

URBAN LANDSCAPE STUDIES  
EUPHORIGENIC LANDSCAPES

**Euphorigenic Landscapes – issue 1.0**

Sören Schöbel, Daniel Czechowski (Ed.)

(Schriftenreihe - LAREG, Bd. 12/

Monograph Series - Department of

Landscape Architecture and

Regional Open Space, Vol. 12)

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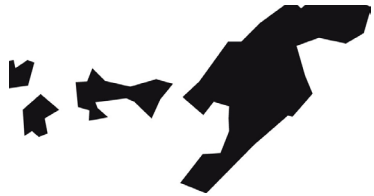
Fachgebiet für Landschaftsarchitektur

regionaler Freiräume

Technische Universität München

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**LAREG**



GORIZIA | NOVA GORICA  
45° 58'N 13° 39'E

SIZE	41   309 KM <sup>2</sup>
POPULATION	35,980   32,763
DENSITY	880   110/KM <sup>2</sup>
ELEVATION	84   61 M
TIME ZONE	CET/CEST (UTC+1/2)

## THE TWIN CITY GORIZIA/ NOVA GORICA BETWEEN HISTORICAL LEGACY AND INTEGRATED FUTURE

Ario de Marco

### INTRODUCTION

The question why people have preferences for some landscapes rather than others has been raised from different perspectives and the belief that we like what has been evolutionary relevant had a strong influence in the theories elaborated in the recent past.<sup>1</sup> An implicit consequence of these theories is that preferences, because are innate, are also universal and, therefore, it was meaningful to identify and weight the contribution of the constitutive elements to the entire landscape. Only recently, the experimental data correlating specific preferences to people background (such as training, profession, childhood environment or age) confirmed previous intuitions that the cultural influence is the crucial factor in determining the attractiveness of landscapes<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, the interest has moved from the identification of the factors for reconstituting an ideal landscape to the characterization of landscape opportunities able to match the needs of a differentiated public.

As detailed contributions indicated lately, there is no universal ideal landscape, but the request for a space that could answer to a variety of parallel needs<sup>3</sup>. Given the elevated concentration of the human population in a restricted number of large settlements, the design of a balanced organization of the urban landscape represents a relevant challenge the interest of which goes beyond the identification of clever technical solutions. Physical inactivity and stress-induced diseases being the two major causes of death in the developed world, it becomes clear that the appreciation of the surrounding landscape is not merely an esthetic matter, as well documented by the correlation existing between the environment and human health. Therefore, landscape shapes that can induce positive feelings (euphorigenic landscapes) are to be thought, since their presence will bring benefits that a modern society cannot afford to neglect. This conclusion can seem obvious to the public opinion, but it still represents a minority approach in the world-wide praxis of planners. Urban landscapes are still largely featured according to the modernist ideology that denies the relevance of the morphological and historical levels and compresses the individual and social needs claiming the supremacy

of an abstract functionality. The consequence is sprawling, a development model that advantages the interests of developers and does not consider the structural levels at which citizens' life should flourish.

#### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The methodological analysis used in this essay follows the semiotic model and the theory formulated by Henri Lefèbvre that describes landscape as the physical space in which different structural levels and cultural interests are combined <sup>4</sup>. Following his conception, for reading and interpreting the landscapes it is necessary to recognize the physical constraints (the morphology), the level constituted by the structures in which the daily life takes place (the texture), the level established by the large infrastructures (the systems), and stewardship elements with symbolic meaning. The comprehension of the symbols will be facilitated by a short "thick description" <sup>5</sup> of the milieu, conceptualized as the resultant of embedded cultural, historical and social experiences.

For the identification of the euphorogenic conditions, we shall also consider the functional description of the psychological combinations that correspond to perceived sensory dimensions and induce in the beholder spe-

cific perceptions and expectations.

As a study model, the urban area of the twin city Gorizia/Nova Gorica (formerly: Görz) was chosen, a 70,000 people agglomerate situated in a relatively rural environment at the Italian-Slovenian border and that experienced a traumatic political separation after the Second World War the signs of which are still recognizable on the territory.

#### ANALYSIS

Is a hilly landscape in which a small urban settlement is confined between a river and the forest euphorogenic? According to the subjective theory, the answer is that there are different perceived landscapes, as many as the beholders that observe using the perspective of their different cultural and psychological background. The euphorogenic dimension will be enjoyed by single observers for which the landscape is readable, understandable, suggestive, and emotionally likeable. However, an analytical dissection and evaluation of the constitutive elements may be useful to identify factors that are crucial for interpreting the landscape, understanding our (subjective) preference, and even identifying proposals for smoothing the dissonances and improving the overall quality.

**AVAILABLE ELEMENTS:  
THE MORPHOLOGIES**

Topographic elements such as hills, rivers, lakes, and their combinations with respective spatial distributions introduce suggestiveness and diversity to the landscape, although they are differently perceived. In terms of dimensions, wooded hills can be associated with the sense of mystery and/or curiosity, since they may be seen either as a screen inviting to observe beyond them or as a barrier that prevents further appreciation of part of the landscape and repulse because of their dense aspect. Slopes constantly modify the observation perspectives and, therefore, may offer a large variety of views. Finally, hill steepness makes them physically not available to complete rationalization and they conserve—more easily than flat areas—some original features and “leftover” surfaces that contribute to landscape variety by introducing greenness and geometric ruptures. Therefore, hills strongly contribute to contrast feelings of boredom and introduce elements that catch the beholder’s attention. In combination with water surfaces, they represent dynamic elements and areas that are, in average, more preserved from a natural point of view. Because of this, they can strongly contribute to

dimensions such as Serene, Space, Refuge, Rich in species, and Nature, depending on the element combinations.

Flat areas are easily urbanized and devoted to rational agriculture. Consequently, they are more ordered and greenness is compressed by the competition for alternative land allocation. In practice, planned woodlands in the neighborhood of the town are rare whilst most of the surface has been occupied by either crops or buildings.

The twin towns (Gorizia on the western side, Nova Gorica on the eastern side) appear differently organized. Gorizia has a sprawling structure and embraces both flat and partially hilly areas, Nova Gorica seems to develop through a more defined, top-down, coherent city master plan in the flat corridor between hill chains.

The river Isonzo/Soča runs at the town edge and represents, although not planned as such, a valuable greenway at least in terms of an ecological corridor. It still constitutes a valid conservation resource, whereas minor creek watersheds have been either paved over or set-aside, becoming a hidden and unappreciated resource. On the contrary, the river’s ecological quality has been preserved because of its marginality for the urban life,

since only a recreational water sports area on the Slovenian side and a minor project along a short bank trail on the Italian side make the watershed available for public fruition, although these are interesting for catalyzing social and recreational activities (prospect dimension). At present, the access to the river is difficult because the banks lay until 50 meters below the town level and the few steep paths along the slopes cross private estates. The result is that a relevant green area remains inaccessible for and unappreciated by the citizens.

#### THE TEXTURE

There are two main macro-orientation lines that are immediately visible and serve as reference for the urban structure. Gorizia is built as a progressive and random expansion from a central axis, whilst Nova Gorica follows a regular development of semi-circles, a sort of amphitheatre with the flat side corresponding to the railway line that is coincident with the national border. Few centrifugal streets start from the railway station and indicate the expansion directions of the town. The different history of the twin towns can easily explain the difference, as Gorizia originated from a slow development of a middle-age settlement built around the castle,

whereas Nova Gorica was designed in the fifties of the last century as a new town that grew up on empty fields to substitute the territory reference town that remained on the other side of the state border demarcation limit. Apart from the city parks and the sport/playground facilities, the major green areas directly connected to the urban network correspond to the hilly woodland of the Kostanjevica-Panovec and of the castle, the amateur airport, and the agricultural fields close to the river. Here, structural differences distinguish between the small and disordered allotments divided by tree hedges typical of the private orchards on the one hand and the rational structure of the single large farm on the other.

The town organization apparently shapes the social aggregation. In Gorizia it is concentrated on the main street, whereas the historical center below the castle has been progressively deserted. In Nova Gorica the social activity has been traditionally more diffuse and recently strongly influenced by the development of the resorts related to its casinos. Both towns try to increase the dimension of their pedestrian downtown areas the establishment of which has supported the development of coffee shops with outdoor tables. However,

their presence as meeting points is, at least in the case of Gorizia, detrimental to the survival of external more traditional aggregation places. Such a process has been accelerated by the building of commercial centers that dried out the economical sources for the borrow shops that progressively disappeared.

Both towns are seats of university departments, but in both cases no remarkable activities or life styles seem to have been influenced or stimulated by this presence that still remains an unexploited potential.

#### THE SYSTEMS

The railway and the associated border represent an important urban element for the structure of Nova Gorica and for the overall panorama because they separate one intensively built area from the agricultural landscape on the other side of the border. This is the only capturing infrastructure feature in a landscape otherwise characterized by low density industrial settlements and residential urban development. The border, although in the meanwhile it became only a mere administrative concept, is still determinant in shaping the territory since it is recognizable as an element of fracture.

Another element at the systems level is the highway. It is invisible and runs relatively far away from the towns, but its recent construction together with the abolishment of the border restrictions strongly contributed to the modification of the objective development potentialities of the two twin towns. Nova Gorica is now efficiently linked to the rest of Slovenia and more easily accessible from outside (for instance, for the casino tourists), whilst Gorizia lost its importance as a hub for the trades with the European South-East and has been set aside with respect to the traffic fluxes.

A final remark is that the elimination of the checkpoints at the border has modified the preferential routes for the car traffic. Because it is faster, some solutions became popular which consider crossing the border in more points to follow a straight line through some town areas instead of following the longer alternative along the non-linear and less densely populated border strip. The consequence, however, is that former streets with texture characteristic changed into roads with system features that dis-aggregate the town coherence. It can be also observed that the increased traffic flux did not result in economic advantages but rather drained out resources from the old town to the

advantage of other, more peripheral, realities or even distant alternatives (malls, neighboring towns).

### THE SCENERIES

From the chosen viewpoint, a 700 m high hill equally shared by the two municipalities, it is not possible to appreciate the highway running beyond the airport and most of the existing railway and car bridges. Although this represents the only viewpoint for the complete appreciation of the panorama, only a few difficult and long paths reach the hilltop. This reality discourages the visit to a place that enables to enjoy a wide and diversified landscape spanning from the sea to the mountains.

The other hills surrounding the towns allow only for a partial view, although many details become more distinct due to the shorter distance. 6 Stewardship elements such as the castle and the monastery placed on the top of low hills are very useful for providing a visual orientation when the observation point is low enough to highlight the contrast between their level and the town plan. Two new towers built recently in Nova Gorica cannot offer a scenic alternative to those historical buildings.

### THE SYMBOLS

The symbols become more and more gray and corroded by the rain and the sun, bushes grow around them and they will be eventually forgotten in years or centuries to come. However, stones are there to remind and warn, and can be used for any political ideology, either to support a more collaborative future or to call for revenge and separation. Thus, symbols represent the irrational level of the soul and are ambivalent since they can propose the reasons of the peace as well as of new conflicts. Some of them are clearly visible: a border stone, a bunker, and the memorial cemetery of Oslavia/Oslavje. They tell the story from the recent past (the border that divided the community and the military confrontation) to the beginning of the XX century, when Italy occupied the region after the conclusion of the First World War. Another symbolic element is more diffused and, probably, has better reached its original ideological meaning by its mimicry quality: the introduction of exotic tree species, such as cypresses and Mediterranean pines, used for defining squares and avenues, for shaping the Gorizia landscape and making it resemble and remind of some popular Italian hilly landscapes.



## DISCUSSION: USE OF THE ELEMENTS

The availability of elements such as extensions, vegetal cover, or recreational structures does not, by itself, guarantee that useful sensorial dimensions and efficient land enjoyment will occur. For obtaining this result, it is necessary to conceive a comprehensive aesthetic idea and to design a strategy for realizing it. In the case of the urban settlement of Gorizia/Nova Gorica, a clear design of landscape management does not seem evident. Although the territory still maintains large green areas both inside the town and at the town fringes, their qualitative valorization is to a large extent underdeveloped. At least, Nova Gorica shows a more homogeneous layout and has preserved the hilly woodland of Panovec for multiple uses. The area has relevant ecological/conservational value and a number of pedestrian/running/mountain bike paths have been marked out. Furthermore, a didactic tree path and a progressive reconversion of the wood species aimed at the recovery of the original plant population mix testify the attention to ecological equilibrium and active enjoyment. On the other hand, a surface diversification in terms of sensory dimensions is still missing and some relevant elements, such as

large open spaces and get-together places for social activities (bonfires, playgrounds, shelters), have not been introduced so far.

On the Italian side, only a very limited spot along one river bank has been organized for facilitating the public access but, isolated as it is, it may only represent a nucleus for further development, since its present surface is probably not sufficient for satisfying any sensory dimension. In summary, the towns have a common problem of insufficient diversification of the available resources, namely it requests a concept that highlights needs and identifies means to implement long-term solutions for fulfilling the user's expectations (euphorigenic achievement) instead of running after episodic and economically unsustainable projects such as the building of a light train connection to reach the castle.

Finally, the valorization of the river sheds as greenways conceptualized according to the contemporary standards, namely a multidimensional occasion for conservation, recreation, and alternative transportation (Bryant, 2006) remains a missed occasion. If used adequately, these areas would also represent an opportunity to connect the two towns through two continuous corridors, one formed by the main river (Isonzo/Soča) and the oth-

er by the Corno/Koren creek. This initial frame could be easily integrated into a larger network comprising the green areas covering and surrounding urban and sub-urban hills. The development of a park emerging from the areas close to the border would provide an opportunity to overcome the separation of the two communities by offering a common texture on which to build a shared life and an increasingly more integrated system of services. Furthermore, it would have a strong symbolic value for connecting two communities using the same elements that formerly separated them. At the moment, the visual separation still indicates the discontinuity and that the two entities do not grow together. The town being a physical point in which system and texture levels merge, the development of a uniquely designed urban landscape would be an advantage for both fractions. Gorizia would be reintegrated in the larger geographical context that progressively moved to Nova Gorica, whereas this entity would provide a chance for the recovery of the now abandoned old center of Gorizia that could become again the symbolic reference for the overall territory. A common urban and economic development would also embody an opportunity to use the texture and sys-

tems levels for healing the “wounds” present at the symbolic level.

The old Austrian town was a tolerant center in which the citizens spoke, or at least understood sufficiently, several languages, but the situation drastically changed at the end of the First World War when its territory passed under the rule of Italy. Only Italian was allowed and ethnical discrimination was systematically introduced. At the same time, the nationalist rhetoric and the cult of the war were pursued. In this frame, the edification of monumental cemeteries to honor the Italian soldiers died on the Karst and Isonzo/Soča fronts was used for patriotic aims. The limes, symbols of the community in the Slovenian culture, were substituted in the squares by the exotic, but ideologically suitable, Mediterranean *Pinus maritima*. Cupressus trees were planted in the countryside for shaping the landscape according to Toscana aesthetic models. This symbolic transformation was undertaken to eradicate the memory of one community and to substitute it with an artificial nationalist aesthetic concept. This politics reminds of other examples of landscape rearrangement for representing new orders as timeless and natural<sup>7</sup>. The discrimination of the Slovenians was a determining factor for their massive

support of the partisan movement during the Second World War and it was the Yugoslavian army to free the town and to claim it as an integral part of the new federation. The international conflict was concluded with a compromise for which the old town remained in Italy whereas the surrounding territory became part of Yugoslavia. The two nations faced each other as enemies and this split also cut deep at the level of the local community. A strongly defended border separated what grew together for centuries. Nowadays, the wounds of the last century seem forgotten in both the daily life and on the official political agenda, but they remain latent in the deep consciousness of everybody who emotionally experienced the past and, therefore, the present time absolutely needs itself symbolic structures for substituting the historical legacy. That is why the old border should become not only the site for experiencing an always more intensive texture integration by interconnecting the services, but also a place for building a “merged landscape” capable of changing the visual perception at the symbolic level by substituting the fracture with a bridging perspective. An urban park designed to answer different public needs could be the integration symbol the community is

waiting for. It would be not intrusive, but could smoothly lead to convergence by merging the daily life levels of the two towns.

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Public open spaces acquire evident functionality when they become dimensions capable of answering to public requests and being integrated in a larger urban context. It means that the responsible landscape planners should limit the contrasts that morphology and system levels evidence and operate to improve the quality of the texture level. This can also be obtained by providing the correct balance between dense and open areas, spots for socializing and peaceful refugees, by showing attention for view points and suggested perspectives, and by trying to maintain the ecological sustainability of the whole project. It is also important that accessibility to the public open spaces and green areas is facilitated by offering bicycle/pedestrian paths, since an euphorigenic landscape is not a passive experience that the beholder simply observes, but an active interaction perceivable by moving in and around. In the case of Gorizia/Nova Gorica, all these aims could be achieved by the institution of a park insisting on the areas alongside the border, a reali-

zation of great symbolic impact.

Adapting the existing resources for precise needs would allow their optimal valorization given the existing constraints such as absolute surfaces and topographic location. Top-down approaches can have the advantages of determining the texture by optimally planning the systems, but also textures can give clear indications for building suitable systems since they reflect the daily reality and its actual needs. The aim of this dialectic interaction is, in either case, the maximization of the diffuse beauty perceptible in the texture, rather than the edification of spots of concentrate beauty that remain, however, physically and emotionally distinct from the daily life<sup>8</sup>. Furthermore, the designer should always keep in mind that his/her proposals should be openly discussed to avoid the danger of the self-reference, namely the formulation of master plans that respond to the specialist expectations but not to the public wishes.

The euphoric experience should not be a passive appreciation of the sublime (a wild natural landscape, difficult to find in industrial countries), but a participation in the active transformation of the real context to reach a useful result in which the diffuse beauty of the texture may improve

everybody's life. The euphoric feeling may be related to the expectations that a landscape can suggest in terms of improvement of physical and mental health, but also of socialization stimulus. In this context, a park with the declared function of a multi-specific urban open space linking the two half-towns would be the ideal space for meeting and exchanging in a harmonic context. It should provide environments that are searched for by different groups, such as open spaces for playing football or frisbee, barbecue places and tracks for runners. It would represent the texture for a natural convergence obtained by sorting people according to their interests rather than their nationality. Healing the wounds of the past would be pursued by exploiting the treasure of the morphology and using it for designing an ideal place for daily life. The heritage of painful symbols that divided would be substituted by the calm praxis of sharing.

## ENDNOTES

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