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DOI

[10.7480/writingplace.6.6351](https://doi.org/10.7480/writingplace.6.6351)

Publication date

2022

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Writingplace: Journal for Architecture and Literature

Citation (APA)

de Wit, S. I. (2022). A Walk to the Cherwell River Meadows: (Meaningfulness and) the Perceivable Form of the Urban Landscape. *Writingplace: Journal for Architecture and Literature*, 2022(6), 12-26.
<https://doi.org/10.7480/writingplace.6.6351>

Important note

To cite this publication, please use the final published version (if applicable).
Please check the document version above.

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A Walk to the Cherwell River Meadows

(Meaningfulness and) the Perceivable Form of the Urban Landscape

Saskia de Wit

'If there can be no form without meaning, there can be no meaning without form,' wrote architect Steven Kent Peterson when discussing the value of defined architectural space.¹ Approaching the transaction between people and the urban landscape as one of affective relationships is about the perceiver as much as about the perceived. In contemporary literature on our relationship with the urban environment, the focus has shifted from object to subject and agency, and thus from information to information seeking, from the production to the reception of sensory stimuli.² However, I would like to contend here that meaningfulness is not primarily an asset of the perceiver, but of the perceived: the urban landscape as a reservoir of possible meanings. We derive meaning from or attribute meaning to things, spaces,

territories, based on our experiences. And experiences are localized: 'All experiences – smells, sounds, weight, temperature, texture – are localized in one perceptual space,' as Malnar and Vodvarka argued.³

In order to arrive at some insights on the role of perceivable form, I will take you on an excursion to Oxford, a mid-size European city with a strong urban identity. So strong, indeed, that although alternative interpretations are possible, they tend to end up outside the major narratives of town and gown, 'dreaming spires', picturesque cityscape and Harry Potter-esque mystery. By weaving the landscape of the non-traditional architectural ensemble of St Catherine's College into that of the traditional urban landscape, this paper aims to unfold (the perception of) the physical landscape, beyond the polemics of architectural style, as a generator of meaningfulness. Devoid of the style characteristics that determine our mental image of Oxford, but remaining loyal to the programmatic and compositional logic of the Oxford colleges, the ensemble exposes just how much the quality of the physical landscape can affect what we perceive and how we attach meanings to what we perceive.

A Modern College in Oxford

St Catherine's College was designed between 1959 and 1964 by Danish architect Arne Jacobsen. It is built on a river island just outside Oxford city centre, in the floodplains of the River Cherwell. A raised plateau provides a canvas on which the building ensemble is symmetrically organized around a central axis. The college is broken up into volumes, spaced wide apart to let space flow unhindered between them. The height of the buildings does not exceed three storeys, as high as many older colleges, but their distance to each other makes them appear lower, creating a horizontality that responds to the landscape horizon. Only the bell tower rises like a single vertical. This belltower is placed in a separate courtyard, not affecting the spatial form of the quadrangle, like the vertical towers, gates and chapels in the traditional colleges.

Not only did Jacobsen transpose the traditional typology into a modern idiom, he also transposed the urban typology of the college onto the open river landscape, opening up the spatial composition without corrupting the basic central organization of the college type. It is this aspect of opening up to the landscape, more than the architectural style, that is rather revolutionary for this traditional English town.

Within a traditional urban-landscape dichotomy there would have been two choices for this river meadow location: to incorporate the site into the urban fabric or to preserve it as an open landscape. Instead, the design reflects equally the urban and the landscape conditions, giving room to local qualities and highlighting the possibilities of the open landscape as an integral part of the urban landscape.⁶

The arrangement of elements such as enclosing wall, staircase, gate, tower and quadrangle forges a new relationship between town and countryside, acting as devices of mediation that guide movement and provoke a layering of uses and meanings.

Walking in Oxford

In the period the college was built, architects, urban designers and landscape architects experimented with ways of analysis and design that took the narrative, spatiotemporal perspective of the experiencing subject moving through the city as the starting point, in a response to what was perceived as an estranged and abstract perspective of modernist urban planning. Among them was architect Peter Smithson. In a 1976 article, he identified Oxford as:

A lexicon of mediators in the language of architecture . . . enclosing wall, turreted gateway, snicket, cloister, passage, screens passage, stair, set-door. All devices of mediation – between open street and closed quadrangle; between quadrangle of one quality and quadrangle of

another; between communal quadrangle and communal hall or chapel; between communal passage, cloister, or quadrangle, and personal room.⁴

He explained these ‘separate words in the language of architecture in this lexicon’, as architectural inventions (‘the legs-in-the-air multiple-field space of Tudor architecture’), transposed onto the urban fabric.

But his interest did not lie in the words themselves:

In Oxford the clamour of actual answering turrets is very strong – caused in part by the irregular arrangement of the streets which makes one see the same ranks and clusters of turrets and chimneys, field beyond field, many times over – like a stage army. And there is also the crowding; the closeness and the jostling of the buildings.⁵

The words begin to make sense when strung together in a visual sequence, seen from an eye-level perspective: the crowding and the visual layering do not manifest in a map. It seems as if these elements and their relationships, ‘that multiple-field architectural space which is so special to Oxford’, can only be properly described from the perspective of the pedestrian, and thus the core of Smithson’s article reads like a tourist guide, carefully describing five different walks through Oxford and Cambridge. The physical landscape – its devices of mediation, and their arrangement in relation to one another – is not a two-dimensional or even three-dimensional structure, but can only be grasped when time is also included, the time it takes to move through the city, as a spatiotemporal continuity.

Peter Smithson must have walked right past St Catherine’s College, but he fully ignored its existence. The architectural language of modernism and the English Renaissance multiple-field space that he so admired seem to have very distinct, even opposite, conceptions of architectural space, and St Catherine’s clean and modern appearance apparently did not fit his narrative of the typical Oxford fabric, a narrative of cluttering and layer-



Fig. 1. Visual score of the original route from Oxford city centre to St Catherine's College, as a layered sequence of devices of mediation, spaces and lines, views and landmarks.

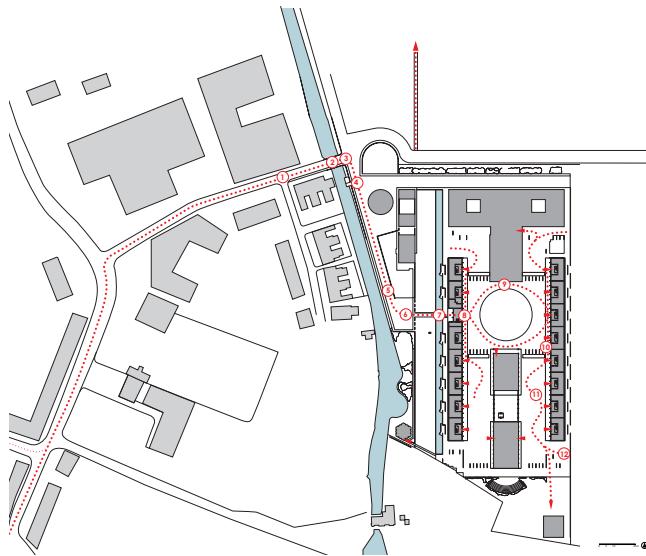


Fig. 2. The route from Oxford city centre to St Catherine's College.

ing and transitioning. However, when one allows for multiple readings, for meaningfulness rather than meaning, the college only adds to the layered narrative of the Oxford townscape.

Walking through St Catherine's College

Only a few bridges cross the River Cherwell. Magdalen Bridge connects Oxford city centre to the eastern part of the city, the only place where the Cherwell is exposed to the city. Five hundred metres north of Magdalen Bridge is the small Nappers Bridge, not crossing the Cherwell, but leading to the river island between the Cherwell and Holywell Mill Stream. Walking across Nappers Bridge, one's eye is drawn over the length of the stream towards St Catherine's belltower, guiding the visitor along the banks of the stream. The river walk passes a circular bicycle shed and leads to an entrance square, where it turns away from the stream to face the building. First to catch the eye is the unambiguous image of modern architecture.

Nowhere in Oxford is there a stronger sense of a modern university as a secular, essentially utilitarian institution, and nowhere in England is there a purer statement of the architectural ideas of the Modern Movement as understood in its heroic earlier years.⁷

Instead of the enclosed spaces of the traditional colleges, buildings and garden elements appear as a simple and legible composition, built out of clearly discernible basic geometric shapes, and grouped in an arrangement of volumes on a single orthogonal grid. The continuity of space is expressed in the horizontality of building volumes and façades. In the façades the construction is expressed in a pronounced rhythm, and the concrete frames project through the brick walls at ground level, giving them a sculptural quality.

This modern visual image is counteracted by the sounds and smells of waterfowl. A lawn – marked by Barbara Hepworth's bronze sculpture



Fig. 3. Façade of St Catherine's College, as seen from entrance square: a clean and modern façade, above a sculptural and interwoven edge of land and water, building and site, architecture and landscape.

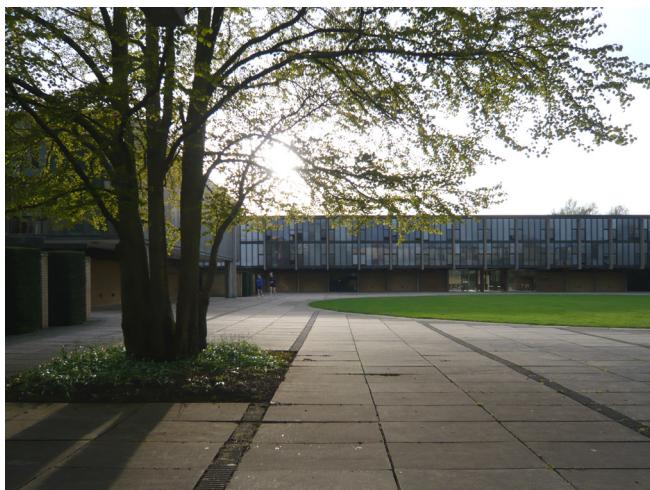


Fig. 4. The quadrangle of St Catherine's College presents a static image of order, clarity and immutability.

Achæan (1959) – and a canal-shaped pool mark the boundary of the rectangular plateau. In contrast to the clean geometry of the building façade, this edge between plateau and lawn is an elaborated brick wall with niches and buttresses, providing ample space for free-growing shrubs and weeds. This rich transition zone between water and land, architecture and nature, designed and unexpected, provides an architecturally defined waterscape for ducks, geese, herons and moorhen. A narrow footbridge, almost at water level, leads across lawn and pool towards the glass façade of the western wing, where the quadrangle is glimpsed through the glass walls of the foyer. The entrance itself is a simple hole pierced in the continuing building volume, a discreet passage typical for Oxford colleges.

The quadrangle, with its circular lawn and majestic (evergreen) cedar tree, presents a static image of order, clarity and immutability, unchanging whether one is walking or standing still, in summer or winter. From the quadrangle one can choose to go either to one of the staircases that lead to the student study-bedrooms, or, through the gardens, to the other parts of the college.

A series of alternating hedges and freestanding walls, supporting a light roof, connect the quadrangle to four gardens. Here, the pattern of movement opens up into a leisurely meandering around plant beds and lawns, connecting not only a range of destinations, but also allowing for a range of possible routes to one's destination. In contrast to the quadrangle, the walk through the gardens will be quite different depending on the season, with spring-flowering magnolias and camellias in May and June, and autumn berries and the fierce red leaves of Japanese maples in October and November, to coincide with the seasonality of the academic year. A profusion of plants creates variation within the unifying framework of the gridded floor. The impressionistic series of planting compositions functions as an incentive to move forward, but without a precise agenda



Fig. 5. In contrast to the quadrangle, the gardens of St Catherine's College are an intimate and intricate fabric of planting and paving, changing through the seasons.



Fig. 6. Balcony of St Catherine's College, looking out over the Merton College recreation ground and the forested river shores.

or defined stages leading to a climax, which provides a more improvisational and personalized understanding of the spaces.

Having crossed the gardens, one reaches the edge of the plateau, beyond the accommodation wings. The plateau is like a balcony, affording a view back over the lawn and the pool, or to the other side over the Merton College recreation ground and the forested river shores. Since this balcony is hidden behind the buildings, one could easily move around the college without ever catching a glimpse of these meadows. Yet, the atmosphere of the river landscape is omnipresent. The coolness of the air, the scent of freshness and the sounds of waterfowl – the sensory components of the rural landscape – permeate the college. More than the visual, the auditory and olfactory aspects firmly place the college in the rural landscape of the river meadows.

The appearance of these meadows has not changed much since Georgian times, despite their gradual transformation into the current recreational programme. The interventions in size, shape, enclosure and material (a grass floor) were minimal. Some meadows are used as public parks, recognizable only from the garbage bins; otherwise they look exactly like the pasture they used to be. If you know where to look, you can reach these fields, as access is provided by a barely visible footpath that branches off from the entrance road. The path connects to the network of public footpaths, bicycle paths and bridleways that criss-cross along the Cherwell. The paths are hidden in the tree-lined edges of the fields and only become visible when a high and slim footbridge crosses the Cherwell. They form an informal and hardly visible yet densely knit connection between the sports fields and the public and collective parks.

Connecting City and Countryside

Although the college is situated in the fields, it is the connection to the urban network that is self-evident. The spatial organization is reminiscent of sequences within the traditional city, such as New College with its axial

sequence and its central lawn, and Radcliffe Square with its open corners. And while the college directly borders the Cherwell, its boathouse, shared with other colleges, sits on the River Thames. Other college functions – playing fields, chapel and some college flats – are also scattered across the city. This creates an intense movement pattern through town, specifically used by St Catherine's residents.

At the same time, almost unnoticeably, the river meadows are introduced: in the transition from the simple planting with indigenous trees at the edges of the plateau, via the lush gardens, to the abstracted image of grass and the monumental tree in the quadrangle. Visually the fields participate in the urban routing, as a subtle endpoint, and smell and sound of the river meadows permeate the outdoor space of the college.

City and river meadows both have fine-meshed, dense and irregular patterns of paths, but with their own internal logic, and the links between them are not easy to find. Urban morphology, programme and routing coincide in the urban network; the rural pattern is looser and broader, overlaid on the agricultural pattern. The connection to the rural network is informal and only for those who know where to look, maintaining a separation between urban and rural network. The college acts as the mediation between city and fields: more specifically the quadrangle, the traffic hub of the college, with a vital role in the obligations and regulations of active daily life.

The modernist idiom of clearly defined built objects in a spatial continuum is transformed into a multiple-field space by the use of planting, which forms interlocking spaces. Aided by these spatial determinants the central quadrangle mediates between the dense urban fabric and the broad yet delineated landscape space of the river meadows. It does so by combining the spatial and sensory characteristics of the open river landscape with those of the college, familiarizing both. The quadrangle is the pivot point: a fixed moment of immobility in the spatial sequence that links the college to the



Fig. 7. St Catherine's College, immersed in the presence of the river.
All colour photo's by Saskia de Wit.



Fig. 8. St Catherine's College, succession of different specimens of the cedar tree in the quadrangle in 55 years: the original *Cedrus libani* in 1966, planted as a mature tree; the *Cedrus atlantica 'Glauca'* in 2005 with a diagonal branching structure, just before it was removed, its successor already waiting on its left; and the newly planted *Cedrus libani* in 2011, still a chubby little ball.

city centre, and the outward-oriented organization of space of the college to the meadow. By thus mediating between city and river landscape in this indirect and informal manner reminiscent of the way the architectural mediators work in the urban fabric, the college presents its mixed message of urbanity and rurality, old and new, definition and freedom.

Changing Form

The spatial sequence described above is what Peter Smithson might have experienced in 1976, had he not averted his eyes from the modernist architecture. It is not, however, what the current pedestrian would see. In 1982 the original routing along the stream was superseded by a revised routing, necessitated by the addition of new buildings at the north end of the scheme. The present route leads straight ahead from Nappers Bridge to the new Porter's Lodge. From here one continues through the service buildings and the gardens, to arrive at the quadrangle from the north, bypassing the sequence of interlocking spaces, views and landmarks.

The composition of the gardens remains mostly unaltered, although most of the original trees and shrubs have been replaced, most notably the prominent cedar tree in the quadrangle. The Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) was chosen, according to Jacobsen, to produce 'the most powerful horizontal effect possible, entirely emphasizing and continuing the design of the architecture'.⁸ Narrow and pyramidal in their youth, in their adult state the branches of these trees are set wide apart in expressive horizontal planes. The first specimen, however, had been replanted from a neighbouring garden as an adult tree and was slowly dying. In 1972 a second tree was planted, to the right of the original one, in order to eventually replace it.

This turned out to be the wrong species: the blue-leaved *Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauca' with more diagonal branches. So now a third one, still young, has replaced the blue cedar, maybe one day presenting the intended impressive effect, but right now a chubby little ball, not forming the space, but an object in space.

Did the meaning of the quadrangle change over time, between one cedar tree and the next? Do those who pass through the quadrangle appreciate or understand what Jacobsen intended? Does it even matter whether they do? Jane Gillette suggests that 'the actuality [of the physical landscape] and its effect on our senses is more important than its maker's message, should there have been one. Yes, in time meaning may ensue but it is probably not the meaning intended by the maker.'⁹ Meaning is ultimately personal, and probably more derived 'from our cultural matrix paired with personal experience, knowledge and feelings.' However, since the stimulus to our readings, that which is perceived, has changed, the meanings we derive from it change as well.

Conclusion

Thus, the main concern when approaching and intervening in mid-sized European cities is not whether inhabitants or visitors consciously perceive what is there to be perceived, and consequently what meanings they derive from the urban environment – as an asset of the perceiver – but to unearth what it is that the physical landscape holds – as an asset of the perceived, the *perceivable form* of the urban landscape. The focus should shift to the qualities of the perceived: the physical surroundings as carriers of multiple meanings, shifting and evolving over time.

Meaningfulness in the urban landscape is guided by (sensory) perception: the qualities of the environment only become meaningful if they can be experienced, and they can only be experienced when possible experiences are structured, served and enhanced by perceivable form. Form (which includes materiality as well as structure) provides the conditions of experience. Sensory qualities are inherent attributes of the physical environment, which can serve as a stimulus or catalyst for the meanings/meaningfulness each of us derives from or attributes to the environment. The elements of the urban landscape, the separate *words* in the language of architecture, provide not images with a defined meaning, but bodily perceivable kinaes-

thetic events that allow each urban dweller or visitor to create his or her own narrative. A narrative that only begins to make sense when the words, those kinaesthetic events, are strung together in a perceptual sequence, in mutual, spatiotemporal relationships. As Eugene Victor Walter writes: 'A place is a location of experience. It evokes and organizes memories, images, feelings, sentiments, meanings and the work of imagination. The feelings of a place are indeed the mental projections of individuals, but they come from collective experience and they do not happen anywhere else. They belong to the place.'¹⁰

- 1 Steven Kent Peterson, 'Space and Anti-Space', *Harvard Architecture Review* (spring 1980), 88-113.
- 2 Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), a.o.
- 3 Joy Monice Malnar and Frank Vodvarka, *Sensory Design* (Minneapolis, 2004), 45.
- 4 Peter Smithson, 'Oxford and Cambridge Walks', *Architectural Design* (1976), 332.
- 5 Ibid., 335.
- 6 Saskia de Wit, *Hidden Landscapes: The Metropolitan Garden as a Multi-Sensory Expression of Place* (Amsterdam, 2018), 195-196.
- 7 Geoffrey Tyack, *Oxford: An Architectural Guide* (Oxford/New York, 1998), 310.
- 8 Arne Jacobsen in an interview by Ole Dreyer in the programme 'Arne Jacobsen in Oxford', Danish Broadcasting Corporation, 1969. Cited in: Carsten Thau and Kjelt Vindum, *Jacobsen* (Copenhagen, 2000), 482-483.
- 9 Marc Treib, *Meaning in Landscape Architecture & Gardens* (Abingdon/New York, 2011), xvii.
- 10 Eugene Victor Walter, *Placeways: A Theory of the Human Environment* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1988), 21.