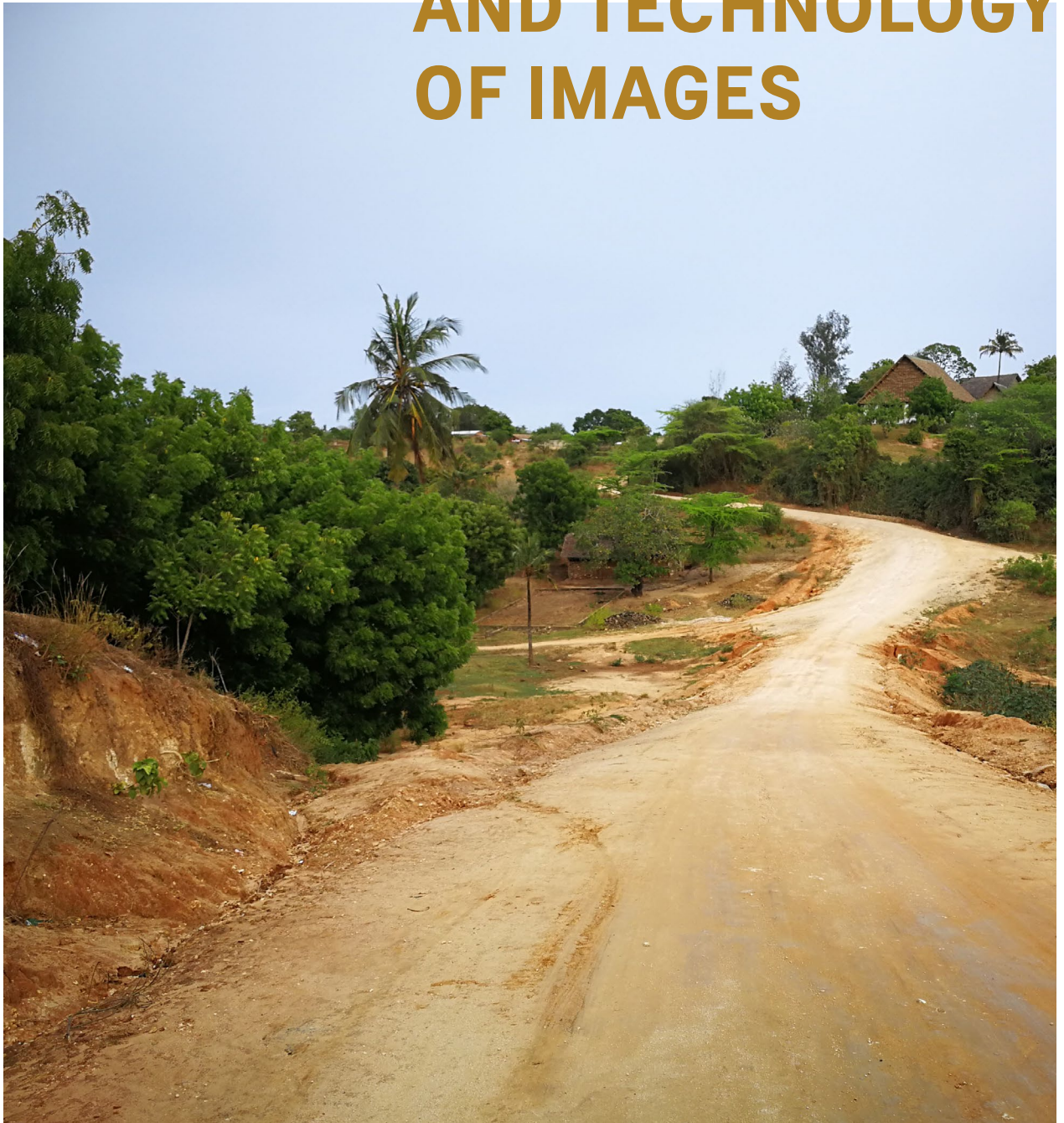


# URBAN VISUALITY, MOBILITY, INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY OF IMAGES









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**Szczecin 2020**



**WYDAWNICTWO  
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W SZCZECINIE**

# URBAN VISUALITY, MOBILITY, INFORMATION AND TECHNOLOGY OF IMAGES



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## Keywords

landscapes  
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perception  
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meanings



# Images of Cities and Invisible Landscapes

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## Abstract

This article analyses the perception and understanding of the visual environment in reference to research carried out in the coastal Kenyan territory. The focus is on the visible and invisible landscapes revealed to a transient inhabitant. Visual space becomes a living space that is both an area of passage and an internalized reality: a place in which personal visual spaces are connected and reckoned from a distance that enhances the comprehension of the dimensions of otherness. Referring to Foucault's concept of heterotopia, this is the space that one can enter and exit based on subjective decisions, a space-time filled by dialogue. This article will examine how some visual features in cityscapes relate to the definition of cultural identity and to the structuring of a mental urban setting. It will consider the quality of imageability (Kevin Lynch), which attributes to a physical space a high probability of evoking feelings in any given observer. The shapes and colours of a lived environment relate to pre-structured representations of meaning. Hence the paper explores how through the category of legibility, or visibility, it is possible to recognize three spaces: physical, mental, and social. Each type of space takes on different developments of meaning expressed through the dynamic association of elements perceived, conceived, and lived.

## Urban Landscapes as Heterotopias

The comprehension of visual messages and meanings internalized by coming across different habitats carries with it a critical awareness of what occupies the space and how. This process of recognition takes place through the appreciation of the layers of meaning revealing the environmental settings, socio-cultural fabrics, sensory phenomena, and production of imagination, such as projects and projections, symbols, and utopias.

Urban landscapes are possibly the largest and most social of human constructs and are efficient symbols for creating a kind of mental topography. They are highly visual; they are large and concrete, so that we may move within them; they seem to comprehend the whole of human experience in an encyclopaedic fashion and they enter into a dialectic relation with humanity: people shape cities, and cities shape people. A transient inhabitant observes and dwells in the physical and cultural space in which they are placed by combining possible phases of representation and interpretation of natural and built-up areas with interior invisible landscapes and untraced urban paths. The in-transit inhabitant ascribes to local morphology an unsuspected centrality, exploring all the features in a non-habitual fashion. The person in transit experiences a given urban space, applying a system of reference codes which are simultaneously known and under modification. From this encounter emerges a hyper textual city that offers properties and resources based on a temporary stability. The relationship with time becomes relevant to understanding the evolution of the representations of spaces. Being in a transient and uprooted living status induces internal territorial narratives. The visualization of individual mental maps gives shape to invisible cities, outlining a new design of the hosting space.

This experience can be meaningfully construed with reference to some conceptual schemes elaborated by scholars who have dealt with the phenomenology of the relationship between individuals and the visual-physical space they occupy. Considering the concept of heterotopy studied by Michel Foucault, the absolutely other space allows us to understand the mechanisms through which we project ourselves elsewhere without a precise place to locate ourselves. Foucault introduces the term *heterotopia* to define a fragment of fluctuating space that is closed on itself but at the same time in connection with the world. The perception of heterotopy is an experience of estrangement while remaining in contact with reality. It may also be understood as a space that one can enter or exit based on subjective decisions and personal projects. Unlike utopia, the non-ideal and unrealized place, heterotopy is an "other" place that produces a state of interference and restlessness, providing a sort of mirror in which the identity reflects itself and tries to comprise itself from the outside (Foucault, 1998).

In light of these considerations, it is possible to connote as heterotopy the space-time experienced in coastal Kenya by the authors of the present book: a space-time lived in a state of separation and belonging;

a condition in which inner personal visual images are evoked and reckoned to build new frames of understanding. This experience of dialogue generated by internal and external visual and acoustic stimuli in continuous succession includes a subtle alchemy of connections among space settlements, urban morphology, cultural models, and expressions of economic and political power. Individuals are actors in the space and interact with it according to their frequencies. The notion of heterotopy reveals its heuristic value through the reciprocal reflection of cultures.

The present text is the result of a fieldwork research project in the Kenyan county of Kilifi, which offered to the author the opportunity to intercommunicate in a specific natural and cultural visual environment. The condition of being dissociated from one's original place and placed elsewhere solicits a fertile adventure of imagination, since as a traveller one feels that something important is happening, that they are taking part in an experience in which they are at once witness and creator.

In accessing the real and imagined Kenyan coastal space, the first element encountered is light: strong light, intense sun. Then there is the urban setting without refined architecture, simple constructions plastered together, with small and cramped mud houses. Thence appears endless constellations of vegetation, an exuberant green of palms, baobabs, and forests that signals a biology which produces and flourishes tirelessly. Then one meets the traffic and the noise of the streets: people spend the day outdoors, moving freely and naturally in the rhythm imposed by climate and tradition. The natural and anthropic landscapes form an inseparable and harmonious whole, identifying the one in the other. The traveller, who at times seems a spurious, incongruous, dissonant element in this environment – often in the grip of fear of everything that moves, from mosquitoes to snakes – eventually plunges into the light and traces their paths of recognition (Kapuściński, 1998).





Il. 1. Małgorzata Szymankiewicz, *Visual Document Analysis Card* according to H.D. Lasswell 2/4-18. TICASS research materials.



Il. 3 Adéla Machová, *Visual Document Analysis Card* according to H.D. Lasswell 2/2-8. TICASS research materials.



Il. 2 Flavia Stara, *Paths and Encounters*.



Il. 4 Monika Zawadzki, *Visual Document Analysis Card* according to H.D. Lasswell 2/4-4. TICASS research materials.



## Inside the Landscape

In *The Image of the City* (1960), one of the most representative works in urban design studies, Kevin Lynch describes a new approach on how to read the visual forms of cities. The image of urban spaces can be explained as "a picture especially in the mind," a sentimental combination between the objective city image and subjective human thoughts. A two-way process, between the observer and the observed, influences the productions of environmental images. The observer, with great adaptability and in the light of their own purposes, selects, organizes, and endows with meaning what they see. The image of cities is a dynamic and ever-changing object; it may differ not only in scale but also in viewpoint, time, and season. To understand the role of environmental images in our lives, we must keep in mind their strengths and weaknesses as we are able to select, remove, and increase various elements to organize our representations of the city. Therefore, what we can pursue is an open and constantly evolving figure rather than a fixed description of an urban space. The term visible, which Lynch calls legible, is a visual quality connected to temporal and social factors within a network of space, power, and knowledge. Environmental images can be analysed in three components: identity, structure, and meaning. The forms and colours of a lived environment are connected to representations of pre-structured meaning. Identity is the recognition of an object that implies its distinction from other things. Secondly, the image must include a positional relationship between the observer and the other objects. Finally, this object must have a meaning for the observer, be it practical or emotional. The first and second components are the most readable/visible of the physical elements in urban spaces while the third is linked to the symbolic heritage of cultures.

According to Lynch, the criterion of *imageability* is built around five feature types that give a qualitative measure to navigation around a place:

**Paths:** channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves. For many people, these are the predominant elements in their representations.

**Nodes:** junctions, a crossing or convergence of paths, may be simply concentrations, which gain their importance from being the condensation of some use or physical character, like a street-corner hangout or an enclosed square.

**Landmarks:** point-references external to the observer. They are usually rather simply defined physical objects: a building, a sign, a store, or a mountain. Their use involves the singling out of one element from a host of possibilities. Some landmarks are distant ones; other landmarks are visible only in restricted localities and from certain approaches.

**Districts:** relatively large city areas with common features which observers can mentally explore. The physical characteristics that determine districts are thematic continuities, which may consist of an endless variety of components: texture, space, form, detail, symbol, and so on.

**Edges:** boundaries which separate two districts with visually predominant and continuous forms. While continuity and visibility are crucial, strong edges are not necessarily impenetrable. Many edges can be defined as unifying seams rather than isolating barriers; some of them are often paths like highways and rivers, which become effective orientation elements as well (Lynch, 2018, pp. 23-33).



Il. 5 Rosita Deluigi, *Visual Document Analysis Card* according to H.D. Lasswell 2/1-17. TICASS research materials.





Il. 6 Rosita Deluigi, Giuseppe Capriotti, *Visual Document Analysis Card* according to H.D. Lasswell 2/1-18. TICASS research materials.



Il. 7 Aleš Loziak, *Visual Document Analysis Card* according to H.D. Lasswell 2/2-6. TICASS research materials.

Henri Lefebvre, in his work *The Production of Space* (1974), observes that space is fundamentally bound up with social reality, so space does not exist in itself, it is produced (Lefebvre, 1974). Edward Soja also explores this concept in his theory of *trialectics* of space, where spatiality is explained through the investigation of three different levels of identification: the first space (perceived space), the second space (conceived space), and the third space (lived space) (Soja, 1996). The interrelatedness of these three orders of space creates the meaning of a place, which is studied through the quality of human activities, particular stories, and people's perceptions/conceptions of the environment where they are dwelling. Each order of space has a different focus in the attribution of meaning. The perceived space is what Lefebvre calls space practice. It is a human physical space, or space that can be understood through the senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching (Lefebvre, 1974). Perceived space has various names, such as physical space, natural space, and space practice. This type of space is a real space that relates to everyday life: routes, places of work or business, schools, etc. In contrast to this physical space, the second space is conceived space, which is a conceptualized space, commonly known as mental space, metaphorical space. It also includes the spaces that are acknowledged by people with specific competence such as architects, city-planners, artists, and geographers (Soja, 1996).





Il. 8 Flavia Stara, Districts ( Kilifi, November 18th, 2018, 2.32 pm).

The third space is the lived space, which connects perceived space and conceived space. In the lived space there is inscribed the tangible and intangible heritages of a given socio-cultural context. Thus, in this kind of space a subjective interaction is created between the real space and the imagined space. It is important that these spaces are understood together and not in a rigid categorization since they are interconnected, inseparable, and interdependent (Soja, 1996). In the understanding of visual messages and their meanings, internalized when one comes across different habitats, it is necessary to have a critical awareness of the phenomenology of the lived-in space, with reference to the layers of historical and cultural past expressed by environmental settings.



Il. 9 Flavia Stara, Landmark (Mombasa, November 4th, 2018, 10.36 am)



Il. 10 Flavia Stara, Third Space (Aboseli, December 2nd, 2018 8.54 am)



## Visible and Invisible within Landscapes

There is a short temporal separation between action and reflection; that is, a small gap between action and the insights derived from being spectators of that action. One encounters a landscape and becomes the actor and spectator of different actions. We allow the visual impressions to permeate us, or we try to understand through a semiological approach what the landscape can reveal about the people identifying with it. Therefore, it is essential to explore different symbolic languages in order to play out a dialogue with a landscape.

The ways in which urban imprinting is transmitted are the most diverse and unexpected, and have to do with the imagination, with educational background, and with the stimuli gathered through the five senses. To belong to a place is not a personal condition but a shared feeling, the result of the conscious construction of human ties with a cultural heritage.

Any urban landscape can be experienced as the place where everything is possible, a place where the individual frees the imagination towards visualizations of desires and memories, translating them into various and possible reconfigurations of the space itself. Therefore, it becomes a place for creative and acted experimentation. Crossing or stopping in a specific geo-cultural space is always intertwined with the expectations of the individual. Roads, buildings, and natural elements are charged with a precise meaning for the temporary inhabitants. Each individual projects into a momentary habitat their own needs, and in so doing conceives an imaginary city that overlaps with the real one. So, the lived-in space becomes familiar: the sense of belonging is generated through the reciprocity within an implicit and explicit urban life. Any urban space is only apparently exterior to the dweller: its structure is interior to the inhabitant, both as a personal assimilation of shapes, colours, and volumes as well as a personal reconstruction of the visual images. Reality is decontextualized and re-contextualized within a new framework of individual mental categories or sensorial alphabets. The dialectical dynamic of visible/invisible is related to one's own symbolic heritage, projections, and contingencies. Thus, landscape is a palimpsest of visual layers that express the practical uses of the physical environment and convey the paradigms of the cultural background. In recent decades, new technological developments have opened new ways of depicting, accessing, and theorizing space. Especially with the rise of digital media and the omnipresence of screens, meaning can be created, extended, altered, elaborated, and finally obliterated by the merest touch of a button (Schmid, 2008). The metaphor of landscape as text and spectacle has a well-established position: through the most diverse places and in a juxtaposition of distant cultural representations, beliefs, and rituals, various historical scenarios alternate in their tangible expressions. Volumes and architectures expand in a myriad of visions in search of languages for a deeper understanding of the existent, looking for possible interpretations, towards an orientation for future projects.

The suggestiveness of Kilifi County, along breath-taking ocean views and congested market roads, calls for an encounter that overcomes the expressions of globalization, the visual techniques of reproduction or a polished persistence of colonialism. Intense emotions affect memory and creativity in the production of different narratives. The historical outlines – impressed dramatically or peacefully – both in the urban planning and in nature, express tensions and evolutions that reveal unexpected tangles of fortunate and unhappy situations in the incessant human dwelling. Ideology, politics, and culture merge in urban life into a complex, vital design of old and new representations of innovation and transition. The visual experience enables elaborating a theory of the gaze that sees, describes, feels, and criticizes the core of images in the continuity of their movement: thoughts oriented toward future space configurations.

European knowledge of African heritage is mostly based on the experiences and codes of Western geographers, historians, and anthropologists. The same did not occur to Kenyans, who – under the economic and cultural dominion of Europeans – are only in recent times approaching their cultural heritage according to their own perspectives. Yet the interpretations given by indigenous peoples, who have not had exposure to European paradigms, of their territories diverge from the European views of appreciation. Still, the look of the foreigner may transform and rediscover landscapes wrapped in the mist of the obvious. The foreign gaze as perceived by the inhabitants leads them to behave like actors in a way, original enough to arouse the maximum of curiosity and admiration. The landscape is the background, the theatre in which everyone plays a role, becoming both an actor and a spectator (Turri, 1998). Since our environment is created for the sake of abstract ideas and the functioning of society with dedicated places for what is considered necessary, we ultimately need to realize that we become a product of that space. We become what we are, as social beings, through our body's reaction to the environment (hearing, tasting, touching, being emotional, or rational), which extends far beyond the mere perception of what the environment is. The visual impact connects internal and external spaces, personal languages with universal symbols, history and spirituality with the socio-economic context, allowing a constant mediation between dimensions and parallel universes. What landscapes reveal also contains traces of what is not seen: that is, the production of mindsets and social structures (Turri, 1998).

Kilifi County features a great variety of forms, reflecting both the complex history of the populations inhabiting the Kenyan coast and their adaptation to the different environmental conditions, as well as the creativity and originality of each tradition. For example, the influence of religious beliefs in the design of architecture, or the practice of customs that determine lifestyles and means of production, or the diversity of customary laws related to family ownership and territorial fragmentation systems. Orientation and disorientation, danger and salvation cohabit in these places which narrate memories and historical periodization.

The search for territorial imprinting is carried out in a visual laboratory where environmental and anthropological issues, social psychology and economics, education and ethics are intertwined. Interpreting Kenyan coastal urban space calls for the abandonment of Western brand urbanization as it requires an attentive evaluation of the socio-economic dynamics of the specific realities, often characterized by the contemplative and socializing dimension of the village where customary ties play a fundamental role (Turri, 2004). The specific informality of towns like Kilifi and Malindi, in addition to their intrinsic dynamism, means that they are placed outside the rigid dichotomy that splits urban from rural. Attention to the processes that characterize the urbanization in Kenya leads to consideration of the individual towns as settlements, each with their cultural autonomy and their particular way of producing space. The landscape is the visible, the perceptible: but as the visible does not express the whole, likewise the landscape expresses only part of its potential visuality.

The visible is interwoven with the non-visible. The visible reality, the space that lies within the scope of our perception, is both a geo-cultural expression and a space of potentialities. Places and non-places fit together like the tesserae of a mosaic in the coexistence of fragments of past and future events, of non-permanence of signs, of enigma and magic.

*[...] Dawn had broken when he said: "Sire, now I have told you about all the cities I know."*

*"There is still one of which you never speak."*

*Marco Polo bowed his head.*

*"Venice," the Khan said.*

*Marco smiled. "What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?"*

*The emperor did not turn a hair. "And yet I have never heard you mention that name."*

*And Polo said: "Every time I describe a city, I am saying something about Venice."*

*"When I ask you about other cities, I want to hear about them. And about Venice when I ask you about Venice."*

*"To distinguish the other cities' qualities, I must speak of a first city that remains implicit. For me it is Venice."*

*(Italo Calvino, *The Invisible Cities*, VI)*



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