

**Yi-Ting Wang**

*University Paris VIII Vincennes-Saint-Denis, France*

## **Total Environment (Sculpture) as a Symbology: The Mesological Study of the *Axe Majeur* in Cergy-Pontoise**

**Abstract:** In Cergy-Pontoise, the artist Dani Karavan is commissioned to conceive the three-kilometer linear path named *Axe Majeur* (Main Axis), connecting the city center and the vast riverside. Instead of a work of art to contemplate, Karavan builds 12 stations in succession and in the form of instruments with which people are equipped to measure and to process the existent environmental data and to find their own interpretation of the site. By making factual information measurable and translatable into cultural connotations, Karavan's work implies a mesological point of view from which osmosis between the sculpture and the site invalidates the opposite physical/phenomenal. The paper studies this method based on the notion *mediance* proposed by the geographer Augustin Berque and on a field survey. Two principles constitute the method: First, Karavan invents a sculptural metrology functioning in the way of the perceptive calibration system. Secondly, the *Axe Majeur* shows a "total environment" which means not only 12 parts as a single unit but also the inseparable relationship of Karavan's environment (art) with the whole geographical environment. Each part annotates the signs left behind after Earth's motion (e.g. topography, geothermal energy) and after cultural activities (e.g. orchard, view of Paris) and turns these signs into the basis on which imagination could be formed and new meaning could arise. By articulating historical and spatial dimension with an environmental symbology, the *Axe Majeur* constitutes an innovative urban planning method which moves away from an international-vernacular (modernism) or historical-ahistorical (postmodernism) debate.

**Keywords:** *Axe Majeur*; environmental sculpture; environmental symbology; mediance; milieu; new cities in France; total environment.

### **Introduction**

Developing the cultural dimension of urban space is not a new issue in urbanism. During the interwar period, the term *urban art* is used largely as opposed to the *tabula rasa* tendency of urbanism and to its resulting lifeless city. Especially employed in the field of urbanism, the term does not refer to a mural painting or a sculpture installed in a public place but a whole urban space conceived as a work of art. In search

of a synthesis between the past embellishment practices and the new ambition of urban extension, urban art implies a time aesthetic composition and functional optimization.<sup>1</sup> Its principal idea is that some of the urban forms in the past constitute a better way of living and serve as an essential reference for the present urban planning. To mention just a few key points: Pierre Lavedan's studies which argued the superiority of radiating concentric city plans over regular "checkerboard" plans;<sup>2</sup> Camillo Sitte's *Der Städte-Bau* which valued ancient public squares;<sup>3</sup> and Charles Buls's analysis, which examined how winding streets allow a visual richness and an unexpected view.<sup>4</sup>

When the term reappears in the French new towns projects of the 1970s and 80s, it shows a great interest in finding a proper culture for the cities, however, it presents very different results. Several contemporary artists were commissioned to collaborate with architects and city planners. The first secretary of new towns institution (SGVN), Jean-Eudes Rouiller has observed that they help improve the quality of public spaces and solve the problems of urban aesthetics with their quasi-instinctive methods, in contrast to the functionalism oriented by rational thinking and by pure technical requirements.<sup>5</sup> Numerous publications associated with this initiative discussed the relationship between art and cities. Some of them focused on the art of public procurement since 1983; some of them on the new functions of public sculpture and its role in urban planning.<sup>6</sup> However, very few studies dealt with the close relationship between the method and the artistic practice called *environment*.

In the late 1950s, the term environment firstly came to light with Allan Kaprow's room-size work.<sup>7</sup> It was used later in France, as François Loyer explained, with a different meaning to describe art on the boundary between sculpture and architecture.<sup>8</sup> The term then extends to the research of urban space and implies a specific way of

---

<sup>1</sup> Pierre Lavedan, *Antiquité et Moyen Âge [Antiquity and the Middle Ages]*, vol. 1, and *Renaissance et temps modernes [Renaissance and modern times]*, vol. 2 of *Histoire de l'urbanisme* (Paris: H. Laurens, 1926–1941).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Camillo Sitte, *The Art of Building Cities: City Building According to Its Artistic Fundamentals*, trans. Charles T. Stewart (Mansfield Center, CT: Martino Publishing, 2013). Originally published as *Der Städte-Bau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen* (Vienna: C. Graeser, 1889).

<sup>4</sup> Marcel Smets, *Charles Buls: Les principes de l'art urbain [Charles Buls: The principles of the urban art]* (Liège: P. Mardaga, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> To mention just three publications, see Sylvie Lagnier, *Sculpture et espace urbain en France: Histoire de l'instauration d'un dialogue, 1951–1992 [Sculpture and urban space in France: History of the establishment of a dialogue, 1951–1992]* (Paris: Harmattan, 2001); *L'art et la ville – art dans la vie: L'espace public vu par les artistes en France et à l'étranger depuis 10 ans [The art and the city – art in life: Public space seen by artists in France and abroad for 10 years]* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1978); and François Barré et al. *L'art renouvelle la ville: Urbanisme et art contemporain [Art renews the city: Town-Planning and contemporary art]* (Paris: Association UAC, 1995); and Daniel Abadie et al., *L'Art et la ville: urbanisme et art contemporain [Art and the City: Town Planning and Contemporary Art]* (Geneva: Skira; Paris: SGVN, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Julie H. Reiss, *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999), xi.

<sup>8</sup> François Loyer, "Environnement, art," [Environment, art], *Encyclopædia Universalis*, <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/environnement-art/>, acc. January 19, 2019.

providing synthetic spatial experiences. Merged with the field of urban art, this environment liberates not only public art from its traditional role but also the culturalist perspective from an obsession with certain past urban forms or civic life. Integrating the environment into the new town projects displayed a new approach which could turn living space into the sculpture, and which could enable people to explore values and meanings *of* and *for* the place they live in. In the case of Cergy-Pontoise, the sculptor Dani Karavan was invited in 1980 to take part in the conception of the *Axe Majeur* which transformed the whole site into an environment, the most complete and the largest scale environment to this day. Through a study of the *Axe Majeur*, this paper aims at clarifying the method at the crossroad between art and territorial planning, between environment and urban art.

## Materials and methods

### *Urban Art in Cergy-Pontoise*

French urban planning in the 1960s is dominated by a functionalist perspective from which large-scale housing estates – the *grand ensembles* – were considered as an only practical solution to the housing crisis. Viewed as a remedy of social segregation, a large number of massive constructions were built in the suburban area. They did not result in a utopia where people live together in harmony and in a way of the middle class<sup>9</sup> however caused grave landscape problems. Against this background, the new town project provided in the following decade, as Gilbert Smadja indicates, was permeated with the urban culturalist perspective heightening the value of site and symbols and leading “back to the *real city* with its cordial, polyfunctional complexity, and take every necessary distance with the icy functionalism of former days.”<sup>10</sup>

In the Saint-Christophe district of Cergy-Pontoise, the project was divided into two parts. The first part was to build a city center around the railway station and mainly for housing, by means of a system of zoning. Marcel Bajard, Michel Gaillard, and Michel Jaouën believe that the typo-morphological method encourages urban planners and architects to discover the notion of urban art, along with a functional asset and a formal laxness.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, it comes in the end with a boom of post-modern architectures such as the medieval bastide-like blocks built by the agency G.G.K. and the Georgian-style crescent created by Ricardo Bofill. An accumulation of

<sup>9</sup> See Jean-Claude Chamboredon and Madelaine Lemaire, “Proximité spatiale et distance sociale. Les grands ensembles et leur peuplement,” [Spatial proximity and social distance. The grand ensembles and their population], *Revue française et sociologie* 11, 1 (January to March 1970): 3–33.

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert Smadja, “An Encounter of Art and the City – Bringing a Work of Art to Its Accomplishment,” in Abadie et al., *Art and the City*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> For this typo-morphological conception of the district Saint-Christophe, see Marcel Bajard, Michel Gaillard, and Michel Jaouën, “La rue dans le concours ‘immeubles de ville’: Ville Nouvelle de Cergy-Pontoise,” [The street in the “buildings of city” competition: New town of Cergy-Pontoise], *Techniques et Architecture* 323 (February 1979): 69–83.

such diverse style buildings gives rise to a blurred and composite patchwork-like form without producing a clear and coherent cultural image.

After viewing Karavan's *Two environments for peace* made in Florence, one of the project directors Michel Jaouën invited Karavan to design the second part of the district connecting the central city to the waterfront area. According to Pierre Restany, this idea of the artistic intervention on the municipal level dates back to 1970 when Rouiller discovered that "the solution to urban art did not lie in setting up sculptures for such places, but on the contrary in transforming those places through the artist's vision."<sup>12</sup> In doing so, the cultural dimension is developed by the actual sculptural research rather than by the traditional urban forms.

### *Environment as Public Sculpture*

When designing an urban production, town planners tend to relate contemporary art to as a means to enrich people's leisure activities and to ennoble the site. It was believed that a new function of the public sculptures was to endow the new towns with a high-ranking identity opposed to the grand ensembles. As Georges Duby says in the preface of *Art and the City, Town-Planning and Contemporary Art*, the function "is to make manifest [...] that this is truly a city, [...] a place in which it is good to live, to stroll, to reflect and rejoice; and that it has been the city-dweller's privilege, through the prestige of public art, to the higher level of what we call culture"<sup>13</sup>. In the eyes of Gaillard and Jaouën, the *Axe Majeur* performs perfectly the function and is considered an advantage that could attract potential clients, namely future inhabitants.<sup>14</sup>

When we look at the sculptures created in this context, we find that many of them are closely related to the practice of environment, for example Ervin Patkaï's *Mur-Fontaine* (1967) in Grenoble, Gérard Singer's *Déambulateur* (1975) in Evry and *Cheminement* (1977–1981) in L'Isle-d'Abeau, Luc Peire's *Place Salvador Allende* (1976–1982) in Marne-la-Vallée and evidently the *Axe Majeur*. However, there is a discrepancy between the planners' expectation and the artists' vision. None of these environments is in line with the attempt to magnify the place, to upgrade it from a suburban housing conglomerate to superior city, or to cultivate people and to instruct them in an elitist lifestyle.

Patkaï uses an architectural casting technique to shape a layered sculptural volume. The stratum-like structure left after demolding becomes a coordinate system which helps read the structure. Midway between rational and irrational, the form makes an encoding and a decoding mechanism possible. The singer creates in a residential area a walk-in space covered with blue epoxy resin and composed of

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Restany, *Dani Karavan, L'Axe Majeur de Cergy-Pontoise*, trans. Claire Larrière (Paris: La documentation française, 1987), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Georges Duby, Preface to *Art and the city*, by Abadie et al., 8.

<sup>14</sup> See Michel Gaillard and Michel Jaouën, "L'ilot comme unité de base: Quartier St-Christophe, Ville Nouvelle de Cergy-Pontoise," [The block as a basic unit: St-Christophe district, new town of Cergy-Pontoise], *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* 234 (September 1984): 24–29.

stalagmite-like steles and bubble-like protuberance. Through contrasting the dwelling experience with the experience of alpinism, the artist tries to provoke the sensations during the arduous ascent and the following euphoria of being unattached so that man's intuitive feeling would replace his rational thought. Peire designs a pavement consisting of white, black and blue tiles, like a giant painting of strict lines drawn on the ground. And the work visually joins the vertical lines on the facades of the surrounding buildings. By mingling the pictorial universe with the three-dimensional living space, Peire's environment extends from the realm of imagination to reality. In the above examples, we find that the culture the environments reveal does not simply result from a reproduction of the heritage elements or a revival of the past noble life. Beyond that, the artists are concerned more about people's perceptive faculties than about transplanting the ancient spatial system to the actual site. To "reset" the cognitive system dominated by a materialist vision, the environments are conceived as a high degree of combination between the spiritual and the real space.

The same goes for the *Axe Majeur*. Within the 12 stations Karavan creates, we find a belvedere tower, an orchard, an esplanade, an amphitheater, a pyramid, a foot-bridge, also, an axial perspective, and a landscape. All recall the cultural heritage such as the medieval fortified towers in Tuscany, impressionism, the Louvre, ancient Egyptian astronomy, and Le Nôtre's garden. However, these elements do not serve as reproducible motifs from a retrospective nor from a postmodern point of view. They could not be easily recognized by their cultural references because of their minimal appearances and geometrical forms. As Karavan's answer in an interview to the question about his lack of respect for traditional French garden composition: "What matters from my starting point is the unity of the axis and not the historical quality: it does not matter whether with a palace or not" (my translation).<sup>15</sup> Instead of following the correct historical formula, Karavan places great emphasis on allowing the axis to run through the whole site in order that the landscape plays a key role in ensuring the place meaning.

### *Point of View of Mediance*

To better understand the meaning-emergence operation triggered by the *Axe Majeur*, it is useful to start with the landscape theory proposed by the geographer Augustin Berque. Inspired by Tetsuro Watsuji, Berque has developed the notion *fûdo* (風土) – the ensemble of physical and social characters of a given region.<sup>16</sup> The term is composed of two sonograms 風 (*fû*) and 土 (*do*) which mean the wind and the soil/earth respectively. According to the syntax of Japanese, the wind is in a position of determiner while the earth is determined, and that denotes the earth subject to the wind. In Japanese, *fû* means "mores" or "in the manner of". To sum up, "*fûdo* signifies

<sup>15</sup> Dani Karavan, Interview by Pierre Restany, 4–5 May 1983, *Cergy-Pontoise Axe Majeur* (Cergy-Pontoise: EPAVN de Cergy-Pontoise, 1984), 26.

<sup>16</sup> See Augustin Berque, *Médiance de milieux en paysages* [*Mediance of milieus in landscapes*], 2nd éd. (Paris: Belin, 2000), 25.

that certain land is seized – perceived, exploited and arranged – in a certain manner by a certain society” (my translation)<sup>17</sup>. Derived from *fûdo*, the notion *fûdosei* with the suffix *sei* equivalent to the English *-ness* is defined by Watsuji as “the structural moment of human existence” (*ningen sonzai no kôzô keiki* 人間存在の構造契機) and is proposed against Martin Heidegger’s theory of temporality without valuing the spatiality. Berque points out that in Japanese, the human being – *ningen* (人間) – is composed of two parts: *nin* (人, read as *hito*) which means human’s individual part; *gen* (間, read as *aida*, *ma* or *ken*) which means its relational part and designates between-ness or spatial or temporal interval. From this perspective, Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* is reconsidered with the interconnection not only between humans but also between human and its environment. And “this correlation is a dynamic coupling – a moment – which evolves in a certain sense, and which for the being in question is charged with meaning.”<sup>18</sup> Highlighting the importance of space means that the human existence should imply both: in Heideggerian way that the *Dasein* is aware of its finitude through the understanding of death and then concerns its existential possibilities, and interacts with the world – “there” (*Da*) of *Dasein* – without drifting away from itself; and in a Watsujiian way that this temporality should be also founded on the spatial structure, both social and environmental, where – “there” as *aida* 間 – the links are established, and constantly changed and moved between the human being and its milieu. By relating *fûdo* to *milieu*, Berque translates the Watsuji’s notion *fûdosei* (風土性) with a neologism *mediance* which indicates “the dynamic coupling of being and its milieu”.

After reviewing the concept *mediance*, we believe that it is crucial to analyze how Karavan takes the ecological and the social aspects of the site into account of the *Axe Majeur*. As a first step, we conducted a field survey in the Saint-Christophe district to evaluate the collected data. And then we brought out the essential idea of practice of environment realized in the *Axe Majeur*. Finally, we developed the relationship between Karavan’s method and the concept of the landscape which, from a point of view of *mediance*, implies at the same time nature and its representation, in other words, objective facts and subjective value.

<sup>17</sup> Augustin Berque, “Milieu et sens des choses. Mésologie et sémiotique,” [Milieu and sense of things. Mesology and semiotics], in *Le Sens au cœur des dispositifs et des environnements*, ed. Eleni Mitropoulou and Nicole Pignier (Saint-Denis: Connaissances et Savoirs, 2018), 25.

<sup>18</sup> For the original quotation in French, see Augustin Berque, *Poétique de la terre: Histoire naturelle et histoire humaine, essai de mésologie* [Poetics of the earth: Natural history and human history, an essay of mesology] (Paris: Belin, 2014), 93. This translation of the *mediance* refers to Augustin Berque, “From ‘Mediance’ to Places”, in *Stream 04: The Paradoxes of the Living*, ed. Philippe Chiambaretta, trans. Derek Byrne et al. (Paris: PCA éditions; Dijon: Les Presses du Réel; Amsterdam: Idea Books, 2017), 122–26.

## Results

### *Sculptural metrology*

When walking through the site of the *Axe Majeur*, we are not obsessed anymore with a confused feeling of *déjà vu* we experience between the railway station and the Place Ronde surrounded by Bofill's monumental semicircular buildings. We begin with the first station *Tour Belvédère* standing at the center of the Place Ronde. There is a long straight path extending from the Tower and paved with white concrete slabs which suggest us the following itinerary. When we leave the Place Ronde, we quickly noticed that all elements such as an apple orchard, a parterre, buildings, and hedges are arranged in a symmetrical way. Our eyes are oriented towards the vanishing point where lies a layer of green and a view of Paris. Then we continue our promenade along a steep slope down to the riverside. We are led to perceive in detail the site including the movement of nature and the variety of the landscape.

We find that 12 stations, instead of being historical elements loaded with cultural qualities, serve as perceptive instruments, as a guiding system for people to explore their relationship to the site. This guiding system is made with various measurement devices following the symbol of time: the number 12, its multiple, or the multiple of its tenth. There are 12 stations. One of them consists of 12 columns, each 12 meters high. In addition, the *Tour Belvédère* is 3.6 meters wide, 36 meters high, and is visually divided into 24 cubes. On the ground of the Place Ronde, there is a paved circle which contains 360 slabs, each 36 centimeters wide, and which corresponds to a 360-degree graduated compass (see Figure 1). This ground circle transforms the central Tower into a giant gnomon from which the moving shadow represents the passage of time. Inside the Tower, there is a narrow opening on every floor to allow people to see the axis of the site (see Figure 2) and observe it step by step while moving upstairs or down. Moreover, a wider hole in the middle of the opening plays the role of viewfinder that helps viewers focus on the view of the Parisian region saturated with memory. This process of scrutiny continues until reaching the rooftop of the Tower. Situated right at the junction of the two parts of the district, the Belvedere offers a panorama. On the northern side, vendors occupy the main street with their vivid and colorful tents, fitting architectural diversity. On the south-eastern side, the richness of the *Axe Majeur* comes into sight (see Figure 3).

The narrow views show the axis passing through the plateau Puiseux, the hillside, the Oise River, continuing to Paris, and crossing the *Axe Historique*. This evokes the links between the old and the new city. Besides, the experience of climbing to the top allows people to observe the composition of the site and the relationship between each component from the different height at which they stand. During their movement, the landscape is configured progressively while they realize the correlation between scales, distances, and viewing positions. Instead of simply providing a spot with a good view, the Tower acts more like an observatory which engages people in a progressive discovery of *Axe Majeur*, its shape, its colors, its size, its topographic

features, its spatial relationship with surrounding areas, and further its possible meaning. Simply put, this is an instrument not for observing pure terrestrial events but for beholding the cultural dimensions of the site.

As an approach to research of mediance, the *Tour Belvédère* put the dynamic coupling into operation with metrology. On one hand, the Tower and the Place Ronde presents a huge sundial from which the movement of the sun and clouds become measurable. On the other hand, the Tower constitutes a system of perceptual calibration through which the site in people's mind and eyes is firstly reduced to the main road of the *Axe Majeur*, secondly complemented by the images observed from different angles, and finally, strongly characterized by a physical and mental axis. The sculptural metrology quantifies what is unmeasurable before no matter in the natural or the cultural field, thus articulates phenomenon to facts. Unlike the postmodern tendency flourished in the neighboring urban area and fascinated by endless historical connotations, Karavan's method attaches great importance to the spatial condition of the site: light, water, breeze, plants, etc. The measurement makes all elements we observe reducible to calculable data, not for creating an abstract world but for triggering possible interpretations.

### *Total environment*

The metrological approach is also used in the other stations. For example, the *Douze Colonnes* [Twelve Columns] which highlight the end of the plateau and the starting point of the slopes become a reference point for viewers to verify their spatial relation to the site. The same logic applies to the *Passerelle* [Footbridge] equipped with rangefinder-like structures which allow viewers to survey the environmental cadence. Through continual measurement and calibration, the relationship between being and its milieu could be established in order to create an environment interlaced with history, space, and people's participation in the site.

This environment composed of 12 stations is in accordance with the notion "total environment" that Restany mentions regarding Karavan's works in Florence and defines as "artscapes integrated into the landscape".<sup>19</sup> We are able to verify the notion from an etymological point of view. According to John Brinckerhoff Jackson's study, the suffix *-scape* which functions like *shape*, *ship* or *sheaf* indicates collective aspects of the environment and signify an organization or a system (e.g. *housecape* equivalent to household, *township* describing administrative unit).<sup>20</sup> Kenneth R. Olwig points out that the suffix *-ship* designates an abstraction of something concrete: *friendship* and *fellowship* describing a quality or state of being friend or fellow.<sup>21</sup> He explains that

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Restany, *Dani Karavan*, trans. Jean Marie Clarke and Caroline Beamish (Munich: Pretel-Verlag, 1992), 58.

<sup>20</sup> John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 7.

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth R. Olwig, "Representation and Alienation in Political Land-scape," *Cultural Geographies* 12, 1 (January 2005): 19–40.



the *landscape* is related to the powerful meaning of *shape*. On the one hand, *shape* as an expression of *-ship* implies the abstract state of a portion of land, configured with the aid of a shaping process. On the other hand, *shape* suggests the material form as a result of that process “by which the land is shaped as a social and material phenomenon”.<sup>22</sup>

From this point of view, we understand that the 12 stations – in other words, 12 environments – present a shaping operation which brings to light the shapes of art. In the sense of urban art, the *artscapes* could be considered as the small-scale urban forms charged with culture and meaning. The fruit trees, the geothermal steam, the abandoned tracks, the river, and the silhouette of the townscape awake people’s memory. All of these take the shape of art which manifests at a time the cultural qualities (i.e. “art-ship”) and the cultural forms (i.e. “art-shape”). Therefore, a walk in the *Axe Majeur* leads to a nest of *artscapes* superposing each other so that both the abstract collective state of the site and its concrete material form emerge. Through organizing its landscape, the site is transformed into a work of art: a total environment.

## Discussion

### *Environmental symbology*

If Karavan has developed in Cergy-Pontoise a place of symbols as Kosme de Barañano points out,<sup>23</sup> it means that time, axes, trees, columns, water, vapor, a bridge, a pyramid and a laser beam here appear as signs and will become cultural symbols through the participation of the public. The symbology that Karavan carries out is defined by Restany as a “synthetic strategy of adaptation” in parallel with an “analytic tactic of intervention” employed by other artists such as Daniel Buren who conceives *Les Deux Plateaux*, Gérard Singer *Canyoneaustrate*, and Jean Amado *Hommage à Arthur Rimbaud*. The former approach which adapts the art to the site aims at shaping the work while “the visitor becomes a reader: he grasps the symbolic significance of the work as he gradually moves through it”<sup>24</sup>. The latter one confronts the artists’ individual vocabulary to the problematic urban expression. The artistic intervention in public space is based on their recognized style.

We find that Restany’s semantic analysis recalls Kant’s “subject-predicate judgment”. If we take Buren’s work as an example, the analytic proposition could be: “the colonnade Galerie d’Orléans is columns”. That is to say, the predicate “columns” is *included* in the subject “colonnade”. Introducing a new linguistic reference – Buren’s columns of variable height and with alternate black and white stripes – dislocates the predicate and then modifies the original subject. In Karavan’s example, the synthetic

<sup>22</sup> Olwig, “Representation,” 21.

<sup>23</sup> Kosme de Barañano, “Dani Karavan and the Meaning of Landscape,” in Barañano et al., *Dani Karavan*, trans. Belaire et al. (Valencià: Institut Valencià d’Art Modern, 2002), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Restany, “Modern Nature and Post-Industrial Sensibility,” in Abadie et al., *Art and the City*, 38.

propositions would be: “the center of an Oise River loop is an axis”. Here, the predicate “axis” is *related* to the subject “center of an Oise River loop”. With the measuring devices on a human scale, the relationship between the predicate and the subject depends on man’s perception, on how he achieves a synthetic understanding of the site. Buren alters what is supposed to be the predicate whereas Karavan generates a predicate which could be continually translatable into other predicates. Here comes the following proposition: “the axis is a link to Paris”.

From the point of view of mediance, this process of predication is summarized by Berque with a ternary relation S-I-P, which denotes subject-interpretor-predicate following the same principle as Peirce’s semiotic triad sign-interpretant-object. This means that S is P for I.<sup>25</sup> This leads to the definition of the reality according to the formula:  $r = S/P$  (reality in the making is the subject assumed as the predicate). Based on the relation, the reality of all milieu is a result of a continuous and reciprocal operation by which S could be indefinitely re-interpreted as P, P’, P”, P”’, and so on, thus formulated as  $r = (((S/P)/P’)/P’)/P’$ ...

In contrast to the modernist and postmodernist approach, territorial planning through the *Axe Majeur* reveals a long-term process. As Karavan says: “Sowing the seed, then ensuring all stages of growth. This is a complex and curious process of creation, the artist being both the one who directs and the one who is directed, the one who directs the work while being directed by it” (my translation).<sup>26</sup> Due to various factors of milieu, neither the artist’s vision nor the environmental condition could occupy the dominant position in the planning. He adds that “it is this nature-architecture relationship that controls the succession of stations and determines the different behavior of users, the effective participation of the public” (my translation).<sup>27</sup> But far from the determinism, Karavan also “strives to create for men so that they can put into action all their senses” (my translation)<sup>28</sup>. The creation of the site will be achieved only when visitors discover what resides in their milieu, in other words, only when their sensibility and interpretation make the synthetic proposition possible, make the environment significant.

## Conclusion

Reviewing the *Axe Majeur* has provided a new perspective for culturalist urban study. We have found that the work associates urban art with the artistic practice of environment and presents an innovative way which revalues at the same time the cultural and environmental issue. According to Karavan, this “is a work with the visible and invisible, with the sensitive matter, with the memory and with the personal

<sup>25</sup> Berque, *Poétique*, 185–86.

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Luc Daval et al., *Question d’urbanité [Question of urbanity]* (Paris: Galerie Jeanne Bucher, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> Karavan, interview, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Daval et al., *Question*.

and historical conscience” (my translation).<sup>29</sup> By adapting the site to man’s vision, the total environment implies a shaping process of the landscape which deploys the mediance. Here comes an environmental symbology by which environmental signs become symbols at the same time as the reality emerges in a constant reinterpretation operation. From this, the site meaning is no longer given directly from what architects or artists construct however lies in the landscape, in the connotation that the spatial characteristics could carry according to people’s historical-cultural interpretation. This has led us to conclude that the *Axe Majeur* as a mediance-oriented method develops a perceptive system by which the place meaning resides in the interrelationship between an individual, society, history, and space.

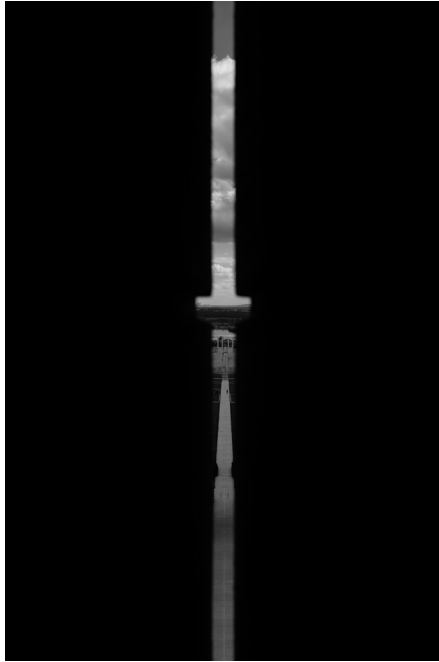
## Figures



**Figure 1:** The Place Ronde viewed from the Belvedere.  
(Photo by author, 15 September 2018.)

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 2:** The view of the *Axe Majeur* from the inside of the *Tour Belvédère*.  
(Photo by author, 15 September 2018.)



**Figure 3:** The view of the *Axe Majeur* from the Belvedere.  
(Photo by author, 15 September 2018.)

## References

- Abadie Daniel, et al. *L'Art et la ville: urbanisme et art contemporain* [Art and the City: Town Planning and Contemporary Art]. Geneva: Skira; Paris: SGVN, 1990.
- Bajard, Marcel, Michel Gaillard, and Michel Jaouën. "La rue dans le concours 'immeubles de ville': Ville Nouvelle de Cergy-Pontoise." [The street in the "buildings of city" competition: New town of Cergy-Pontoise]. *Techniques et Architecture* 323 (February 1979): 69–83.
- Barañano Kosme et al., *Dani Karavan*, trans. Belaire et al. València: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 2002.
- Barré, François et al. *L'art renouvelle la ville: Urbanisme et art contemporain* [Art renews the city: Town-Planning and contemporary art]. Paris: Association UAC, 1995.
- Berque, Augustin. "From 'Mediance' to Places." In *Stream 04: The Paradoxes of the Living*, edited by Philippe Chiambaretta, trans. Derek Byrne et al., 122–26. Paris: PCA éditions; Dijon: Les Presses du Réel; Amsterdam: Idea Books, 2017.
- Berque, Augustin. *Médiance de milieux en paysages* [Mediance of milieus in landscapes], 2nd éd. Paris: Belin, 2000.
- Berque, Augustin. *Poétique de la terre: Histoire naturelle et histoire humaine, essai de mésologie* [Poetics of the earth: Natural history and human history, an essay of mesology]. Paris: Belin, 2014.
- Brinckerhoff Jackson, John. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.
- Chamboredon, Jean-Claude and Madelaine Lemaire. "Proximité spatiale et distance sociale. Les grands ensembles et leur peuplement." [Spatial proximity and social distance. The grand ensembles and their population]. *Revue française et sociologie* 11, 1 (January to March 1970): 3–33. doi.org/10.2307/3320131.
- Daval, Jean-Luc et al., *Question d'urbanité* [Question of urbanity]. Paris: Galerie Jeanne Bucher, 1986.
- Gaillard, Michel and Michel Jaouën. "L'ilot comme unité de base: Quartier St-Christophe, Ville Nouvelle de Cergy-Pontoise." [The block as a basic unit: St-Christophe district, new town of Cergy-Pontoise]. *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* 234 (September 1984): 24–29.
- Gaudin, Jean-Pierre. *Dessins de villes, "art urbain" et urbanisme, anthologie* [Urban design, urban art and urbanism, anthology]. Paris: Harmattan, 1991.
- Karavan, Dani. Interview by Pierre Restany, 4–5 May 1983, *Cergy-Pontoise Axe Majeur*. Cergy-Pontoise: EPAVN de Cergy-Pontoise, 1984.
- L'art et la ville – art dans la vie: L'espace public vu par les artistes en France et à l'étranger depuis 10 ans* [The art and the city – art in life: Public space seen by artists in France and abroad for 10 years]. Paris: La Documentation française, 1978.
- Lagnier, Sylvie. *Sculpture et espace urbain en France: Histoire de l'instauration d'un dialogue, 1951–1992* [Sculpture and urban space in France: History of the establishment of a dialogue, 1951–1992]. Paris: Harmattan, 2001.

- Lavedan, Pierre. *Antiquité et Moyen Âge [Antiquity and Middle Ages]*, vol. 1, and *Renaissance et temps modernes [Renaissance and modern times]*, vol. 2 of *Histoire de l'urbanisme*. Paris: H. Laurens, 1926-1941.
- Loyer, François. "Environnement, art" [Environment, art]. *Encyclopædia Universalis*. <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/environnement-art/>. Accessed January 19, 2019,
- Mitropoulou, Eleni and Nicole Pignier ed. Saint-Denis: *Connaissances et Savoirs*, 2018.
- Nuridsany, Michel. *La commande publique [The public procurement]*. Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1991.
- Olwig, Kenneth R. "Representation and Alienation in Political Land-scape." *Cultural Geographies* 12, 1 (January 2005): 19–40. [doi.org/10.1191/1474474005eu321oa](https://doi.org/10.1191/1474474005eu321oa).
- Reiss, Julie H. *From Margin to Center: The Spaces of Installation Art*. Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1999.
- Restany, Pierre. *Dani Karavan, L'Axe Majeur de Cergy-Pontoise*, trans. Claire Larrière. Paris: La documentation française, 1987.
- Restany, Pierre. *Dani Karavan*, trans. Jean Marie Clarke and Caroline Beamish. Munich: Pretel-Verlag, 1992.
- Roullier, Jean-Eudes. Préface to *L'art et la ville: Intervention des artistes dans les Villes Nouvelles [Art and the city: Artists' intervention in the new towns]*. Paris: SGVN, 1976.
- Sitte, Camillo. *The Art of Building Cities: City Building According to Its Artistic Fundamentals*, translated by Charles T. Stewart. Mansfield Center, CT: Martino Publishing, 2013. Originally published as *Der Städte-Bau nach seinen künstlerischen Grundsätzen*. Vienna: C. Graeser, 1889.
- Smets, Marcel. *Charles Buls: Les principes de l'art urbain [Charles Buls: The principles of the urban art]*. Liège: P. Mardaga, 1995.

Article received: April 2, 2019  
Article accepted: May 25, 2019  
Original scholarly paper