The relationship between spirituality, architecture and landscape: the case of Walden & Thoreau and Sidhartha & Hesse

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Introduction

Quality of Life (QoL) has been conceptualized in different ways and, recently, accepted as a subjective and multidimensional concept (Bonomi, Patrick, Bushnell & Martin, 2000). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines QoL as “individuals’ perception of their position in life in the context of culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns” (WHOQOL GROUP, 1995, p. 1405) and considers that it is structured in six dimensions, which are: physical, psychological, level of independence, social relationships, environment and religious/spiritual values (WHO, 1999).

Recent utilization of spirituality and religious beliefs concepts in the definition of health by WHO reflect the influence these concepts produce in the perception of peoples’ QoL. Studies have shown that religious experience is an important factor in QoL perception, and it is intimately related to health, social and psychological aspects (Epperly, 2000 cited in Panzini et al, 2007; Shreve-Neiger & Edelstein, 2004; Koenig, 2004). The active participation in religious practices and spiritual development are directly related to the perception of quality of a good life and inversely connected to psychological symptoms, as depression (Koenig, 2004). It also represents an important coping tool to deal with other aspects of life, (Ramos, 2001). Therefore the interest in this relation is not restricted to the medical/clinical professionals but also organizational/ environmental researchers.

The conceptualization of spirituality in the scientific community tends to converge and have many points in common. For Guillory (2000 cited in Mai & Denardin, 2005), spirituality is a state of consciousness that influences the pattern of behavior that people take through life, while religion represents a practical side of spirituality. Religious practices express spiritual values by means of rituals and worship, prayer, meditation and others and take place in certain sacred buildings or environments (Mai & Denardin, 2005; Shreve-Neiger & Edelstein, 2004). Koenig (2004) defines spirituality as a personal resource to assign meaning to issues of life, with sacred or transcendence, which may or may not lead to the practice of religious rituals.

To the extent that personal values are directly influenced by spirituality, it is no longer an
issue restricted to the context of religions. Individual values determine the placement of people in life. It is therefore important to consider that spirituality affects significantly the design and training of these values (Mai & Denardin, 2005), insofar as it is a concept closely related to “individual experience, and is generally linked to private events and transcendence” (George et al, 2000; Hill et al, 2000; Piedmont, 1999 cit in Shreve-Neiger & Edelstein, 2004, 380). And, therefore is closely related to our experience with space and place.

Our personal values and religious beliefs are important factors in how we perceive our own existence and environment. These beliefs consist in an attempt to make the world more understandable (Carone, Jr & Barone, 2001), mitigating the effects of the hardships and problems that people face. According to these authors, religious beliefs act as aids to thinking, as providing “prior notice” of how to act when a specific situation happens. Thus spirituality is intrinsically linked to space and environment that enhances our feeling of belonging and the assignment to our lives.

Methods and study cases
Taking as research framework the dialectic architecture-body-mind this communication outlines some hypothesis on the relationship between internal space-external space. As study cases authors selected two world masterpieces of poetic prose. The first one is an autobiographic text, the second, a fiction. The first allows to approach the perception of the reality of outside spaces (a house, a wood, a lake) seen from the inside space (the self). The second allows to focus a fully experience of the outside (a house, a forest, a river, a city) overlaid by the mindfulness activity. One book is Walden; or, life in the woods, by H.D.Thoreau, the other one is Siddhartha, by H.Hesse.

In Walden, the writer describes on his diary a particular way of living: auto sufficient, completely isolated in the woods, occupying a self-made small house, near a lake. In Walden, we look at the concepts of domestic&public space and their links to spirituality, self belonging and happiness. By dissociating characteristics of the place from the demands of functionality (usually dictated by common sense) Thoreau redefines the frontiers between public and private space, as well as between architectural program (demands of space and its requirements) and typological elements of architecture (the ideas behind building forms historically connect to specific functions). Moreover, the spatial expansion manifested in Thoreau’s daily chronicles subverts classic concepts of scale and proportion, linking the notion of spatial dimension to the vibration and breathing of the space. This seems to be a mind movement commanded by perception that eludes the very Euclidian Geometric postulates.

In Siddhartha, the main character dwells different scenarios: a few houses, paths, forests, a city, a river. Despite the richness of literary devices, from an architecture&landscape point of view, it is noteworthy the scarcity of physical elements descriptions: just a few images bring us a sense of place related to the drama setting. Looking deeply to the narrative it becomes clear that the spiritual density of Siddhartha-character, emphasized by the flow of the writing, hides the exact place where the action really occurs. And the action does not occur in the outside spaces where Siddhartha moves through, but rather
in his own internal space. All lifelong Siddhartha’s experiences converge to a unique space, a complex one, a flexible space that contracts and expands, which is the space of the mindfulness where Siddhartha definitely inhabits. Missing the stage of inhabiting home before inhabiting the world (Bachelard,1961) in this case, before inhabiting the world Siddhartha inhabits inside himself.

Conclusions
The revisitation of Walden&Thoureau and Sidhartha&Hesse suggests a revision of the relation spirituality&architecture&landscape. The fusion between Nature and states of mind, or between landscapes and mindscapes underlines the inevitability of a poetic dimension of the inhabiting. The dialectic internal spaces&external spaces points out the spiritual dimension of the well being as a critical matter to the QoL.

Key words: quality of life, well being, spirituality, spiritual architecture, landscapes, mindscapes

References


Siddhartha by Herman Hesse is an excellent book and is written with the spirit of mystery and wonder that also permeates most Buddhist teachings. At the end of the book, Siddhartha has attained what appears to be Nirvana. He is sitting with his friend Govinda. Siddhartha, feeling great compassion for his friend's suffering, instructs him to kiss his [Siddhartha’s] forehead. Govinda finds this odd, but is compelled by a great love of Siddhartha to accept. As he does this; he attains some kind of enlightenment - and though it's always seemed to me to be less 'significant' or permanent than what Siddhartha has attained - it is still a profound and magical moment of transformation. Does anyone know what Hesse intended us to derive from this sequence? Siddhartha (German: [ziˈdaỄta] (listen)) is a 1922 novel by Hermann Hesse that deals with the spiritual journey of self-discovery of a man named Siddhartha during the time of the Gautama Buddha. The book, Hesse's ninth novel, was written in German, in a simple, lyrical style. It was published in the U.S. in 1951 and became influential during the 1960s. Hesse dedicated the first part of it to Romain Rolland and the second part to Wilhelm Gundert, his cousin. Start studying Henry David Thoreau - Walden. Learn vocabulary, terms and more with flashcards, games and other study tools. The work describes Thoreau's thoughts over the course of a year spent immersed in the natural world. Read the excerpt from Walden. Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails. Let us rise early and fast, or break fast, gently and without perturbation; let company come and let company go, let the bells ring and the children cry determined to make a day of it. How does Thoreau use the imagery of bells in the excerpt? The bells are a symbol of civilization. Hermann Hesse, the Nobel Prize-winning novelist, poet, and critic who enjoyed a cultlike readership among young people during the 1960s, was born in the quiet Black Forest town of Calw, Germany, on July 2, 1877. He was the son and grandson of Protestant clergymen who had served as missionaries in India. Hesse spent the next several years working as a clerk at bookstores in cosmopolitan Basel, where he studied art history and the writings of the Swiss cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt. Hesse brought out his first novel, Peter Camenzind, in 1904. Translated into English in 1969, this story of a failed writer who embarks on a journey to discover the world became the prototype for much of his fiction. Walden, by Henry David Thoreau, is the foundational text of American nature writing; the point from which American nature writing begins. The source of this desperation for Thoreau was materialism and also the lack of a sincere or an authentic spirituality. Is Walden nature writing? Not really or perhaps not only the book is, in fact, remarkably complex. Part of its genius is the way it combines several preexisting genres or styles of writing between a single set of covers. Consider the first chapter, which Thoreau interestingly and suggestively called a 'Economy.