

“On the one hand, narratives structure the values people live by; on the other, the strength of narratives lie in their fictions. As Hayden White argues, this situation is unavoidable, since tropes and narratives constitute the way we understand and explain the world. It is an ironic but also critic position.”

Simon Swaffield, ed., *Theory in Landscape Architecture: A Reader*

Since from in society and the development of cities, the very beginning of a life, water has been playing an important role, which implies a close interaction, with people's daily life based on the supply of water to some extent, drinking water, irrigation, laundry, etc. It is inconceivable to establish certain society within a condition of no water existing. But more significantly, than the daily supply, the water can be, what directly implies the human behaviors and activities related to the water. The waterfront life style of no matter the local or foreigners is tightly relevant to the creek, river or the sea. That means it is not that hard to find people fishing, washing, boating, swimming, etc. around.

Based on the fact of the close interaction between people and the water itself, it is of great importance to constitute a water landscape narratives based on how people perceive and further how people experience and engage with the water. Here I would like to set Vedado district in Havana, Cuba as an example to explore details about what to grasp, why and how to structure such a narrative of water.



Diagram 1: Study area

Introduction of Vedado

Before dealing with the water, it is unavoidable to draw a general picture of Vedado itself. As a main part of Havana, the house condition in Vedado is almost the best of the whole city, with most of which built in 1950s. And a number of tourists and Cubans from other districts of the city come here because of numerous commercial, cultural facilities and exclusive hotels. In this sense, the fact that there are people of diversified cultural backgrounds, nationalities is one part of Vedado's identity, which also indicates the flexibility in human behaviors and activities.

There are two main types of waterfront areas in Vedado, one of which is along the Rio Almendares and the other is the coastal place, one main part of the whole El Malecon. Both the waterfront areas along the whole Rio Almendares and El Malecon are pretty large-scale areas which is kind of difficult to explain explicit every part. So that is the reason why I only pick out the fragments for both of them within the Vedado district. Through the exploration and comparison of the two particular water landscapes, the aim is to find a way to better approach the role of water in the urban fabric.

The water landscape alongside Vedado, Havana

The architect Bernade Tschumi suggests the disjunction between the space itself and the events happening. Starting from this point, rather than the detailed description of the water landscape itself in Vedado, it is more appropriate to tell the story and the implications for it. It is precisely speaking, the narrative of how people constitute their lives in Vedado. Therefore, when dealing with the water landscape in Vedado, which are areas along the Rio Almendares and the coastal areas in Malecon, it is inevitable to pay close attention to the people's behavior in Vedado. Specifically, it is about how people perceive – according to what they see, smell, hear etc. and about how they experience and interact with the river and the sea – based on people's experiences, memories and living conditions. On the one hand, the natural features of the waterfront area is the base of the overall narratives; on the other, the cultural and the social backgrounds of people themselves finally decides the outcome of the narratives. As far as I am concerned here, I would like to make separate analysis on the two waterfront areas in Vedado and then through the integration and comparison to redefine the water landscape in Vedado and



Forest system, Rio Almdendares.¹



Rio Almdendares.²

to reconstruct the whole understanding of the interaction with water there.

The Rio Almendares

The Rio Almendares is located to the west of Vedado district, of which the land is not fully or premeditatedly exploit alongside the river line, with more than half covered by trees. Maybe it is more precise to say that this area is redeveloped pretty well to be an enormous forest park system which extends directly into the heart of Havana. The part within Vedado is with no doubt mostly covered by greenery, except for several spots with buildings for living, warehouses and a small ferry and three bridges connecting the other side of the river. And in these parts of the river, it seems not so many activities happen there. The experience differs among different parts because of different spatial attributes.

Within the part of the river, speaking of the residential buildings, there is an area occupied by a local community, El Fanguito, which is kind of like a slum, a certain place full of informalities. Consequently, one part of the waterfront area is almost fully occupied by this informal settlements. And without the care from the government, although diverse, the quality of the environment is generally not in a high level. Here, the standard of quality doesn't come from any official or a fixed rules, but from the common sense, related to the beautiful scenery and the purified water quality. Also, because of the dense residential spaces, there is little left for the waterfront to be open spaces which like a buffer zone in between the functional constructions and the nature. The natural quality of this water landscape is actually not satisfying. But still, we could get multiple activities related to the water in this narrow, disordered place. When staying as the individual, people sun clothes in front of their house doors, row boats on the river. And sometimes people sitting as a small group on a stone facing the river, chat with each other and have a rest. According to these scenes we could say all the behaviors relevant to the river are flexible, mutate, coming from the daily life of the communal sense and quite normal in a way.

When seeing from another point, the diverse activities are just generated of people within this local community. For people first being there, it is even hard to find the way leading to the river since the informal settlement forms a mazelike route system. And the purely residential area of a small scale have a strong communal sense, which

is rightly for local people in the waterfront. As a stranger happens to be there, you will feel that everyone is looking at you with the curiosity. This part of Rio Almendares is like a "forbidden land" separated from the whole waterfront there.

The coastal area in Malecon, Vedado

When comes to the coastal area in El Malecon of Vedado, we could get a vast view of the ocean, which is very impressive and appealing. The coastal place consists generally of the short wall to resist the flood, the Malecon road, commercial programs and the blocks of hotels for tourism. The tourism implies that the people here are a mixture of foreigners and local residents. Thus correspondently, it is pretty easy to find people selling stuff on the pedestrian pavement like drinking, eating and artworks, which is a kind of commercial activity. Besides this, the normal activities like swimming, fishing and informal music performance also happen around the water.

However, which attracts me a lot is something special or spiritual I could say. There are people sitting alone and in silence as if deep in their own world. And some lovers nestling up, viewing the setting sun above the sea. Compared with normal activities, the frequency of spiritual ones more relate to the high quality of the water area with beauties. Besides that, the time is also a crucial element influencing the generation of spiritual behaviors, usually more during the night than in the daytime. The darkness means relatively less exposure to the public and more privacy to be just yourself. The weak light from the street lanterns is beneficial for the private sense as well.

Another fact to be mentioned is the classification of people interacting with the waterfront here. Although the richness of activities in the whole coastal line, we could still see the difference between tourists and Cubans. Cubans, generally speaking, have more tight relation with the place than tourists when seeing from the type of behaviors, and the activities are more diversified. For Cubans, we could see people fishing, swimming, jogging along the road and staying several hours to do whatever chatting or playing music, which are normally long-standing, and have close interaction with water. But for tourists, it is unimaginable to spend even more than one hour just sitting at the short wall or jump to the sea. On the one hand, the time for tourists is limited to experience the whole Cuba. On the other, the relatively loose interaction is because they are not enough familiar with this area, no matter what of spatial attributes or cultural, so-

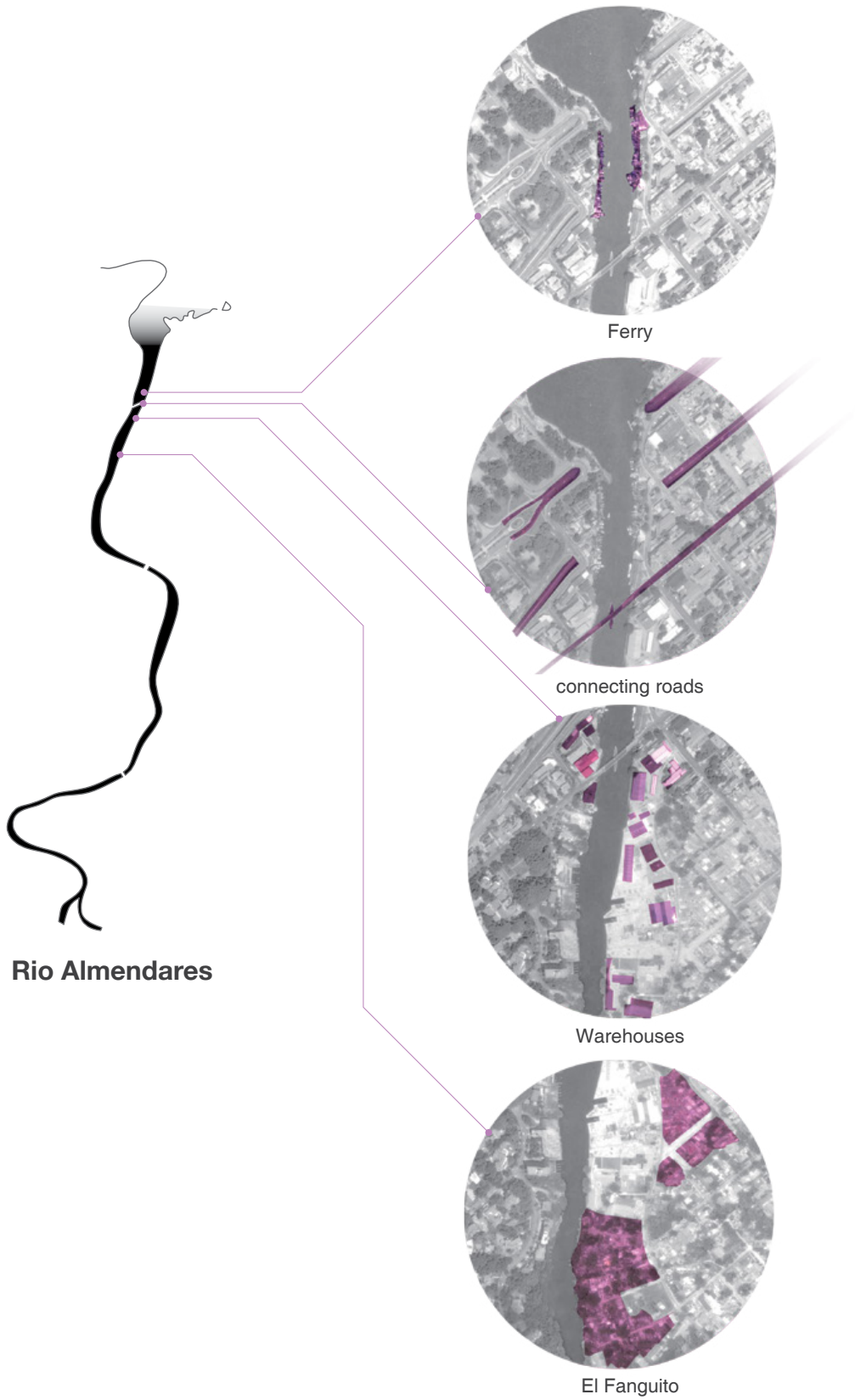
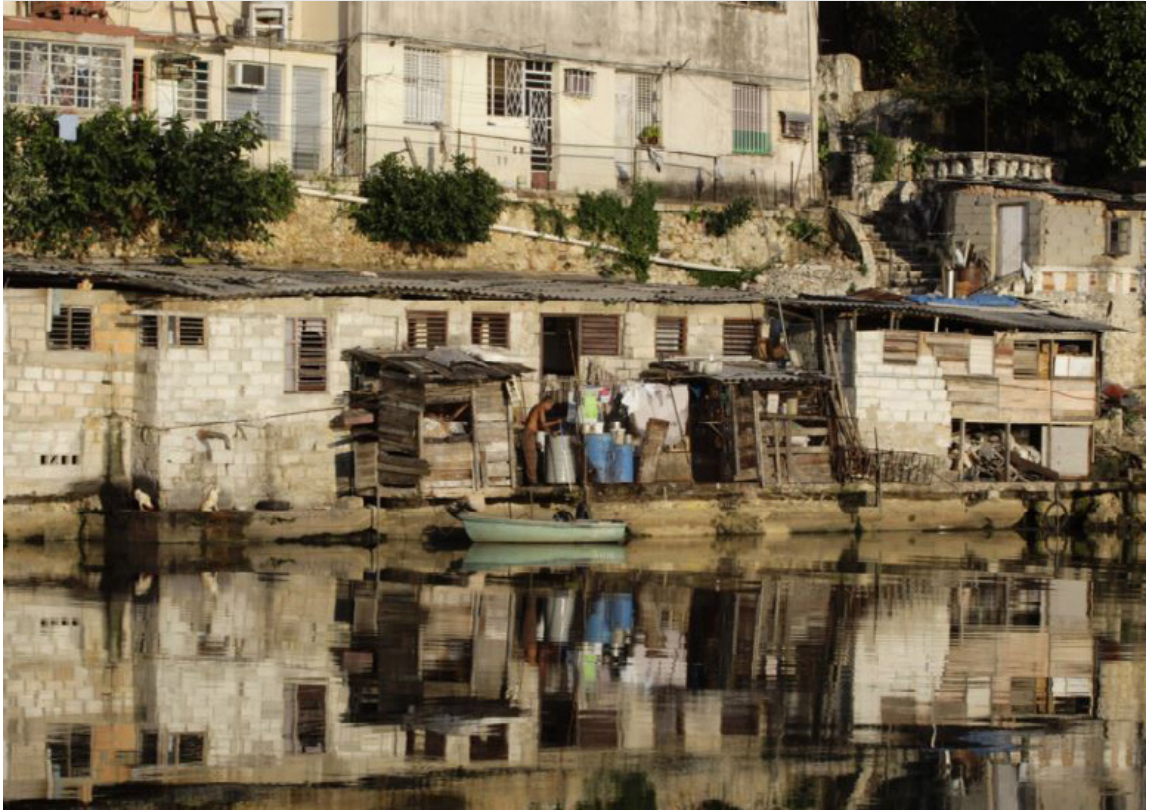


Diagram 2: Elements of Rio Almendares



El Fanguito.¹³



Clothes sunning, El Fanguito.¹⁴



Cuban ———
Tourists - - - - -

Diagram 3: Activities in Malecon

cial parts.

The comparison of Rio Almendares and El Malecon

Above there is an abstract diagram to show the experience of two particular waterfront areas, using five basic senses as the measure standards. Basically, human body's direct perception about the world is the synthesis of these senses, eyesight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. Of course, it is the fact that the experiencing process is too complicated to totally explain it in this short text. Therefore, here I would like just to simplify the process and to show the primary information and results. So basically the diagram shows in the whole route of respectively El Malecon and Rio Almendares, the perception of human body with five senses.

From the overall comparison of the two series of diagrams we could already judge the apparent difference. In the diagram of El Malecon, each line shows the general coherence from the beginning to the end, when in spite of the small fluctuations. But in the diagram of Rio Almendares, there are several times of jumps in the route. This indicates the essential difference between the water landscape of El Malecon and Rio Almendares. The coherence in experience means the coherence in the water landscape itself. The waterfront area in El Malecon is comprised of a variety of programs, almost the similar mixture in each fragment, leading to the similar experience of people. But for Rio Almendares, with most of the area occupied by natural features, the bridges connecting two sides of the river and the constructions, no matter if they are for living or storage, stand out easily to give in a way a surprise for people owing to the great distinction between the nature and the built fabric. Specifically speaking, the surprise derives from the voice of car traffic on the bridges and people in El Fanguito, the smell of lunch cooking, the materials of trees and walls, etc. And the absence or not of the taste is related to the presence of programs of restaurants or cafes.

Both waterfront areas are the merge of built environment and unbuilt environment. But nevertheless, seeing from the diagram, in terms of spatial attributes, of them one is mostly transformed into a place with more artifacts while for Rio Almendares, the natural still takes the most space. Through the comparison, I just show the essential difference of two landscape, with no

intension to judge which is better or not. And it is impossible and makes no sense to try to judge it. This kind of difference rightly illustrates the different roles of these landscapes in Vedado and the story they tell in the collaboration with people right there.

Conclusion

Through the comparison of the local and tourists, we know people with varied cultural backgrounds interact distinctively with the landscape, and the programs in the waterfront areas help to define how people behave. Further, even for the same landscape, the time will influence the outcome.

Through the tracing of human behaviors in two waterfront areas, we could find that how people behave and react is not just linked to the natural features of certain specific area like the scale of water or the quality, there are also other elements influence the results. Owing that it is the nature in urban environment, the effects coming from the city, the solid urban construction and time-related differences. But one thing needed to be mentioned is that normally it is easier for the high quality of landscape like beautiful scenery to lead to spiritual activities.

The last but not least, the reality if the landscape is coherent, if there are unpredictable fragments in the whole landscape, plays a key role in people's overall experience of the area itself.

Therefore, to do the narratives on the water landscape helps us to understand this particular environment. More significantly, through the investigation about how different people behave and interact with different water landscape we could roughly draw a line of water's role both in the urban fabric itself and in our daily life

Eyesight



The incoherency due to El Fanguito and 3 connecting roads.

Hearing



Influecing elements: sounds from human activities, El Fanguito and 3 connecting roads.

Touch



Influecing elements: the artificial materials in the natural environments

Smell



Influecing elements: The flavor coming from El Fanguito, tail gas of car traffic from the connecting roads.

Taste

absent

Nothing for tasting.

ROUTE



Diagram 4: Visitors' Experience analysis: East of Rio Almendares

Eyesight

The coherence of the visual perception, with similar ocean scenery.

Hearing

Not just the sound of the natural features, the sound from the city and people also influence.

Touch

The general perception of the materials, concrete, water, etc.

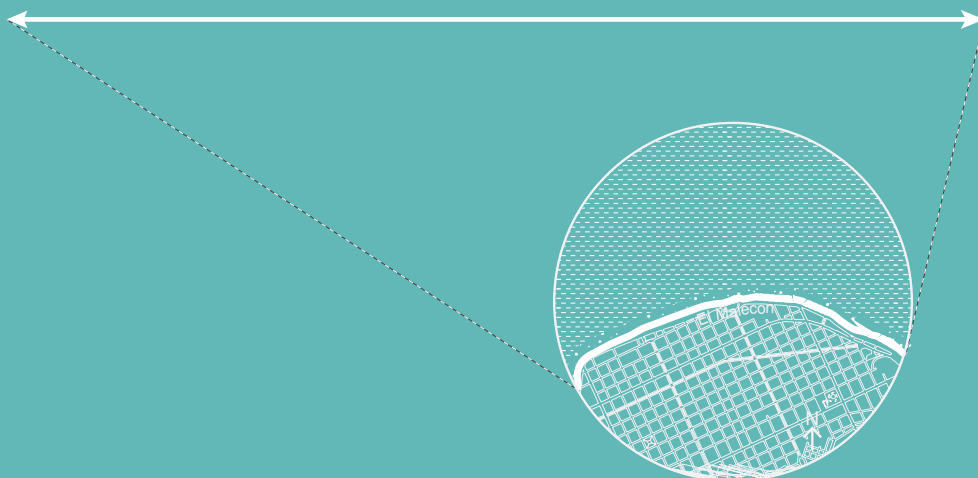
Smell

Influencing elements: flavour of food of different restaurants, tail gas of the traffic.

Taste

Influencing elements: food of different restaurants.

ROUTE



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Other images and diagrams are produced by the author