

Title of paper: Changing Chance: A walk through the landscape of process in design

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Biography: **Eliana Sousa Santos** is an architect with practice within architecture “expanded fields” of landscape, sculpture and design. She did her undergraduate studies at FAUTL Lisbon, graduate studies at DARQ FCTUC Coimbra, has worked within the team of West 8 and worked as an independent architect. She is currently a PhD candidate at the London Consortium, University of London. Her current research interests are about the “desire for landscape” that can be found in contemporary artistic and architectural practice.

Changing Chance

A walk through the landscape of process in design

Abstract

This essay concerns the peripatetic of the picturesque in the architectural and artistic discourse in the twentieth-century. It focuses on the relationship between Robert Smithson's text "Frederick Law Olmsted and the dialectical landscape" with the English polemics of the picturesque in the field of architecture and design. It shows how Robert Smithson employed and manipulated concepts in the field of philosophy of art to justify a departure from the creation of artworks as individual finished objects. In his text Smithson reintroduced the terms picturesque and sharawadgi in connection to landscape in order to explain its dialectical character. Robert Smithson's interest could have been catalysed by the re-emerging polemics around the notion of picturesque that happened in England between 1940 and 1960. Nikolaus Pevsner revived the interest around the concept connecting it with the modernist ideals. Smithson recognized that a picturesque landscape – in the twentieth-century as well as in the eighteenth-century – is never finished and thus can never be considered an object on its own, a thing-in-itself.

Picturesque peripatetic

The concept of picturesque was constantly emerging in the discourse of diverse people in twentieth century's art and architecture theory. The picturesque thus appeared as an important concept of the seventeenth century British art in Christopher Hussey's *The picturesque* (1928), as the true 'pioneer' of modern design in Nikolaus Pevsner's *The Englishness of English Art* (1956), as an enemy impossible to beat in Reyner Banham's "The Revenge of the Picturesque" (1968), as the origin of Land Art by Robert Smithson in "Frederick Law Olmsted and the dialectical landscape" (1972), and also as the founding concept of the "Originality of the Avant-Garde" (1982) by Rosalind Krauss. This range of different opinions aroused by the same word – in a gradient that spans pure admiration to absolute irritation – is the testimony of an argument that influenced the development of architecture and the arts in the last century. Although important studies concern the polemics of the picturesque in English architectural discourse separated from the American critical and artistic practice, a study of the transatlantic relationship between them is lacking. The present essay introduces a connection between the two.

In 1973, Robert Smithson published the famous essay that allowed people to look at his own work as picturesque. It was "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Picturesque Landscape". Inspired by his visit to the exhibition about Frederick Law Olmsted's work in New York's Central Park, Smithson defended Olmsted's liking for the writings of Uvedale Price and William Gilpin:

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The origins of Olmsted's view of landscape are to be found in 18th-century England, particularly in the theories of Uvedale Price and William Gilpin. Price extended Edmund Burke's Inquiry into the ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful to a point that tried to free landscape from the "picture" gardens of Italy into a more physical sense of the temporal landscape. A tree for example, struck by a lightning was something other than merely beautiful or sublime – it was "picturesque." This word in its own way has been struck by lightning over the centuries. Words, like trees, can be suddenly deformed or wrecked, but such deformation or wreckage cannot be dismissed by timid academics. Price seems to have accepted a side of nature that the "formalists" of his times would rather have excluded.ⁱ

Here Smithson considers two main ideas about the picturesque: one is 'the physical sense of the temporal landscape' that is evident when reading Gilpin's travelogue; the other is that picturesque is not easily definable, something that Uvedale Price classified between the concepts of beautiful and sublime.

When stressing the physical sense of the landscape over the pictorial sight seeing, Smithson recalls all the necessary activities, besides looking, that are implied in any sightseeing journey. There is no mere sightseeing, since the whole activity of walking, moving and being in a landscape transforms a vast eventless space in a sequence of meaningful experiences. As for the concept of picturesque being in between the sublime and the beautiful, Smithson focuses his attention on the a-formal — and not formless — nature of the picturesque. This preference for the a-formal nature has its roots in the notion of picturesque that was weaved in the eighteenth century – by Uvedale Price, Richard Payne Knight and William Gilpin – and that was revived in the twentieth century by Christopher Hussey and Nikolaus Pevsner. The picturesque in its material sense — a response to the strict formality of the swooning hills of English gardens improved by Humphry Repton — was supposed to cause unexpected events in the real landscape through a 'new system of improvement by neglect and accident'ⁱⁱ. The other important feature of this notion would be the attachment of concepts and ideas through imagination as William Gilpin and Payne Knight defended.

Knight strongly agreed with Archibald Alison's 'theory of association', an idea developed in *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* published in 1790. In Alison's theory certain objects were found to be catalysts for intricate trains of thought. He linked these association sequences with the concept of picturesque, so that when a spectator was suddenly drawn towards a picturesque view, connecting it to a painting or a drawing, all emotions that were primarily

connected with that painting were suddenly brought to memory. Thus in Payne Knight's view, art was directly connected to perception and memory, enhanced by the power of suggestion of the interaction between the two.

Regarding the power of associations, there is something very picturesque emerging in most of Robert Smithson's writings. His essays are usually full of references and they can be called picturesque in the sense that they manifest his own associations of ideas. Smithson shared with the philosophers of the picturesque the playful need to absorb all kinds of information and use it in their own accord. He realized that all his knowledge about different disciplines allowed him to do such things as think about art in scientific terms or think about science in artistic terms. Smithson's texts show that he was a prolific reader and that his curiosity expanded along many subjects. He often used scientific terms to define artistic problems, he quoted profusely and played with his imagined reader's curiosity. In the essay enigmatically titled "The artist as a site-seer: A dithorpic essay" he even adds a note urging: "...look up the word dirge in the dictionary, it will give you lots of ideas".ⁱⁱⁱ

In "Frederick Law Olmsted and the dialectical landscape" Smithson refers another word that will also bring many ideas to mind when looked up in the dictionary. The word is *sharawadgi*.

Looking up 'sharawadgi' in the Oxford English Dictionary we find that its first record was made by William Temple, in his text *Upon the gardens of Epicurus* published in 1685. Temple had heard from people "who have lived much among Chineses" that their opinions about design, "building and planting", were completely different from "ours in Europe", since the Western way of design seemed to take in to high account planned proportions and organized symmetries, whereas the Oriental design would be surprisingly beautiful but without "any order or disposition of parts, that shall be commonly or easily observed"^{iv}. Long after Temple, Alexander Pope and Horace Walpole have also used the word associating it with irregularity and *chinoiserie*. But the last two records in the dictionary are the result of the work of Nikolaus Pevsner.

In 1949, Nikolaus Pevsner and S. Lang published the essay "A Note on Sharawadgi" in the *Architectural Review*, where they traced the genealogy about the origin and possible meaning of the word to find how William Temple came across it. The premise of the whole article is that William Temple's invention, or misunderstanding, of the word *sharawadgi* was the catalyst of the 'picturesque movement' in England. For Pevsner, who was keen to find origins and pioneers, this was a real joy.

Robert Smithson most probably had read this essay since he owned Pevsner's *Studies in Art*,

Architecture and Design: from Mannerism to Romanticism, a book that consisted in a selection of Pevsner's essays in which "Note on Sharawadgi" was included.^v

In this volume Pevsner grouped a series of texts that he had published in different journals, between 1925 and 1956, and a good part of these essays had the picturesque as an important topic. This volume thus included "The Genesis of the Picturesque" and "A Note on Sharawadgi" both published in the 1940s in the *Architectural Review* and denounced by Reyner Banham in his "Revenge of the Picturesque", it also included the articles "Richard Payne Knight" and "Uvedale Price" with precious informations about the picturesque fabulous duet. For Pevsner, the richness of the literature about the picturesque resides mainly in the fact that this was an aesthetics based on a dialogue between Payne Knight and Uvedale Price. Pevsner's interest in the theoretical dialogue between Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight is the basis for his affirmation: "the modern revolution of the early twentieth century and the Picturesque revolution of a hundred years before had all their fundamentals in common."^{vi}

The picturesque was to be related with modernism through a common tendency to rationalism, together with the comprehension of painting as the depiction of purely abstract features and the association of ideas that can be attached to them. The picturesque revolution was to be connected with a fondness for contradiction, an harmony between opposed concepts. Uvedale Price initially defined picturesque as the concept between beautiful and sublime, Payne Knight identified a dialectic between visual abstractions and association of ideas, and Pevsner identified the rationalist streak behind the will of wanting nature to become more natural.

It is thus possible to suppose that Smithson was familiar with Pevsner's view about the philosophy of the picturesque. In the "Genesis of the Picturesque" Pevsner had connected the picturesque with liberal idealism:

The Landscape garden was conceived in England between 1710 and 1730. It was conceived by philosophers, writers and virtuosi – not by architects and gardeners. It was conceived in England, because it is the garden of liberalism, and England just at that moment turned liberal, that is Whig.^{vii}

In "Richard Payne Knight" and "Uvedale Price", Pevsner had defined the picturesque as a dialectic between conceptual analogies and visual abstractions and considered both authors as pioneers of modern thought. And finally in a "Note on Sharawadgi" Pevsner, together with Lang, considered the invention of this concept as the origin of this whole process.

Robert Smithson, maybe following Pevsner's and Lang's references, suggests as further reading

on the subject of *sharawadgi*, the homonymous paper “A Note on Sharawadgi” by Y. Z. Chang. Chang’s paper starts with a problem that seems taken from a story by Jorge Luis Borges, he wants to clarify the following statement by the editors of the New English Dictionary about the word *sharawadgi*: ‘Chinese scholars agree that it cannot belong to the language.’^{viii}

Chang states that in fact the ‘Chinese scholars’ were right saying that *sharawadgi* couldn’t be a Chinese word. But it might be a Chinese expression, or a group of words instead. So he finds that William Temple could be referring to *Sa-ro-kwai-chi*, where *sa-ro* means careless or unorderedly grace; and *kwai-chi* means surprising or impressive. “*Sa-ro-kwai-chi* would then mean ‘the quality of being impressive or surprising through careless or unorderedly grace’^{ix}

Although Chang’s essay allows to consider that William Temple was not lying when he referenced the fantastic Chinese expression, Pevsner and Lang refer many other studies on its etymology that were contradictory. Some suggest that the invention of a word such as *sharawadgi* was an easy solution to justify Temple’s own aesthetic preferences. Recent studies connecting the word *sharawadgi* with asymmetric beauty have traced its origin not to Chinese, but to Japanese language — supposing Temple’s introduction with the word to the contact with Dutch settlers in Kyoto, and thus absolving him from the accusation of having invented it.^x Although not exactly a liar, Temple was a storyteller and he also had a scope for the spreading the interest about the idea of irregular beauty. Travelogues, exotic stories and the reference to oriental cultures legitimating trends was a recurrent practice in the eighteenth century. And this fascination traversed centuries and got into Robert Smithson’s skin.

Smithson’s fascination with the word *sharawadgi* is clear in his praise for Frederick Law Olmsted where he stresses the process dynamics in of a landscape garden, which he illustrates with Olmsted’s anecdote:

The landscape-architect André formerly in charge of the suburban plantations of Paris, was walking with me through the Buttes-Chaumont Park, of which he was the designer, when I said of a certain passage of it. ‘That, to my mind, is the best piece of artificial planting of its age, I have ever seen.’ He smiled and said, ‘Shall I confess it is the result of neglect?’^{xi}

But Olmsted, who had learned with Uvedale Price and with his own experience, knew that neglect is the final stage of a very carefully prepared set of premises that would allow these happy accidents to happen. Olmsted is known to have been a fan of William Gilpin’s travelogues and is quoted to have said that Uvedale Price’s *Essay on the Picturesque* to be one of the most influent

books for the development of landscape architecture.^{xii}

Before being Central Park's construction hero, Frederick Law Olmsted wondered through different occupations. He worked as a sailor in a vessel bound to China, tried to set up a farm, travelled to Europe, started a publishing company, worked as the reporter of the immoral conditions in 'American slave states'. When he was appointed as superintendent of New York's Central Park in 1857 he was 35 years old.

In 1852 Olmsted published *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England* as an account of his trip to that country. Although he was travelling to a place that he already knew from Price and Gilpin's descriptions, his account is not about the recognition of an already imagined landscape. Olmsted was attentive to many details of English life and cities and he was fascinated with everything he could learn in the foreign country. In fact he seemed to be very much in tune with the attitude described by Nikolaus Pevsner in his view about Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight message:

...keep your eyes open. See, analyse what impresses you, and for what reasons. You will then realize that we have available an infinitely richer body of materials for artistic creation than classical theory would make you believe. Use it in your work. To this day we cannot do better than to follow this advice.^{xiii}

So in his walks and talks Olmsted noted everything that would be useful as practical and creative material. He notices people's behaviour, their dress code, and the way they build their houses, their farms, their businesses, their cities and their lives. He notes the minutiae and describes overall impressions.

One of the most well known impressions by Olmsted is his description of his visit to Joseph Paxton's Birkenhead Park, which is usually connected as an obvious influence to the project of Central Park in New York. Olmsted's notes about Birkenhead have many practical details about planning, planting, constructing and maintaining a park, but its main concern is with the process of formation. Olmsted thus lists the tasks that transformed a 'flat clay farm' into a 'delightful garden' in only one year.

Since this was an incredibly fast operation, Olmsted managed to describe the whole process in two paragraphs. The sequence of tasks is the following: the setting of roads and walks, the excavation of a pond, the creation of mounds with the ground taken from the pond, the draining of the site to fill the pond, the planting of the mounds and the building of facilities like lodges and pavilions. The process seems to be magically self-sufficient: draining the terrain would supply water for a pond, excavating

the pond would provide ground to form hills. After this set up: "... the skeleton of this delightful garden was complete."^{xiv}

And in the years to come this skeleton would develop itself into a luscious garden, getting even better as time passed, with the help of happy accidents. Olmsted's description is very beautiful and optimistic, it concerns invaluable knowledge — how to arrange a set of premises that will allow a place to develop itself. But it is not the development of park that Olmsted notes as the most fantastic thing in Birkenhead, for he saw that the beauty of the whole park was in the fact of being a space open to anybody.

The poorest British peasant is as free to enjoy it in all its parts as the British queen. More than that, the baker of Birkenhead has the pride of an OWNER in it. It is not a grand good thing?^{xv}

Olmsted didn't separate process, aesthetics and ethics. The park was beautiful because of its clever construction, its pleasant result and its democratic quality. If it had missed one of those qualities it could not possibly be a 'grand good thing'. Rather than being concerned with purely aesthetic problems, Olmsted expands his notion of a 'good' park to include the moral to its function and beauty to the ingeniousness of its building system.

Maybe inspired by Olmsted harmonious union between aesthetics, ontology and ethics in the landscape garden, Robert Smithson considered the concept of picturesque as something not purely aesthetic. Smithson while trying to recover what was lost with academic timidity, rearranges a definition of picturesque that is in total accord with the development of a system or process that would allow the transformation of materiality: "Price and Gilpin provide a synthesis with their formulation of the picturesque, which is on close examination related to chance and change in the material order of nature."^{xvi}

Smithson's notion of the picturesque is thus related with his own fascination with the concept of entropy, and the way in which an entropic movement could be catalyzed by human action, hence his connection between the ideas of chance and change. With this Smithson tried to obscure the aesthetic and philosophic connection present in the compound 'picturesque landscape' and continues:

The picturesque, far from being an inner movement of the mind is based on real land; it precedes the mind in its material external existence. We cannot take a one-sided view of the landscape within this dialectic. A park can no longer be seen as a

“thing-in-itself” but the park becomes a “thing-for-us”. As a result we are not hurled into the spiritualism of Thoreauian transcendentalism, or its present day offspring of “modernist formalism” rooted in Kant, Hegel and Fichte. Price, Gilpin and Olmsted are forerunners of a dialectical materialism applied to the physical landscape. Dialectics of this type are a way of seeing things in a manifold of relations not as isolated objects. Nature for the dialectician is indifferent to any formal ideal.”^{xvii}

For Smithson the picturesque is based in the material reality, it exists, it is based on ‘real land’. At the same time this reality is the catalyst for the recalling of disparate ideas, memories and connections. Based in this contradiction Smithson defines the picturesque as dialectical materialism, adopting Friedrich Engels’ ‘materialist dialectics’ theory as an analogy.

Smithson is in opposition to a formalist understanding on art, and further he names his adversaries as Clement and Wilhelm Worringer. Both, according to Smithson, partook the Kantian tradition of aesthetics where the aesthetic object is completed, finished in a temporal sense. They considered the world as a group of independent objects rather than relationships between them. Smithson reaches for a way of seeing things as relations and the concept of *sharawadgi* allows space those relations to happen.

Considering the construction of Central Park in New York, Smithson reminds the reader that the site would be almost a desert by the time Olmsted started working on it. What Smithson said to admire about Olmsted’s project was the courage he had to bring sharp contrast between a luxuriant nature and the artificial city. What is notorious in the documental sequence of the 1972 exhibition catalogue is that that whole area had no contrast at all, being unified by an overall amorphousness, since by then the city of New York was barely in an embryonic stage of what it would become few decades later. In Smithson’s text underlies the conviction that the park was a catalyst to what the city would become, the park was the material evidence of a dialectical system and would never be a single object or a finished product. Smithson’s impression of Olmsted’s design had nothing to do with the final aesthetic result of an enclosed landscape garden but with the discovery of the violent change that was necessary to create it, and the flow of consequences that it managed to cause beyond itself. Smithson was taking the landscape park away from its aesthetic tradition and bringing it closer to the physical materiality required to contribute to the shaping of an entire city.

Smithson reintroduced the terms picturesque and *sharawadgi* in connection to landscape in order to explain that a landscape – in the twentieth century as well as in the eighteenth century – is never

finished and thus can never be considered an object on its own, a thing-in-itself. Considering that a landscape is always an evidence of a continuing process rather than a completed form.

ⁱ pp. 63 Robert Smithson, 'Frederick Law Olmsted and the dialectical landscape' in Jack Flam (ed.), Robert Smithson: Collected writings, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)

ⁱⁱ letter from Uvedale Price to Humphry Repton in Uvedale Price, *On the picturesque: with an essay on the origin of taste, and much original matter*, (London: Caldwell, Lloyd and Co., 1842)

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Smithson, 'The artist as a site-seer: A dirthorphic essay' in Jack Flam (ed.), Robert Smithson: Collected writings, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)

^{iv} William Temple, *Sir William Temple upon the gardens of Epicurus*, (1908)

^v The complete listing of Robert Smithson's library is in: Ann Morris Reynolds, *Robert Smithson: Learning from New Jersey and elsewhere*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003)

^{vi} Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art*, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1955)

^{vii} pp.146 Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Genesis of the Picturesque' in Nikolaus Pevsner (ed.), *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design: from Mannerism to Romanticism*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968)

^{viii} pp. 221 Y. Z. Chang, 'A Note on Sharawadgi', *Modern Language Notes* 45:4 (1930), 221-224

^{ix} pp. 106 Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Genesis of the Picturesque' in Nikolaus Pevsner (ed.), *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design: from Mannerism to Romanticism*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968)

^x Ciaran Murray, 'Sharawadgi resolved', *Garden History* 26:2, (1998) 208-213

^{xi} Robert Smithson, 'Frederick Law Olmsted and the dialectical landscape' in Jack Flam (ed.), Robert Smithson: Collected writings, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)

^{xii} Witold Rybczynski, *A clearing in the distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the 19th Century*, (New York: Touchstone, 2000)

^{xiii} pp.228 Nikolaus Pevsner 'C 20 Picturesque: An Answer to Basil Taylor's Broadcast', *Architectural Review* 115:688 (1954), 227-229

^{xiv} pp.87 Frederick Law Olmsted, *Walks and Talks of an American Farmer in England*, (New York: George P. Putnam, 1852)

^{xv} *ibid.*

^{xvi} Robert Smithson, 'Frederick Law Olmsted and the dialectical landscape' in Jack Flam (ed.), Robert Smithson: Collected writings, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)

^{xvii} *ibid.*