on this journey by reminding me of what is truly essential, by sharing your view and insight on Disney's characters with me, and by rushing me to begin playing.

Finally, a note on the image copyrights: I took great care in identifying copyright holders and obtaining adequate permissions. When that has not been done it was either because I could not identify copyright holders or did not receive a response from them.

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*What, do you imagine that I would take so much trouble and so much pleasure in writing, do you think I would keep so persistently to my task, if I were not preparing—with a rather shaky hand—a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at least to eyes that I will never have to meet again. I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who am I and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.*

(FOUCAULT 1972: 17)

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## Foreword

The idea of 'Total Landscape' first emerged to me in 1993 while working on the Global City project with my friends and fellow students Sarah Gansel and Antonella Vitale at the Berlage Institute Amsterdam (BiA). The project was supposed to rationalize an idea that essentially came from our professor Elias Zenghelis, who gently coaxed us into believing that the differences between what we call 'natural' and 'artificial' are no longer the differences of kind but of degree. The Global City project was about identifying a universal set of conditions characteristic for each point of a global network of artificial 'landscapes' that would allow intensified compactness and congestion in particular segments we called 'environments'. Typology and theme of environments depended on the percentage of density occurring in the particular landscape, in relation to the balance between 'natural' and 'artificial'. In that sense, the Global City project was an attempt to rationalize and articulate the idea of a globally emerging system that I cynically called The Straight Society. I had no doubt that most people experienced 'the logic of the inconceivable' of such a system because it runs as an undercurrent stream beneath what we daily experience in the world of appearances and the world as sensed. It occurred to me that what I was truly interested in was finding out how that system actually works through what seemed to be a totalizing system of forces, and just how such a complex artificial universe systematically links every artifice—whether a social relationship, an artificial rain, or an economic order—into a universal densely woven fabric. It was also clear that this man-made, artificial system was in desperate need of a holistic, comprehensive, anticipatory, and sustainable understanding. I was not only interested in the question of form, place, and aesthetic, but much more in the set of conditions out of which it arises and the totalizing condition of convergence it successfully fabricates. The work of Superstudio, Archizoom, Archigram, the Situationists International, and the entire architectural avant-garde of the 1960s and early 1970s was instrumental in initially

formulating the question of condition. The key question guiding this quest at the time was the effect to which total landscape was influencing the practice and theory of architecture, because to most of us the early 1990s brought an obvious conflict that began emerging between architects and Architecture.

In many ways, retrospectively, the point of no return was a casual round-table discussion with French architect Henry Ciriani at the BiA, in spring of 1994, when Ciriani recounted his 'Schiphol airport experience': 'It's all there, everything you may ever want [...] it's clean, the music is discrete, everybody is kind and helpful, if you fall there is a medical crew to assist you in a second—it cannot be, it just cannot be, this is not life!' The subject of the discourse quickly changed and moved to the kind of architecture commonly spelled and pronounced with a capital 'A,' where apparently life is still possible and everything is just fine. It seemed to me that paradoxically, locations where 'life just cannot be' form an increasingly large part of our experience of the world; locations such as theme parks, airports, large shopping malls, all-inclusive tourist facilities, and increasingly also urban public spaces. At the same time I was involved in co-editing a volume of student writings and projects made at the Berlage Institute in 1992–93 titled *The New Public Realm*. Most of student projects at the time focused on the emerging, hybrid forms of public realm and public space. Through a series of competition projects (often co-designed with Sarah Gansel) I attempted to theorize a shift from forms of public space based on face-to-face interactions and collective programs, to public environments that are increasingly privatized, individualized, aestheticized and mediated by entertainment technology, and it seemed that the only force that kept remaining traditional public spaces together was their attachment to infrastructural systems: in short, they became a function of motion.

Total landscape was further elaborated in 1994 on the occasion of an exhibition of my projects titled, not surprisingly, 'Total Landscape'. I

then embarked on a long search and study of 'the cases' that would enable me to unearth, document and interpret the hidden dimension of total landscape. Initially I merely offered criticism of the logic of enclosure and exclusion, as well as an enthusiasm for the potentially desirable role that digital technology can play in total landscape, but that did not take me far: what was *de facto* needed was a deeper understanding, a fundamental change in the way these issues are understood, a change that transforms perceptions of public space, a development of a specific vocabulary and the analytic tools for understanding total landscape, and a deep and thorough understanding of the processes of its production. The only way to get there was to identify 'cases' that would more precisely lead me to the ensemble of techniques, procedures, methods and practices that bring such controlled environments into being. In 1994, I had identified a number of possible cases and initially hoped to conduct a comparative analysis of theme parks, cruise ships, all-inclusive tourist resorts, extra large shopping malls, festival marketplaces, and airports in order to begin tracing the logic of total landscape. It did not take long to realize that theme parks, especially places like Walt Disney World Resort (wdw) or Huis Ten Bosch (HTB), would be ideal case studies due to their complexity, transparency, size, popularity, and also due to the so-called 'theme park model' that seemed to be an ideal entry into the discourse and problematique of the transformation of urban public space by total landscape.

The research was initially conducted during a two-year period (May 1996–June 1998), at the University of Florida at Gainesville (only two hours away from Walt Disney World Resort), and was divided into two major parts: research into relevant theoretical material, and the fieldwork and collection of the primary material related to case studies. The fieldwork in Walt Disney World Resort and other theme parks in Florida was conducted on several occasions from January to July 1996, when an extensive video and photo documentation was created, and a field-study was conducted with a group of students from the

University of Florida. I carried out the study of the Japanese material at the School of Architecture, Kyoto University, where relevant documents were painstakingly translated to me by fellow students and researchers in Professor Takeyama's Laboratory, from August 1996 to September 1997. During the same period, the fieldwork on Huis Ten Bosch and other Japanese case studies was performed. Interviews with the design team at Nihon Sekkei, employees and top executives at Huis Ten Bosch Corporation, and guests at Huis Ten Bosch theme park were carried out in April 1997. The second, five-year-long phase of the research started in 1998 to be supported by numerous research grants at the University of Texas at Austin and extensive travels. My second visit to Japan in 1999 enabled me to perform additional research and update previous research findings. Finally, the Dean's Fellowship in 2003–04 helped to bring everything together in the book format.

When I started writing the *Total Landscape* and decided to keep the focus on theme parks, I hoped that this book could be written as a diary of an archeological excavation. In that sense I was hoping that the book would be similar to Paul Virilio's *Bunker Archeology*, in which Virilio documents concrete bunkers built on the coast of Normandy by German forces during the World War II (Virilio 1994). Virilio rightly understood bunkers and fortifications as clear expressions of Hitler's military understanding of territory, time, and subsequently of the concept of 'military space'. But Virilio's good fortune was in the fact that Hitler and his military commanders were long gone by the time he visited the coast of Normandy, back in 1960s. My problem was that I had to work with what art historians and curators customarily call 'a living artist'. Namely, despite an overall decline in attendance and the fact that the age of extra-large theme parks is gone, theme parks have been very much alive. Just as I enjoyed Virilio's discovery of the half-buried German bunkers and his interpretation, my reader, I hoped, would one day open these pages and would be able to understand the rationale of a strange civilization that had built such monstrous struc-

tures in order to produce 'the most transient, yet lasting of products: human experience'. My belief has been that exposing minute details and facts of the production of theme parks would in fact expose the historical and human condition of the present, hence the total landscape not as a theoretical framework but as a condition. In that sense, theme park is the ur-form of total landscape. I was coached by Walter Benjamin's attempt to create an 'Ur-history of the 19th Century' with his unfinished Arcade project through which Benjamin collected 'images' of 19th Century Paris that captured 'small, particular moments' and then attempted to present them in a form of montage. Such images, whether pictorially or verbally represented, were supposed to reveal the 'total historical event', the perceptible ur-phenomenon in which the origins of the present would be found (Buck-Morss 1991: 71–77). As Buck-Morss writes, Benjamin transferred Goethe's concept of the *urphänomen* that emerged in Goethe's writing on the morphology of nature, to his own work on history. The concept of ur-phenomenon suggests that there are ideal forms that can reveal, through an act of 'irreducible observation', both object and subject of knowledge, and potentially their relationships. For Walter Benjamin, postcards, ads, street signs, posters and many other artifacts of the late nineteenth century Paris were precisely such symbols. To my mind, theme parks are such 'ideal symbols' of the Twentieth Century where 'general reveals itself immediately in a particular form' (Simmel 1918: 57). Theme parks themselves are thus the theory of total landscape.

The question then was how to represent the complexity of theme parks, and especially of urban public space, without simplifying them—how to talk about so many interrelated domains without appearing a dilettante? The resulting narrative is for the most part free from any attempt to work explicitly in either theoretical or critical mode, as well as from attempts to instrumentalize knowledge towards operational aims because this is neither a 'how to make a theme park' book nor a 'how to design public space' manual, although it sheds light on the actual processes of designing and operating both

theme parks and public spaces. In doing so, I have tried to minimize the professional jargon from all fields involved and allow the general public to get a sense of complexities beyond each of the professional practices at work without simplifying their intricacies. In order to open the book to non-design audience, I have also tried to present my theoretical observations within the narrative context and avoid too many normative declarations. This book has been a long time coming and in the process, I have accumulated an impressive amount of research material from a variety of sources and all imaginable academic and professional disciplines. I have met a wide range of people and learned a great deal about things I cared about as well as about topics I could not care less about. At times, I felt that different materials had pulled me their ways and often I felt lost in view of the complexities involved in this kind of research. At the same time I struggled to bring all the relevant material to the eyes that may be different than mine, as I desired to speak to designers of all kinds, to marketing professionals, to sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, and many others including the lay reader. Keeping this ship on its course, whatever the course may have been in the last ten years, was not a trivial task. I believe many of those struggles will be obvious to careful readers, together with the fact that this book does not 'celebrate' either Walt Disney's or other theme parks.

Writing a book on something as complex as theme parks and public spaces without explicitly referencing ways in which their cultural and social meanings are contested on the ground through daily practices was a hard task, but it was done on purpose. The assumption that at this point in time seems realistic is that in-between theme parks and the increasingly privatized urban public spaces, there are subtle differences of degree rather than kind, and the purpose of my effort has been to identify, unearth, and study the common framework of the two in order to eventually learn how to manage it in regard to its most promising possibilities. For promising possibilities are embedded within the grounded and critical social practices of both individuals



and social groups inscribed in space and time. Despite all the challenges to be mapped out later in this book, it has been precisely the populist appeal of mass entertainment and mass consumption that potentially, just potentially, carries an energizing force within it for the traditionally marginalized social groups, for women, children, teenagers, people of color, the poor, the old, and many other 'good natured crowds', both as producers and as consumers. Despite all my efforts, I did not find evidence that there is a critical mass of resistance practices that can mount a significant challenge to the condition of total landscape, even though, one could argue, we all simultaneously produce it and consume it. After all, as Christine Boyer rightfully asked, 'who raises a voice in opposition to this corporate organization of culture?' (Boyer 1994: 65) More importantly, there is no evidence that there is *de facto* a meaningful dialogue between those who produce theme parks and public space, and those who 'enjoy' them. The only form of 'exchange' between the two camps is marketing analysis. One of the reasons for that has also been an explicitly materialist conceptualization of both theme parks and privatized public space that tends to disable alternative interpretations and contested meanings potentially generated by varied social and cultural groups. Ironically, total landscape offers a vision of social space without society. But rightly so, because if there is no voluntary, desirable, meaningful and constructive communication between individuals, 'there is no such a thing as society', as Margaret Thatcher famously declared. Thus, by purposefully excluding the point of view of those who 'produce through the act of consumption'—guests, visitors, tourists and citizens—I wanted to be very realistic in identifying the current state of the question.

Through the last few years of working on this manuscript I ended many of the long days by reading stories to our daughter Maya, many of which, on her request, were about Disney princesses. I even promised I would take Maya to Walt Disney World Resort where all of the Disney Princesses, together with Tinker Bell and Peter Pan, live.

After all, her friend Eva is going to visit soon, and what kind of Dad would I be had I not promised we would go too as soon as Daddy finished the book? Very often Maya impatiently asked: 'Daddy, are you done with your book? When are we going to Disneyland?' I then had to explain we are going to Walt Disney World, not Disneyland, because Walt Disney World is bigger and better: it's a whole 'world' not just a 'land', and we can also go to nice places to swim. Of course, as millions of other parents, I was thinking mileage, gas prices, affordable hotel rates along Florida's Atlantic coast, and the AAA discounts on vacations in Walt Disney World Resort! I even got somewhat excited and enthusiastic about the trip. Inspired by what she saw on television and also by her friends's practices, Maya insisted on playing games on Disney web site, and the environment of many such games is the clear metaphorization of the Walt Disney World Resort. Needless to point out, the local mall has a Disney store that enabled Maya to make a leap from the phantasmagoric world of Disney to the materialistic world of retail shopping. The bright red, blue and yellow that made the Disney store stand out, together with the extra large pair of abstracted black mouse ears, created a strong and memorable image. The music that played in the store was the same as that we heard on the website. The environment felt so familiar and friendly, warm and inviting. The Tinker Bell swimming suit, made in China, was particularly interesting and would be an ideal 'present', Maya argued, given our forthcoming trip to Florida to visit Walt Disney World Resort. On the way home we stopped by the local supermarket to get milk, and somehow passed by Disney toys and books, and what a wonderful opportunity presented itself to us: to get a set of five Disney Princess books to be read the same night while drinking the milk we were just about to buy. The milk jar Maya drinks her milk from was also made in China and has Tinker Bell on it. And on, and on, and on this goes, and it is not only about the panoptic effect of synergetic marketing. As this book is about to show, it is much more than that: it is total landscape at work!

# 1

## PUBLIC SPACE

SONY PLAZA  
SONY WONDER  
TECHNOLOGY LAB



SONY PLAZA  
PUBLIC ARCADE

SONY  
WONDER

Public Space

