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Philippe Pn Nys, Mandana Mb Bafghinia

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TOWARDS A NEW PICTURESQUE ERA

THE HIGH-RISE AS EXPERIENCE



Mandana Bafghinia

Phd student University Lumière Lyon 2/University of Montréal

Philippe Nys

University of Paris 8 – AMP/UMR LAVUE 7218 CNRS

During this transition to the virtual world, as our living space progressively detaches itself from the ground and graphs itself on to vertical points, what can we say of our perception of yesterday's images? In the present mixture of virtuality and reality, on the last floor of the high-rise how are materiality and immateriality superposed?

To clarify this hypothesis, we will detail four stages of the process:

- *First, a brief review of the structural position of the picturesque in the late eighteenth century in European aesthetic thinking;*
- *Second, a necessarily brief review of its expansion, notably territorial and horizontal in Europe and the world;*
- *Third, the new vertical expansion of the picturesque beginning in the late nineteenth century which today dominates the world due to what can be termed a furor turrium as it relates to furor hortensis of the eighteenth century;*
- *Fourth, the question of what happens to the "last stage" of an urban high point through the analysis of a specific case in Paris, the Tour Montparnasse, taken from our current research on the future the Parisian metropolis.*

A short reminder of the historical picturesque

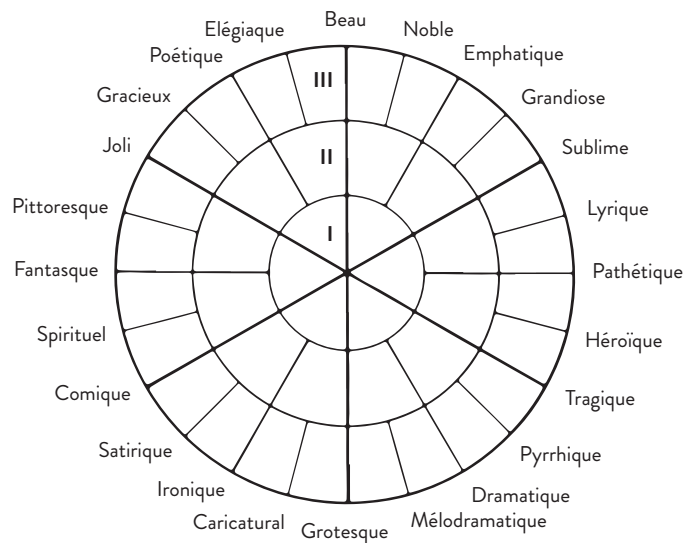


Fig. 1

In the years between 1947 and 1956, the French aesthetician, Etienne Souriau created a series of different diagrams based on art and aesthetic values gleaned from literature and poetry. Within this circular diagram, that included the picturesque, one could evaluate all art productions and mediums (*fig.1*). Theoretically speaking, from I. Kant's with the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* until today, the aesthetic debate has been contained within the between two strong polarities of the beautiful and the sublime. But as many theoreticians and historians of art and aesthetics, Souriau neglected to take account of important historical notions, notably the complex discussions and practices surrounding the picturesque that began in 1750 and lasted until 1830.

The period saw four major English theoreticians of the picturesque: William Gilpin, Humphry Repton, Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price (1747-1829), one of the most important theoreticians of picturesque at the end of eighteenth century. He placed the picturesque between the serenely beautiful and the awe-inspiring sublime, defining it as both an object or view the picturesque as an object or view worthy of being included in a picture and a fluent movement from beautiful to the sublime, and from the sublime to the picturesque. The picturesque can thus be combined with each pole and take on differing degrees of intensity, values, perceptions and mate-

riality. The relationship of these three terms should be understood in the form of a triangle; the picturesque should also be considered as one of the major terms in landscape painting for artists in the 18th and 19th centuries (*fig.2*).

If the sublime evokes intense emotions and inspires grandeur and terror, with its depiction of the vastness of nature and the beautiful, it is a term aimed at the mind, for its representation promotes pleasurable feelings such as harmony and perfection. The picturesque, however, defines an object or view worthy of being included in a picture. In (modern) Greek, the picturesque is *parastatikos*, or better yet, *graphicos*, adjectives that relate to something that is dynamic, full of spirit, lively. Without conjuring the Italian and Latin origins of the words, the picturesque can thus be etymologically and culturally associated with the graph, as in a trace, or a tear (black) on a surface (white) of pure matter, empty and smooth –a record of the memory of a *dynamis*, an “*enargeia*”, an act.

The landscape is one of the most eminent manifestations of the pictorial, not only from an historical and « purely aesthetic » point of view, but also from an anthropological one. As a manifestation and incarnation of the profoundly visual character of our culture, and, undoubtedly, the anthropological character of man, the pictorial references (in a meta-historical and meta-physical way) a body with organs: notably the eye, or more exactly our two eyes (*fig.3*).

The picturesque production methods circulating around the globe “cover” current globalization practices with Harlequin’s shimmering coat. These images that we name the “new picturesque” « cloister the whole world (*claquemurant pour ainsi dire tout l’univers*) », to use the critical and prescient expression of the Marquis de Girardin in his treatise on *The Composition of Landscapes*, published in 1777.

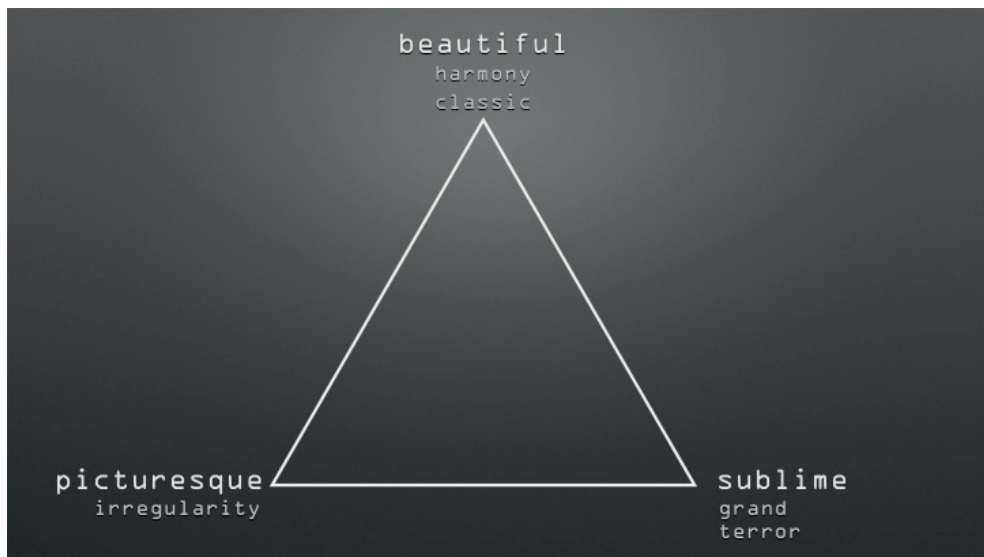


Fig. 2

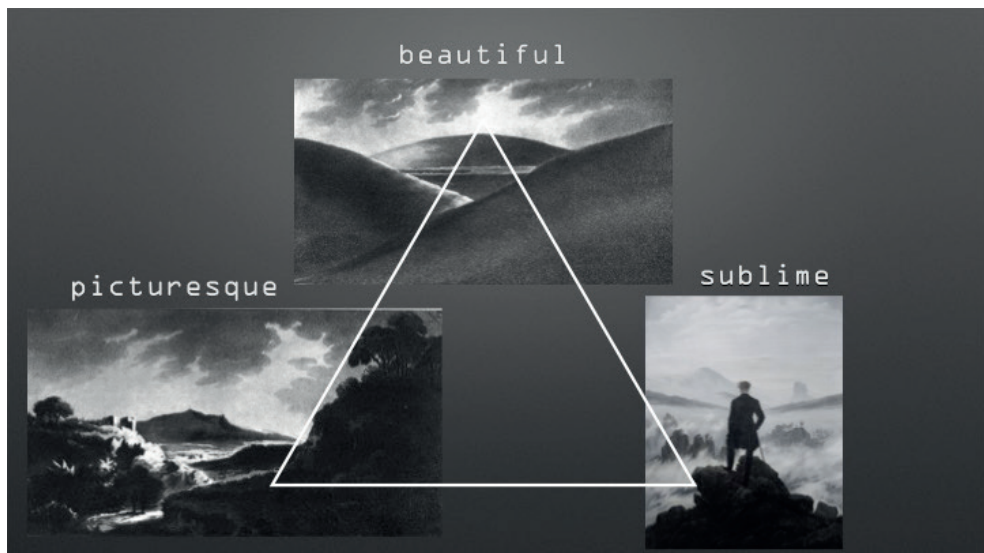


Fig. 3

Principal steps to an expanded field of the picturesque



Fig. 4

Our understanding of the status and practice of the picturesque can be considered relatively precise and exhaustive from an historical and genealogical point of view. If we limit it to certain European, colonial, or even American architectural and urban operations and theories, a “contemporary picturesque” has not yet been formalized according to conceptual, territorial and project-based terms. From the beginning of the 19th century onwards, the picturesque has undergone profound transformations. If three centuries ago, the picturesque was part of the experience of the European Grand Tour, its modality of perception has become radically different. In the past, horizontality was the mediation of time and nostalgia for the natural landscape to become a new type of urban landscape (*fig.4 and 5*).

Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a series of elements has changed our perception and the way we perceive our cities. These changes can be considered through a few salient examples. Aerial photography, as an invention of modernity, by Nadar in 1868 introduced a different view of our cities. It was the first time that citizens could consider their cities from above. The vertical construction of the city

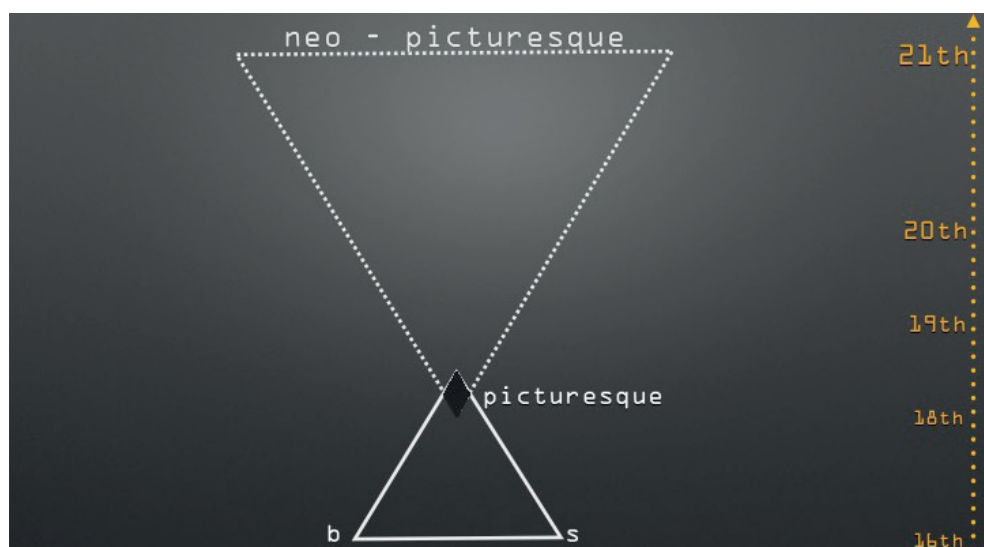


Fig. 5

marks another turning point: if in the past the scope of the city was horizontal from the end of eighteenth century onwards, cities became dominated by skyscrapers following the pioneering examples of Chicago and New York (Berenice Abbott, *Untitled* 1929-33) These skyscrapers altered the urban tissue and created a new term for their "landscape", the *Skyline*.

Our cities gradually became great cities (Paul Citroen, *Metropolis* 1923); and eventually Nature was replaced by urban nature as a secondary nature emphasizing speed, mobility, and the acceleration of time. The image of this new city as a fragmented one provokes a sense of loss, dislocation and collapse. The General Motors Futurama exhibit the "Highways & Horizons" pavilion at New York World's Fair in 1939, had visitors ride for a third of a mile in audio-equipped chairs through the 35,738 square foot scale model of an imagined world of 1960, complete with automated highways. This staging of modernity revealed another aspect of the importance of height, in observing the city, here conceived both literally and figuratively as a model (*fig. 6*).

However, at the dawn of the 21st century another dimension was introduced in the urban landscape to revolutionize our perceptions: the virtual. An imaginary, or constructed space, the virtual is not immediately accessible to the eye, but must be constructed and represented as such. Humans, historically, have sought to look "above" the horizon. This gaze is one that, in a body left attached to the land and ground, leaves it to the eye (and body) to see above the horizon line, to break away from the earth, and move beyond the horizon.

It remains nonetheless a physical impossibility. The divine gaze is inaccessible to man except for the dying man or already dead (Socrates in the *Phaedo*). For this, he must leave the earth, and fly away taking with him his own body. It is technology that allows us to displace ourselves, to circulate on the vertical plane. What indeed of the man "in the middle" space? What is typology exists of view not horizontal view vertical view (up or down), but of crushing depths, manipulated in images by yet another form of technical devices? The dimension of the new technologies to be found in the digital world, create a new form of gaze, that leads to a form of self-floating in the image. A number of productions by the neo-intelligence machines have changed our sensibility with game interactivity, superposition of soft wares manipulations on the image of heritage cities, augmented reality and the 3d view from the satellites (*fig. 7*).

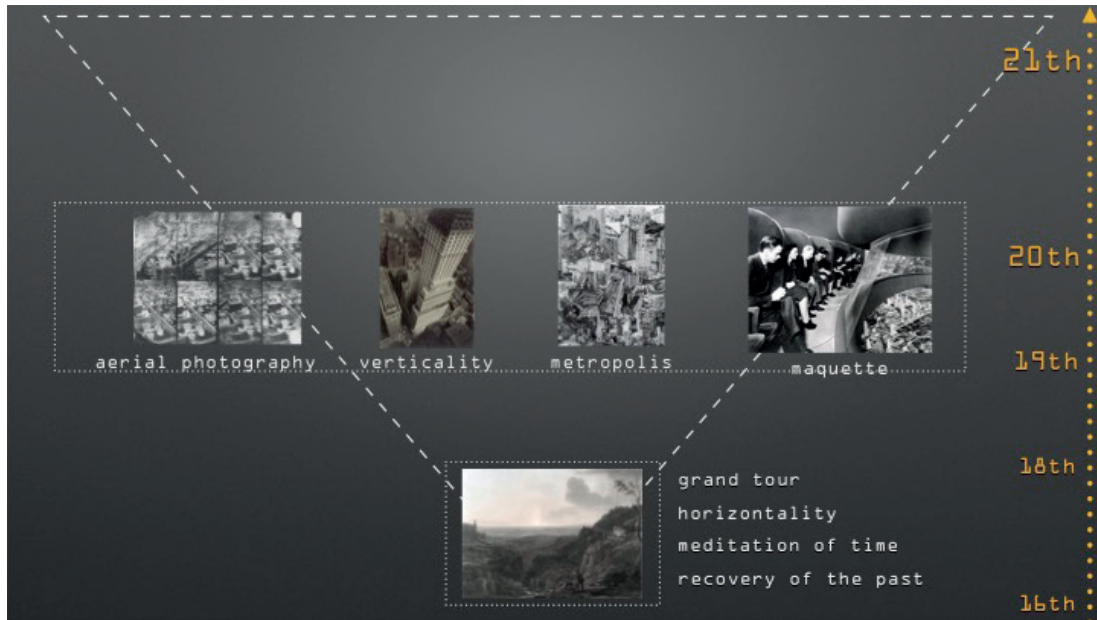


Fig. 6

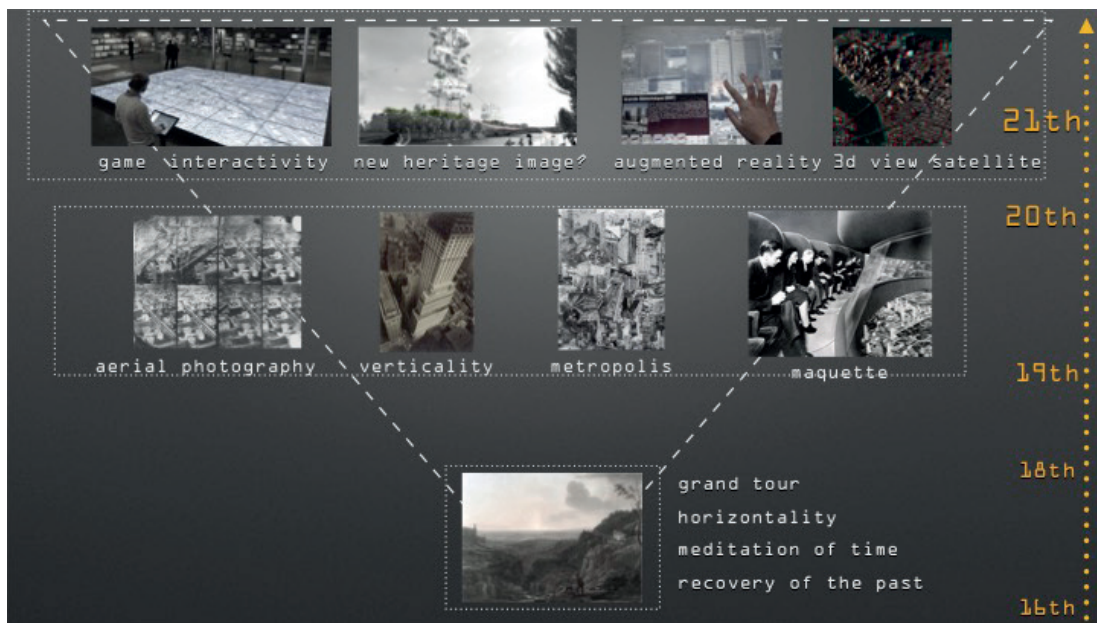


Fig. 7

The high-rise as experience between materiality and immateriality

This paper aims to find another vision of vertical architecture in terms of experience in height, another vision to be deployed in different strata to define and specify: theoretical and historical aspects and meanings of the “height” and “perspective” such as size and view point. The physical and visual experience of “high points” in a contemporary metropolis use representation of productions and images documenting as experience, among other perspectives. The experience of the last floor combines different polarities and scales, a canopy of high rise buildings, a place where inhabiting the present defines itself as an experience that creates a new life in which the time collapses and the instantaneous nature of perception dominates. It is a reflection on the city in which what is given to see what is revealed, taken into account. The height, not just the sight lines of the streets, corridors, is taken into account because when we detach from the urban space and head to the top of a building, that is we enter another dimension different from the ground public surface. What values are associated with these experiences and points of view from above? What is at the stake both consciously and unconsciously in this type of space where in our fear of height is confronted with our desire to look further?

Today we are facing a new overflow of mass production of images and frames from social networks and urban tissues. The new usage of our sight not only horizontality or verticality, but like a field of networks floating from over the environment and being accommodated by our memory. These developments in communication, electronic content, and growing hybridization often qualified as augmented reality, add another quality of intelligence to our sight. Our reactions and responses are no longer limited to our sensibility, but come to encompass the sensuality of our environment, our cityscape. Visibility and invisibility interact in the experience of daily life (*fig. 8*).

In the technological world, very small and very large interconnected objects produce, at the same time and in the same space, an immaterial world of images, either voluntarily or involuntarily. These images are elaborated by agents formed by the coupling of men and machines. The analysis of relationships and connections between them with the way that the illusion and disillusion, real and play, create a zone that Winnicott names it *transitional spaces*. These spaces generate: play areas, the potentialities in personality development, as well as the education and training of each individual in different environments and contexts. Hence, the last floor can be a place between reality and play where the spatial devices allows us to apprehend the vastness of the city. These framed spaces overlooking spaces by means of a gain in altitude can be considered a social construct, mediated by tangible spaces, perception and representations allow the individual to form different views. Views such as: a vertical view from below, or vertical views from above, but especially viewed from oblique angle of the very high, that produces shadows, reliefs and depths down

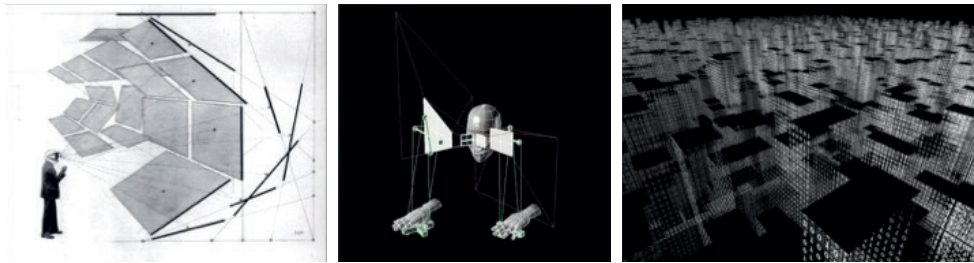


Fig. 8

below. Beyond his or her immediate perception, the spectacular gains access to a top view, stable in its trajectory, not like an airplane, that creates a model effect of the great city. This view accumulates a model effect and makes it possible to read a city by taking into account its complexity and its history. These devices will also be considered from an intangible point of view by using images and representations to “translate” in their own mediums that materiality, either by conventional technical representations (plan, section, elevation, of digitalized images (3D representation), aerial photographs and in situ, photos from underwater depth, or creating this models and effect of miniaturization. This game space permits the viewer, by means of manipulations, to apprehend very large or exceeding large territorial elements. Correlative to the nestling of the eye in the apparatus of a sensible and sentient body is the question of what, specifically, these images *render* rather than the necessary technical devices for their fabrication. It is the manner in which these images become visible, sensible, and impressive that is of capital importance –how they are translated for our eye and our human bodies (*fig. 9*).

In order to understand these steps we will now outline the perspective of the “Last floor” from a specific context in Paris, the Montparnasse Tower. To understand the challenges of a new picturesque generated by the use of “last floor” at the top a skyscraper, such as Montparnasse tower, it is necessary to briefly recall certain historical elements of the Parisian urban context.

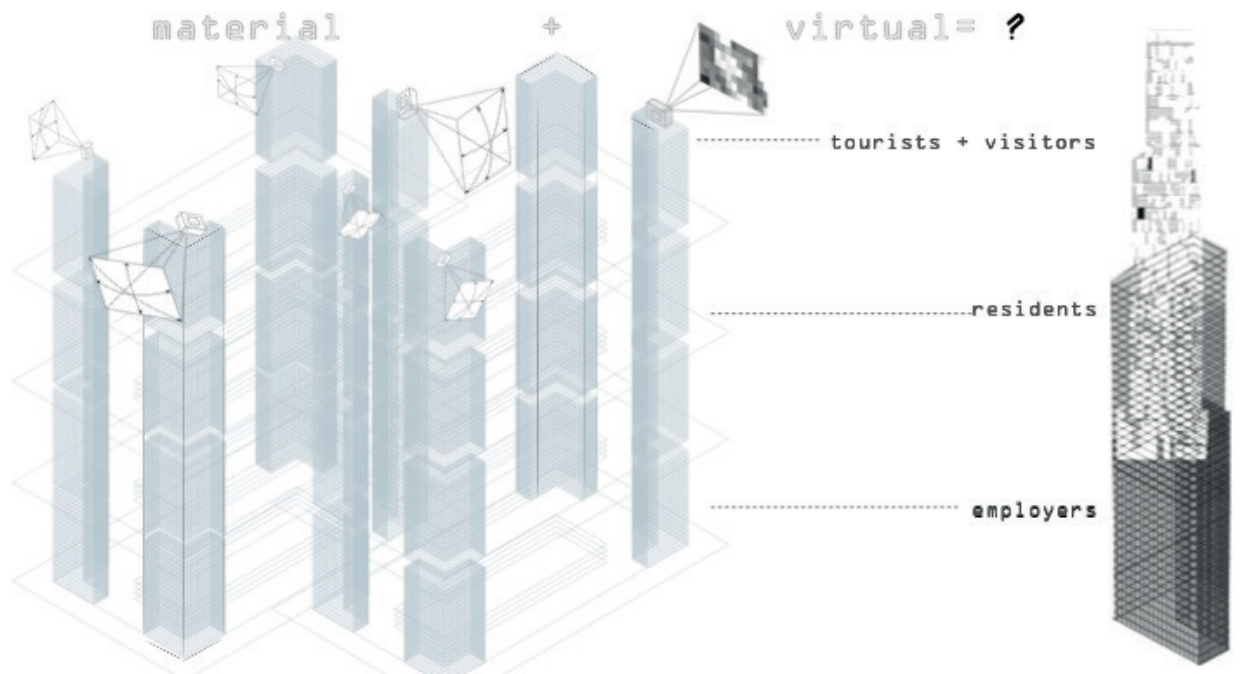


Fig. 9

The new picturesque in Paris?

At the end of the nineteenth, and throughout the twentieth century, the industrialized countries have encountered two basic urban phenomena. In Europe, two world wars with their mass-bombing, have destroyed many large and small cities such as London, Berlin, Dresden, Warsaw and several cities in Japan ... This demolition caused the *tabula rasa* that generated modernist and postmodern reconstructions or identical heritage reconstructions. On the other hand, the construction of increasingly high towers, first in the United States and (almost) everywhere then produced the iconic skylines of our contemporaneity. This model is still operative today. New York is a city in which competitive iconic images travel around the world in a race for new heights.

Paris, however, has survived massive destruction due the same to wars and somehow managed to escape the temptation of vertical construction, the "Eiffel Tower" alone assuming the role of a vertical eminence contrasted with the horizontality of the capital city. Due to the transparency of its structure, the Eiffel Tower also offers a spectacular upward element, a long vertical traveling progressively unfolds in the same movement with the cultural imagination attached to it *in situ*, *in visu* and *in actu*. It is as if every spectator, quote a famous passage from Descartes, became "as master and owner", of a world deployed world at his feet.

Amid these specificities and despite the absence, upon closer examination, of a *furor turrium* as an attractive urban planning alternative, Paris can be considered a European and world metropolis with a singular « aura ». The Parisian cityscape can indeed be characterized and synthesized into two main elements: first the enhancement of heritage and second, picturesque. The *Forma Urbis* of Paris changes, but according to its own, internal logic. The city accumulates successive historical, urban and cultural layers. These layers are visible and legible for the *flaneur* of the nineteenth century, and today's Parisian nostalgic for Baudelaire. The layers are for the tourist to discover, plunged with delight into this labyrinthine urban fabric, made up of the compactness of the urban morphology, density of activities and physical characteristics of the white stone architecture. This accumulation and the materiality make whole Paris a place of heritage and memory, but not in the sense that it be worshiped, like the ruins of Rome. Paris is a melting pot of multiple images and differences in one unity. This unity that creates, stimulates, and excites the eye, brings forth discoveries and surprises. Here we find a series of characteristics typical of the scopic drive of the picturesque eye. The combination of heritage and scenic is one of the main reasons that Paris - and France - became the first tourist destination in the world, and one of the main cities for international associations (ICCAworld).

Among a vast number of significant Parisian places, four urban situations act as « high points » in the current city limits. They are potential observation decks

from which we can analyze the evolution of our sight and choose images to see. In the order of their historical creation the four points are: the Arc de Triomphe (1836), situated at the western limits of the city. It is one of the outstanding points of historical axis of Paris, or its « triumphal way » that represents an image of French Revolutionary and the Napoleonic Wars. It is the 11th most visited monument in Paris. Then, Montmartre, Sacré Coeur (1882), in the north of the city, raised after the Paris Commune. It is the second most visited monument after Notre Dame. The Basilica's Terrace and Esplanade also offer panoramic views. Third is one the modernist project of the 1970s, Montparnasse (1973) tower in the south part of the city. Fourth, the towers of the TGB (Très Grande Bibliothèque) of the National Library of France (1995), situated on the east side, south of the Seine, and in one of the newly reconstructed areas of Paris. These urban situations are positioned on the axes of Roman founders of Lutetia city that cross at Saint-Michel/Saint-Germain. The north-south axis, or *Cardo*, unites Paris St Denis basilica with the tower of Montparnasse and beyond. The east-west axis, or *Decumanus*, ties Marne-la-Vallée to La Defense and beyond. These orientations are marked by a monument or a remarkable site, which becomes not only a "mecca" of history but also a "high place" in the urban history of Paris. Topographically speaking, it is a venue built from scratch on an artificial soil. It is a stand. All four are in the limits of the actual Boulevard *Périphérique* (Paris's administrative limit marked by a controlled-access, dual-carriageway ring road). From such positions, one can see the city and the cityscape. From inside the *Périphérique* (Paris Intra-muros), outside (Parisian suburb) and beyond.

From these high level views, the eyes are turned towards the city and its panorama. It provides a view of the historical city, an accomplished urban form, closed in on itself. On the other hand, every situation occurs on the outside of the city, aimed toward its future developments, imaginary, utopian or real. These orientations are the observation decks for each historical moment, defining how Paris has projected a future, and France, from an artistic point of view, promotes science and culture. From a visual perspective, we can group the first two orientations under the "classical" visual arts (painting, drawing, engraving) and technical modernity like photography and cinema. The last two represent the new age of digital imaging, digital books, in short, a technological modernity.

As much as the Eiffel Tower is clear, transparent and light, the Montparnasse tower is black, opaque, heavy, and frozen like a sentinel. Not particularly appealing and attractive, high and vertical, it is clearly visible and legible in relation to the horizontality of the Parisian cityscape. If you can see it from everywhere, the converse is also true.

Its top floor offers a panoramic view of 360 degrees from which we can discover the



Fig. 10 - 11

Parisian cityscape fairly accurately in 3D, as a model and not as a surface. Advertising (and the website) is made to attract tourists and bring them up to the top, to compete with the elegance of the Eiffel Tower, and Montmartre's Sacred Heart, which seems anchored in the geological morphology of Paris.

If the Eiffel Tower can be seen as “decorative”, as a precious gem placed on the summit of the city of Paris, Montparnasse tower can be seen as its opposite. Produced according to an economic and functionalist logic, it is built on slabs, which separate from the soil to create an underground train station with all of its connections. In the period of new modernity, everything is built at the cost of the brutal destruction of entire neighborhoods, the Mecca of artistic history (and picturesque) of Paris. There remains an empty shell, a precious name, gutted of its original meaning (*fig. 10 and 11*).

The Mont Parnasse, in two words, defines the system of classical fine arts (Souriau, the Marquis de Girardin, and the picturesque theoreticians) as a poetic place, the highest ever since it marks the meeting place of all the arts. The Muses dance in circles surrounding Apollo, the sun god, the god of poets, god of beauty (classical), with the lyre, enthroned at the center of the round dance. Here is a possible reversal of meanings of the tower and its role in the new production system images. The

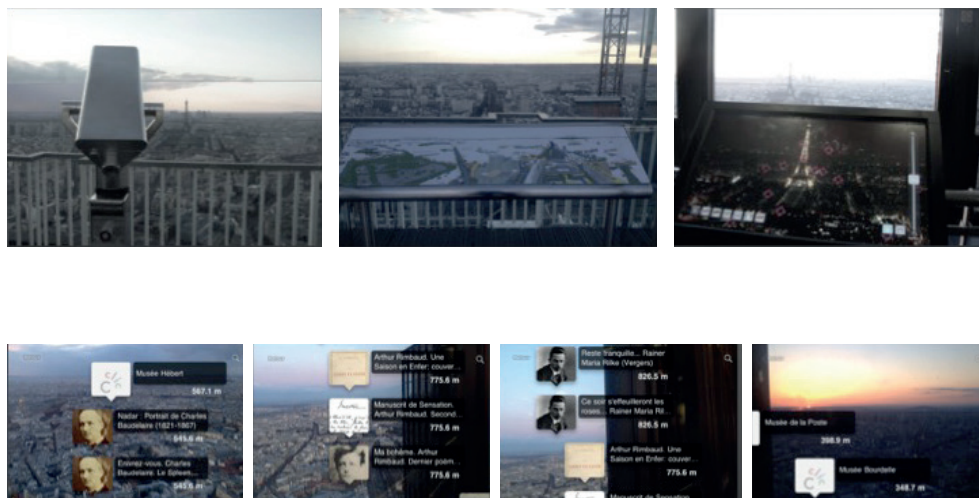


Fig. 12

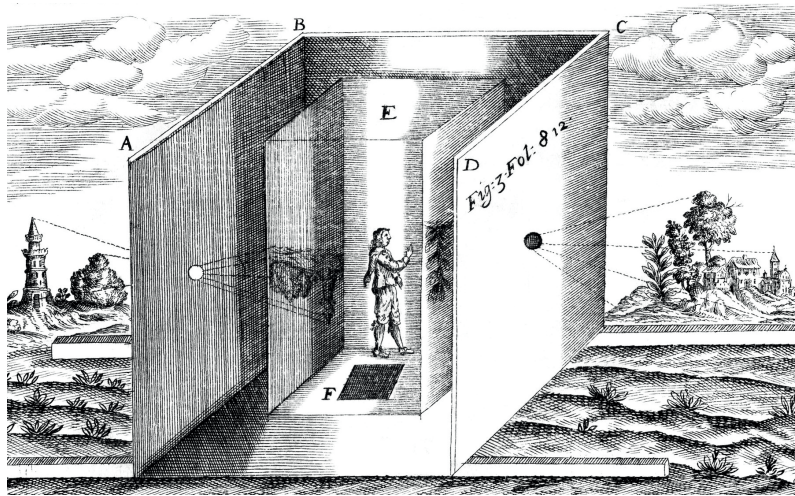


Fig. 13

black tower can be seen as a *camera obscura*. An involuntary, monumental scale of the city and the entire urban landscape is produced by digital facilities and other instruments that project a new space from which to see. This digital camera walks the cone of vision, recording not only the 360 degrees of around the physical city, but also the historical and cultural layers of science, arts and letters. The devices installed on the top floor create new visual matter, they are devices that can travel through time and space by mobilizing the banks of data and images from the Internet (fig. 12 and 13).

The tower is not just a technical architectural object or as a symbolic object, but the means by which to see the interactions between the creation and implementation of material imaginary to create either a new urban identity or a new skyline practices. Exceeding a public to approach a particular entry to mix different approaches to come up with something new. In this sense, the Montparnasse tower is not only a station or a functional tower; it is a place for the production of images and their consumption. A place that is eminently contemporary picturesque. It is from this matter that the contemporary inhabited world is drawn and deploys itself to become a temporal spatial bubble, a sphere, an envelope, even a screen, where are projected and developed in a literal sense, such as a film, images constitutive of a "*frons scaenae*" (fig.14).



Fig. 14

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