THE ALPINE FELLOWSHIP
2017

CHŌRA

LANDSCAPE
AND
MINDSCAPE

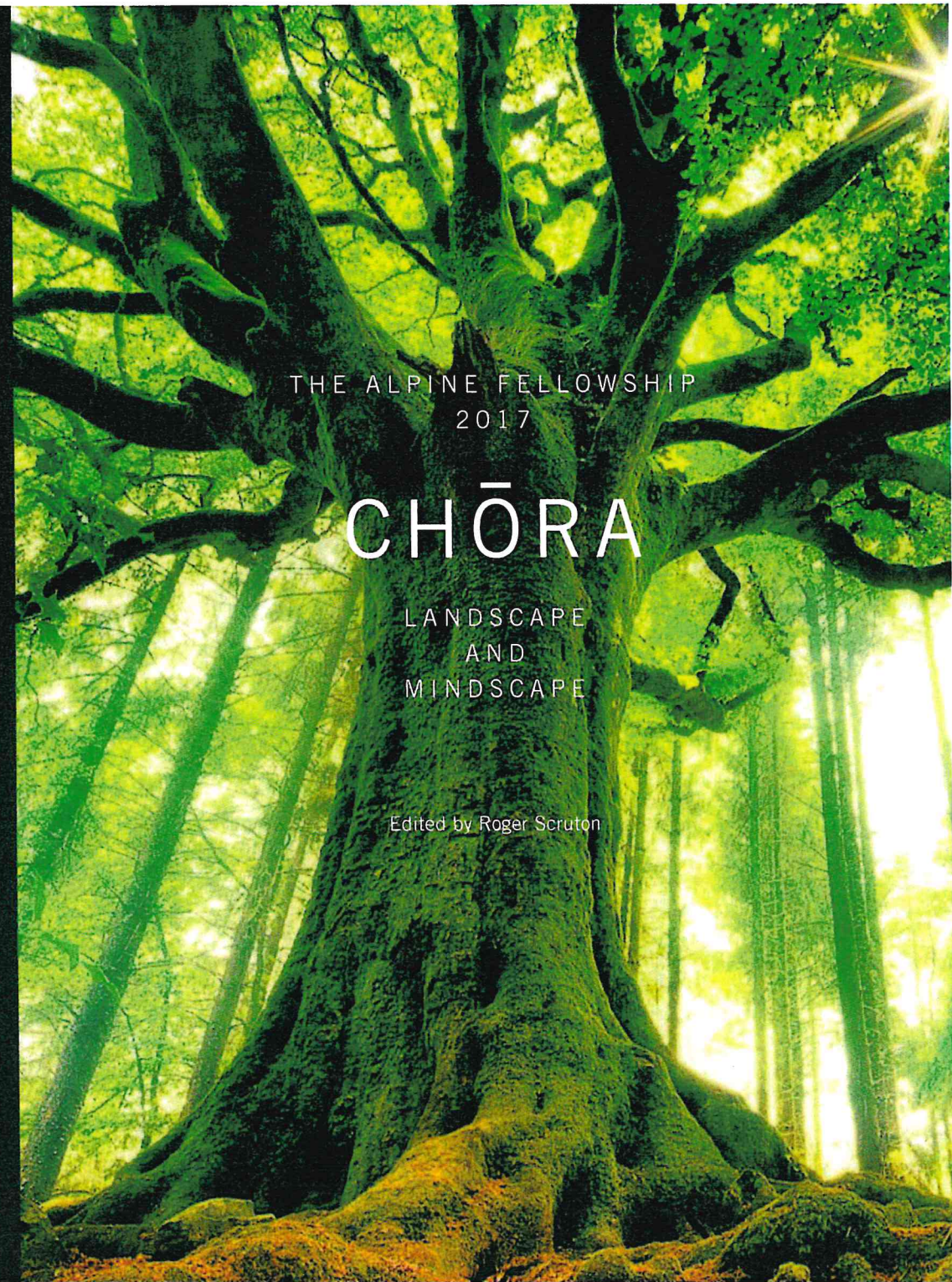Edited by Roger Scruton

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CHŌRA – LANDSCAPE AND MINDSCAPE

Roger Scruton

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Corporate Landscapes

Pasquale Gagliardi

What is actually a 'landscape'? How can we conceptualize it in order fully to understand its quiddity? I will borrow the original argument brought forward by Georges Duby, in his book *Dialogues* (1980).

Men must feed themselves, wrest from nature the conditions for their survival; and can do so only by taking account of the environment that characterizes their habitat. History shows us, however, that their productive practices are not necessarily in functional accord with this environment, but are equally determined by rites, symbols, ideas—in brief, by a worldview. A pure productive practice does not exist; every productive practice is immediately a symbolic practice of appropriation of the world; every productive practice is a way of responding, fitted to a determined environment, to the basic biological requirement, but in so far as that is already culturally formulated. And the signature through which an environment testifies to this *cultural requirement of survival* is called landscape.

According to Duby, then, the landscape is a *natural* reality that has inscribed within itself a *cultural* code. This cultural code is in the first place an aesthetic code. I will mainly refer, in my reasoning, to 'corporate landscapes', i.e. landscapes that characterize corporations and, in general, utilitarian organizations. The reason behind my interest in 'corporate landscapes', is the fact that corporations are *par excellence* productive social systems, expressly governed by instrumental rationality. There, the symbolic value of practices—and the weave between 'expressive' disinterested (aesthetic) actions and 'impressive', interested actions aimed at practical goals results—in contrast—more clearly than in other (non-utilitarian) social aggregations. As G.A. Fine noticed, 'work is a minuet between expressive form and instrumental function'. (*Kitchens: The Culture of Restaurant Work.*)

In order to better understand this weave, I will propose some reflections on the relations existing between *ideas/concepts* and *images/forms*, *identity* and *style*, systems of *meanings* and systems of *sensations*. To translate an idea into an image (or vice versa) entails passing from conceptual abstract order to formal concrete order, expressing, that is, representations of the *mind* in terms of relations between formal elements perceptible to the *senses*. In a visual image these relations are spatial and chromatic, in an auditory perception they are temporal relations between sonic stimuli of different pitch and intensity, and so on. Every cultural system seems to have structural correspondences between its ontological or deontological codes and its aesthetic codes, that is to say, between systems of beliefs and of values, on the one hand, and specific patterns of relation between formal elements on the other. Hauser (*The Social History of Art*, 1952), studied the connection between the geometric style and the autocracy of forms of government in the cultures of Neolithic peasantry, Vernant (*Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, 1969) studied the relationship between the structuring of space and political organization in ancient Greece, and Panofsky (*Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, 1951) studied the relationship between Gothic architecture and scholastic philosophy.

Students primarily interested in mental representations of cultures often use the expression 'vision of reality' metaphorically to indicate a 'conception' of reality. I am suggesting that we use the expression literally, to look at the corporate landscape as a materialization of a worldview, and strive to interpret the aesthetic code written into the land. How and when does a land becomes a landscape? A land becomes a landscape when it is aestheticized. This will happen in two different ways, working, that is *in situ* (in the physical place) and also *in visu* (into the eye). The first way consists of writing the aesthetic code directly onto the physicality of the place, populating it with artifacts. Every landscape has a scenographic element, meaning that it is 'constructed to be seen'. This setting displays and hides, provides backgrounds and close-ups, sequences and articulations. Often the setting constitutes a real visual metaphor: it prompts one to interpret a factory as a cathedral, a pathway as a labyrinth, and a ministry as a monastery. The second mode of aestheticization of a physical place—the writing of the aesthetic code into the eye—consists in educating the eye, in furnishing it with schemata of perception and taste, models of vision, 'lenses' through which to look at reality.

Of course, the 'aestheticization' of the corporate stage is not achieved solely by creating and acting on its visible characteristics: a landscape can be physically constructed to furnish sensory experiences that involve the other senses as well. It is also true that in the human species not all the senses are equally developed or have the same completeness, the same perceptive potential as sight. Nevertheless, the dynamics described with reference to vision are very likely common to all the forms of sense experience: every organizational culture educates the sense of taste, of smell, of touch, of hearing, as well as of sight.

The corporate stage is constituted not solely by inanimate material artifacts but by human beings as well: 'bodies' are a vital—in the twofold sense of essential and alive—component of the landscape. They too, like material artifacts or inert nature, can be 'aestheticized', thereby giving material form to a particular conception of an organization's identity and strategy. (Think of the standardized body language and the dress code of an airline hostess or of the MacDonald employee.) Thus emphatically highlighted is the character of landscaping as a 'technology of control' and the relationship between aesthetics and power. The 'vision' embedded in the landscape can be both a means with which individuals are able to define their personal identities, and a means with which an organization can assimilate people and control them.

An interesting question is: to what extent the great social, economic and technological changes that distinguish the present age foster the birth of organizations which not only have organizational structures different from traditional bureaucracies but are physical and spatial settings radically at odds with those to which we have been accustomed for so long. Let's then move to the new, emerging landscapes.

The traditional organizational landscape—as outlined so far—is primarily a unitary physical space, partly natural and partly artificial, in which it is generally possible to regulate (facilitate or impede) flows of information and relationality, both within the organization and between the organization and the environment. But what landscape characterizes the organizations unconstrained by a territory, virtual communities or temporary organizations that are going to be the organizational forms of the future?

It is difficult to apply the idea of 'landscape', as something unitary which everyone—members or customers—are able to perceive, to de-territorialized organizations, or at any rate to organizations whose members spend increasingly more time outside formal work areas. Actors perceive only the fragment of landscape in which they are located or with which they are in contact. They can 'imagine' (or know through media-transmitted images or sounds), the work settings of the persons with whom they must coordinate themselves, but they cannot perceive them sensorially and directly. In these cases, social interactions based on sensory contact (and therefore which may be regulated in their proxemic features by means of gestures and the reciprocal positioning of the actors in space) are significantly reduced. In the new physical workplaces, moreover, the fragments of the 'corporate' landscape experienced by each actor may be confused with the domestic landscape and with other organizational ones: in situations like telecommuting, e-mail at home or day-care at work, the walls that separate work from the family and the other institutions to which the worker may belong, even temporarily, weaken or disappear.

If the language of things and space is—as we have seen—both a means with which individuals are able to define their personal identities, and a means with which an organization can assimilate people and control them, the new work settings will probably prompt the invention and diffusion of new corporate artifacts and new semiotic conventions. Some authors have pointed out that both of these processes—identifying and assimilating—will presumably be based to an ever greater extent on 'portable' symbols: company T-shirts or corporate ties can be expected to replace architecture, and business cards to replace diplomas and awards hanging on office walls or other 'office-bound' symbols. In a certain sense, the only alternative to a virtual corporate landscape might be a miniaturized and—so to speak—pocket-size landscape.

Some commentators maintain that in these circumstances it will be more difficult for managers to use landscaping to condition the workers' aesthetic experiences, and that there will be more space for individual freedom and empowerment, while others argue that it is impossible to determine '…on whether the new workplace aesthetic is representative of democracy or dictatorship, of employee empowerment or managerial control—or of all, at one and the same time' (G. Cairns, 'Aesthetics, Morality and Power', *Human Relations*, 2002). For sure, the traditional tried and tested systems of socialization, communication and control will become largely obsolete, and the central role played in the new learning environments by computer-mediated communication will lay the basis for new kinds of aesthetic experiences, while rendering others unlikely.

The computer screen separates the users from a real world of multiple perceptions which engage all the senses, and ushers them into a virtual world of infinite potential—made up of images, sounds and information—which requires and refines some senses but dulls others. It is also likely that of the two modalities of aestheticization illustrated earlier—'in situ' and 'in visu': the direct writing of the aesthetic code onto the physicality of the place, and education into perceiving in a particular way—the latter will assume more importance. If it is not possible to structure the setting so that it furnishes

the sensory stimuli desired, the only alternative is to educate people to select stimuli by filtering them through the corporate aesthetic code. I'm eager to look at more empirical data that might shed clearer light on these new sensory maps, and on the emotional climate that supports or is generated by them.

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