

# DESIRE LINES

## SACRED SPACES, RITUAL PATHWAYS, LANDSCAPE DESIGN

“I get my energy from being out on the road.” *Richard Long (land artist, UK)*

“Many roads and streets now belong to the internal combustion engine. The term ‘way’ should be salvaged and restored to its former glory, signifying a footpath for bipeds and quadrupeds”  
*Tom Turner (1996)*

Dwelling vs. Wandering (Heidegger)

Farmers vs. Nomads (Chatwin)

Residing vs. Walking (de Certeau)

Place vs. Path (Norberg-Schulz)

District vs. Path (Lynch)

fig.1

## SPACES, PLACES, SCAPES & TRACES

Here I trace a path – like a crooked mile - passing through ceremonial, symbolic and sacred spaces, moving on to explore an increasingly important spatial type – that of passages, routes, greenways, green infrastructure, river corridors. I suggest here that, for landscape designers, these linear spaces deserve as much attention as the delimited, enclosed ‘areas’ that generally occupy the attention of designers and their paymasters. Such routes are important, not just in a transit sense, or even as functional ecological corridors, but are often psychologically important as spaces of transformation and meaning. Many philosophers and writers have proposed a deeply held ‘duality’ in our relationship to these two types of space (fig. 1). In a way, what follows is a call for a new *re-connectedness* in the aftermath of a Modern *distancing* between humanity and landscape – as (proudly) described here by one of the proponents, Le Corbusier (quoted in Benton, 1986):

*“The distance between landscape and us becomes a palpable presence. Replacing the experience of landscape itself. Our separation from the landscape becomes the object of our awareness. The landscape thus separated from us becomes an object of contemplation, dematerialised as the Idea of Landscape”*

## STEPPING BACK

Alongside the long history of managed functional landscapes – farming (enclosure, irrigation)<sup>1</sup>, woodland, markets, manufacturing space etc, and aside too from the somewhat later<sup>2</sup> history of gardens (private and public), ecological parks and garden cities, there exists a lineage of intentional metaphysical or sacred spaces (though some gardens and squares were and still are laid out following cosmic geometries).

From prehistoric times, mankind has sought to mould structures and landforms and invest in them the power, perhaps, to inspire awe (or submission), but also to facilitate transformation and revelation. It is increasingly accepted that monumental and burial remains were knitted together within a sacred landscape of pathways and avenues. There exists a multitude of examples of such landscapes, from the very early Knowth/ Newgrange and Tara-Skyrne, in Ireland<sup>3</sup>; to Avebury & Stonehenge/ Woodhenge; the wonders of the pyramid-dominated complexes of Egypt and Central America; Greek and Roman temples and sacred groves; Christian and Buddhist monasteries; and even some contemporary land art/ architectural creations. In this last category, I would include James Turrell and Enric Miralles as two of the more intriguing exponents.

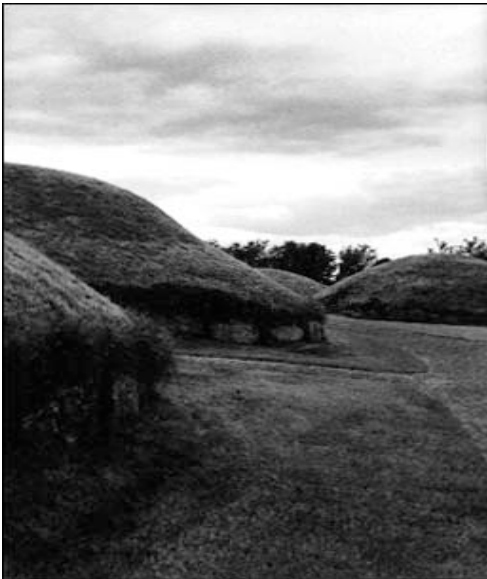


fig. 3 mounds and burial chambers, Knowth, Ireland

In the case of Miralles, at the Igualada Cemetery (outside Barcelona), the idea that the procession path of a funeral would direct the shape of the landscape guided the layout of the project. Rather than removing the earth to uncover the traces of past human life and culture, traces are embedded into the earth to mark the movements of future life and culture. Prevalent in Miralles projects is the theme of walking, and his projects placed great emphasis on public routes from the exterior through the interiors (Spellman, 2003). Turrell, by contrast, is engaged with landscape and the passage of light. He is currently working on the transformation of the huge extinct volcanic Roden Crater in Northern Arizona, creating conditions, or 'skyscapes' (chambers,

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<sup>1</sup> The Hammurabic Code (c 1750 BC) includes sections on maintaining irrigation canals and ditches

<sup>2</sup> A garden plan for a court official in Thebes has been dated to 1495 BC

<sup>3</sup> Newgrange, built around 3,200 BCE and recently restored, is a great circular mound of earth and stone 250 feet in diameter encircled by a ring of standing stones. The interior is solid except for a single stone-lined and -capped passage 62 feet long and 3 feet wide, which terminates close to the centre of the mound in the main chamber with a corbelled vault 20 feet high and three recessed chambers. The entrance, in front of which is a massive stone (10 feet long, 4 feet high) carved with spirals and lozenges, incorporates a roof box which allows the sun, at sunrise on the morning of the winter solstice on December 21, to penetrate the full length of the interior passage all the way to the main chamber. A similar carefully calculated phenomenon is also found at Abu Simbel in Egypt.

tunnels and landforms) for experiencing starlight, moonlight and the pyrotechnic displays of sunrise and sunset. It is “the architecture of space, created by light” (quoted in King, E, 2002).

“ Turrell’s high ambition is to reveal to us anew the extraordinary properties – physical, symbolic, and psychic - of light, one of the commonplaces of our lives. Like many other recent artists in the landscape, he aims to create an environment of rapture.” Beardsley (1989).

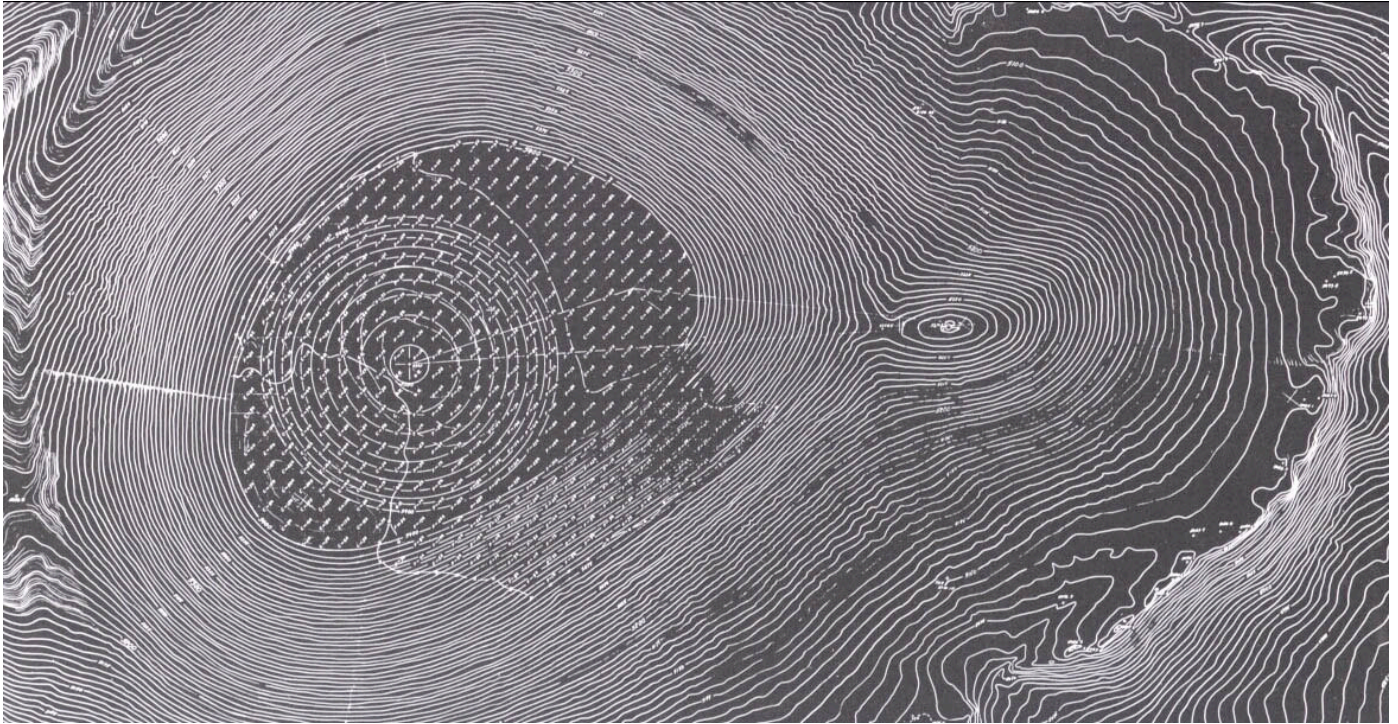


fig.4 James Turrell 'Cut and Fill and Tunnel Alignment for Roden Crater Project' (1980).

## SACRED SPACES

In a wide-ranging review of landscape architecture, Robert Holden (2003) groups a selection of contemporary landscape designs under 'Landscapes of Meaning and Allegory', indicating the enduring importance of the metaphysical in the spaces that surround us. In shamanic cultures the physical landscape is transformed into a spirit or animist landscape, with the belief that waters be regarded as sacred; that areas of wild land be set aside as sanctuaries for ceremony; and that trees and animals are containers of sacred power. A surviving remnant of this 'connection' is portrayed in a number of Russian films from the last decades of the 20thC -, one outstanding example being 'Goodbye' (Klimov, 1985), the story of a community and a landscape about to be 'drowned' by a new dam project.

A codifying of this relationship is apparent in the field of Feng Shui and maybe as a corollary for the western mind, there exist the multitude of 'rules' of Alexander's pattern language (Alexander et al, 1977). Included in this vast compilation are details of how one might create a 'sacred space' – with a connected series of 'nested precincts' that become progressively more private and end in a sanctum sanctorum (Pattern Language -No. 334). Alexander has acknowledged that, whilst there isn't a direct relationship between his work and Feng Shui, there is overlap, and the design outcomes of both processes may in some cases be similar (Alexander, 2004).

Commonly, in the entry to very sacred and powerful places there was, and is, a series of lesser spaces to pass through. Positions of power were located deep within a tree-like or linear structure. The depth to which visitors were permitted to penetrate indicated their status - e.g. at Versailles, in the age of the 'SunKing. This arrangement turns the space into a path, usually with clearly articulated entry 'gates', followed by a



sequence of increasingly sacred spaces and a symbolic story e.g. The Temple of Amun, Karnak<sup>4</sup>, and the sacred way at Delphi<sup>5</sup>. Examples abound too in the creations of Christianity, e.g. in the case of *sacri monti*<sup>6</sup>. Bom Jesus do Monte (fig. 6) built at the end of the 18thC is an especially theatrical example, offering a vicarious pilgrimage experience. It is an experiential and metamorphic rather than a picturesque aesthetic. Another particularly apt example is the nine-level, terraced Buddhist (though initially Hindu) monumental area in Borobudur in Java, involving a 5-km clockwise approach, which is a pilgrim path. (Incidentally, staircases now provide quick access to the top for those who desire merely the view, not the journey...)



fig. 5 Borobudur, Java



fig 6 Bom Jesus, near Braga, northern Portugal.

Another eastern analogue is the 'roji' - dewy path – which forms the entry to the ritual Japanese tea-house. The characteristic articulation, materials and construction of the entry path inculcate Zen Buddhist beliefs in

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<sup>5</sup> At Delphi, the path first enters the sacred precinct through the temenos wall, then wound up the hillside passing the monuments and treasuries which lined the path until it reached the inner sanctum of the Temple of Apollo

<sup>6</sup> Real spaces where Christians in groups could follow the biblical narrative of the Passion of Christ by treading a path leading from one memorial site to another, from the floor of a valley and up a steep hill. They reproduced actual distances from the Holy Land sites. Some cities even sent individuals to Jerusalem to check the number of paces between sites before building a sacro monte. (Conan, 2003)

a powerfully symbolic way. On a much larger scale, the Causeway of the Dead at Teotihuacan (outside Mexico City, fig. 7) exhibits a great processional avenue, over a mile long. It is divided into broad flights of steps which accentuate its rhythm. There are eight 'landings' rising gradually from north to south, and seven flights of steps enabling the spectators to look out over the causeway (Stierlin, 1968).



fig. 7 Teotihuacan, Mexico

## PILGRIM ROUTES

Along with the well-known Santiago de Compostela pilgrim route(s) in Europe, other examples of important sacred journeys include those made to the sacred mountain of Arunachala in southern India, to the Amanath Cave in Kashmir, to Mount Fuji-san near Tokyo, to the town of Wangdi Phadrang in Bhutan in the Himalayas, to the Shwe Dagon pagoda near Rangoon, to the site of Angkor Wat in Cambodia or the ascent of Croagh Patrick in the west of Ireland. Traditionally, the quality of the religious experience was such that the entirety of the path followed by the pilgrim was seen to be sacred.

Five thousand feet above China's Yellow River towers Tai Shan, the most significant of China's sacred mountains, revered by Taoists and Buddhists. Pilgrims toil up more than 7,000 steps, a six- or seven-hour journey, which they usually start at night in order to pass through the South Gate of Heaven in time to witness the sunrise. Considered the son of the emperor of Heaven, Tai Shan is dotted with calligraphic stones, pagodas, and temples, including the Temple of Bixia, the Princess of the Rosy Clouds who bestows long life on those who ascend. At the summit stands the Temple of the Jade Emperor, where the inspired burn incense and money.



fig. 8 wayside shrine above Dharamsala, Himalaya

Closer to home is Avebury – where “it was at the Sanctuary that Neolithic pilgrims would end their long Ridgeway journey...” (Cope, 1998). Here, Neolithic trackways link sacred spaces. Cope surmises that, as master psychologists in the planning of ritual and pilgrimage, the Neolithics were capable of turning their great ceremonial centres into mind maps which mystified and intrigued. For the ancients, the great trek to Avebury would have been a spiritual confirmation of everything that they believed in and practiced and as

such, Avebury had a duty to boost and empower the Stone Age pilgrim. Each one of the centres we see today was supposedly a station of the great pilgrimage within the Downs temple precinct (Cope, 1998).

The 'realness' of the pilgrims experience is bound up with the movement, the physical effort, the changing sensual scene, and weathers that are transited. Mountain ascents like those described earlier can be journeys through time as well as space, as one traverses different seasons, sometimes leaving the hot desert landscape below to arrive in the wintry snow. The path to a sacred place is often a hard path, full of obstacles, with attendant risks, gates and trials.

## PLACES AND LINES

In this brief discussion of sacred geographies and pathways, one could also consider the enigma of the straight lines left on the landscape by archaic cultures in the Western Hemisphere. Examples include the Nazca lines in Peru, similar lines on the deserts of western Bolivia and northern Chile, and the extensive linear markings left by the Anasazi Indians in the vicinity of Chaco Canyon in New Mexico.<sup>7</sup>

Of course we inhabit now a whole other universe of virtual/ computer space, with hypertext thought, not narrative thought. But pulling back from that information abyss – the disembodied, cyber/cyborgian space, I want to e-scape back to real, *physical* space – and look a bit more deeply into the psychology of routes and pathways (though it could be argued that such 'spaces' are as much in the mind of the 'traveller' as having a physical imprint - traversing a mind-scape as much as a landscape). As Olafur Eliasson (2000) wrote: "But at the same time, evidently, an equally urgent need has emerged for man to regain a firm grasp of his surroundings in their capacity as a physical reality undergoing the processes of natural life...."

Christian Norberg-Schulz states, in discussing the trinity of 'places, paths and domains' that, whereas a 'place distinguishes between inside and outside, " the path symbolizes man's existence, a going forward from the known to the unknown through a succession of spaces" (quoted in Barrie, 1994) Looking at the distinction between 'located space' and 'linear space', possibly what is needed is a 'twin' concept to that of the 'genius loci' – perhaps 'genius via', (to coin a term). De Certeau (1984) distinguishes between "two specific forms of appropriating space; walking rhetorics and residing rhetorics...a dialogue between the architects style and the pedestrian's use"

In a number of his books, Bruce Chatwin played with thoughts on travel and the origins of settled and nomadic parts of humanity, and the ever-present frictions between the two. In 'The Songlines' (1987) aboriginal pathways (Dreamings) across Australia are described as traversing a landscape which is 'sung into existence' by those on the journey along the songline. In Aboriginal belief, an unsung land is a dead land: since if the songs are forgotten, the land itself will die.<sup>8</sup> James Cowan (1991) appraised tradition and metaphor as part of the native Australian way of seeing landscape. Passage through the land implies Dream Journeys, functional pilgrimages which have been misread by materialist scholars as survival strategies for hunter-gatherers. More recently, Iain Sinclair, in London Orbital (2002) on the subject of the River Lea: "Lea as ley, it always had that feel. A route out. A river track that walked the walker, a wet road. The Lea fed our Hackney dreaming: a water margin"

An example of a landscape design project that set out to address the role of both the subconscious and the pilgrim's journey is Jellicoe's 1964 Kennedy Memorial Garden. The design draws upon John Bunyan's 'The Pilgrim's Progress' and Giovanni Bellini's 'Allegory of the Progress of the Soul'. Jellicoe designed a flight of steps, rising through the woods to reach a glade in which the memorial stone is set. A paved pathway leads

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<sup>7</sup> The lines at Chaco Canyon do not follow the natural contours of the terrain but rather run straight across the land, often going up the face of vertical cliffs, making them completely unsuitable for transportation of either people or supplies. Furthermore, terrain-specific roads and tracks that date from the same periods as the straight lines have been found nearby, thus undermining the explanation that straight lines were used for transportation purposes

<sup>8</sup> In 'The Songlines', Chatwin quotes Father Flynn (and Aboriginal ex-Benedictine) "Aboriginals could not imagine territory as a block of land, hemmed in by frontiers, but rather as an interlocking network of 'lines' or 'ways through'. All our words for 'country' are the same as words for 'line'. Everyone hoped to have at least four 'ways out', along which he could travel in a crisis'. The waterholes were ceremonial centres where men of different tribes would gather. To sing a verse (of a songline) out of order was a crime. Usually meant the death penalty.....Here there are no frontiers, only roads and stops – handover points. Birds also sing their territory."



to the Seats of Contemplation - the end of the journey. This was a key project in the development of Jellicoe's view on the role of the subconscious in landscape design (Turner, 2008).

## PATHWAYS TRANSFORMED

Pathways can begin life as purely functional, e.g. the Silk Road (trade), and the numerous salt routes scattered throughout the world. In later times, with decay and disuse, these can become overlain by a more spiritual meaning, or aura.

Robert Holden (2003) speaks of “the palimpsests of historical layers that form most landscapes: one human activity and its markings superimposed on another” and Peter Cook (in Spellman, 2003), describing the Californian desert: “ I was always conscious of the minutiae that referred to each other as fragments of human interaction: tracks, markers, remnants, cuttings, foldings, - shadows even. Indeed, I was reassured by them, being the creature that I am: nurtured in damp valleys that have been overlaid twenty or a hundred times by wind, husbandry, battles, greed, or the occasional good idea and riddled by lost codes of association or interdependence”. As is commonly the case, it is the human touches and ‘residues’ (imprints) that give these spaces their power, not in a sublime sense, but nevertheless an emotive draw and a mental intrigue. Roman roads, drove routes, pilgrim ways, green lanes can, in many cases, exhibit a similar aura.

There is a strong link to land-art and site-specific art; One cannot discuss walking and landscape without reference to the artist Richard Long. He redefines the boundaries of art practice, making much of his art as he moves through the different land surfaces which cover the planet. “If walking has become Long's trademark, the path is perhaps the central image or archetype in his work. To walk a line is the easiest thing a human being can do to put a mark on a place. The idea of the path or way has meaning in all cultures— from the most material to the most spiritual. It is both real and symbolic, whether it be the Christian's pilgrimage, the Taoist's Great Way, or the Zen Buddhist's Heavenly Way”. Moorhouse (2002).

Land-art helps put the "meta" back on the front of "physical," which much of landscape design seems to have largely lost over the past 200 years.



fig. 9. Richard Long's 'Walking a Line in Peru (1972)

## WAY-MARKERS

The arrival of megaliths in the landscape conveyed a new attitude and approach to landscape, one that excludes the other species and aims at dominating the whole environment. No longer were humans merely creating spaces of refuge (huts, caves), but creating a human-made web of linked built structures. Human marks as articulations along a line are discussed in *The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology* (Renfrew 1994). Here it is argued that many examples of Rock Art can be read as the expression of nomadic people for whom the world is a network of tracks, whereas for sedentary cultures it is a field or an area.

As an example of significant journey markers there is the story of Charing Cross (London): When Edward The First's wife Eleanor of Castile died at Harby in Nottinghamshire in 1290, he had crosses erected at the 12 places where the funeral cortege had rested on its way to Westminster Abbey. Charing Cross was the last one.

Turning now to milestones as markers: The word 'milestone' has been appropriated for widespread application in business, politics etc. However, I would like to draw attention back to the milestone as item of real physical importance, and one that has the potential to take on the role of communicating something of the essence of both the 'genius loci' and the spirit of the pathway. Just one of the expressions of context is the potential for milestones to reveal and communicate much about the geology of the location, area and pathway.

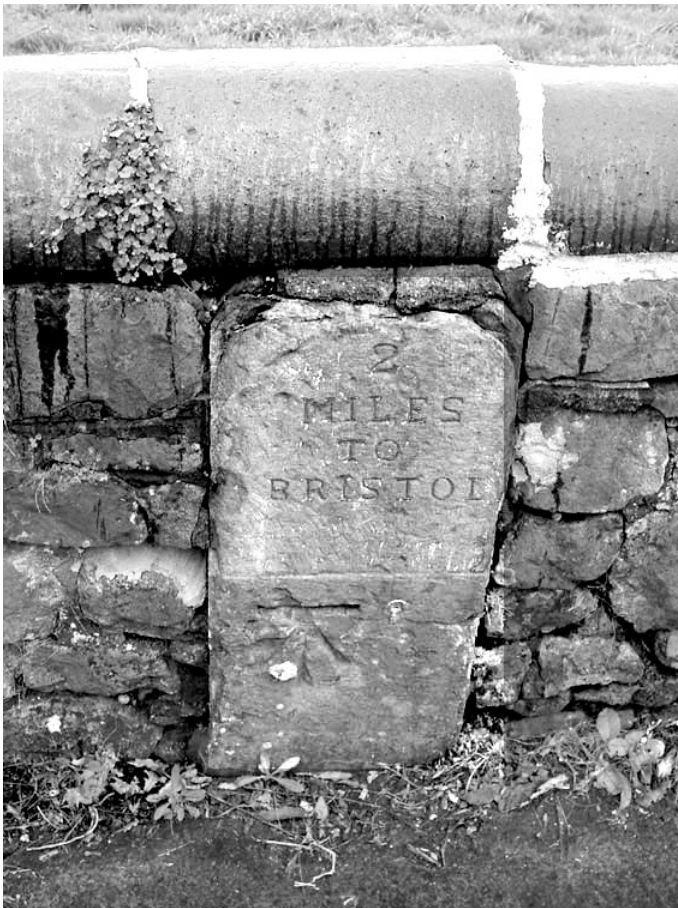


fig 10 old milestone, of local sandstone, near Bristol.

The white quartz milestones that once lined the winding old Cork-Limerick road, in Ireland, were a significant ingredient in the (slow and twisty) car journeys of my childhood. The motorway which has replaced the old road enables a much speedier journey, but absent now is the rhythmic physical marker sequence, and the steady visual countdown to the destination.



## THE WAY AHEAD

Michel Conan (2003) makes an interesting distinction between two types of metaphorical 'pathway' landscapes – i.e. those that assume perfect knowledge of the narrative to be emulated (e.g. the sacri monti described earlier) and those aimed at leading visitors to discover for themselves a personal interpretation of the motion. Either way, because they engage the landscape with all their bodily senses, the intertwining of landscape structure and narrative engages them in a process of self-transformation.

### What does this mean for Landscape Designers?

If landscape designers want to reclaim the power to create spaces of meaning and power (even transformation) the suggestion here is that one field deserving of more attention is that of routeways, both cultural & spiritual. Is it possible to develop the ideas expressed here into new designs, ones that seek to achieve new meaning? Some possibilities present themselves:

- Opportunities to enhance linear spaces/ routes through subtle placement of markers - significant points (harking back to milestones); and marking starting points (gateways/ thresholds) and endpoints.
- To become more involved and lend support to keeping alive older paths and links, allowing a new reading of the landscape – and comprising as important a 'heritage' as buildings. Surviving drove roads and green lanes are examples that need this attention.
- To view routes/ lines as the vital links in the chain that can join more enclosed spaces ('greenways', 'green necklaces', 'green ribbons')
- And of course, designing new pathways (sculpture trails, greenways, paths that join city to countryside, riverside paths, and more long-distance walking routes). Integrated sculptural works can act as landmarks, give opportunity for reverie, even focus the meaning of a place by working in a shared symbolic vocabulary, as perhaps Brancusi's work in Tirgu Jiu illustrates<sup>9</sup>; it need not be a zoo of redundant artworks.

Metaphysical spaces are still relevant, even vital, today, and one major component is the re-discovery of routes/ paths of meaning, and the tactile real-ness comes from movement, effort, the changing physical scene and weather.

The topic is becoming increasingly relevant to the practice of urban design also. Kevin Lynch, in his analysis of urban environments, 'The Image of the City' (1960) established the terms path, edge, district, node and landmark as principal components of the urban landscape and important characteristics in analyzing the city. According to Lynch, a path needs to have a distinct identity, with a clear sense of directionality and continuity that includes origins, edges and destinations. Paths often comprise a time series, a sequence of events along the path, and often there are landmarks and nodes which give identity to each section. Districts, on the other hand, are defined by enclosure, based on some common identifying character and need to possess 'singularity' and 'form simplicity' to be successful. The future of our cities is bound up with our ability to re-connect the centre to the hinterland – corridors, radial paths, riverways ( the 'blueways' of Turner<sup>10</sup>) - even if we can't yet realize Christopher Alexander's ideal of 1-mile wide fingers of countryside penetrating all major cities.

On a wider scale, there is new impetus behind the promotion of cross border 'cultural routes' in Europe. The link is often to ancient connections. The routes are "spaces of tolerance, of mutual knowledge and solidarity, spaces of dialogue and meeting, as well as creativity – where the European idea is forged concretely" e.g.

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<sup>9</sup> In Tirgu Jiu , Brancusi's 'Table of Silence', Gate of the Kiss and Endless Column are situated along a kilometer axis through the centre of the town, creating a new alignment and a new concept of place.

<sup>10</sup> In 'City as Landscape' Tom Turner describes 'blueways' (running beside rivers and canals), 'brownways' (deep cracks with earth, pebbles and exposed rocks), 'orangeways' (like esplanades, places where one goes to be gay and look at other people, 'purpleways' for explorers, like historical trails but with an air of grandeur, 'whiteways' (commanding expansive views, on high ground)

the revival of Via Francigena<sup>11</sup>.

Turning once more back to Australia, according to Robert Lawlor (1991) we should be *following* the Australian Aborigines, not just studying them. His tract in favour of nomadism and against sedentary lifestyles is a warning of the desacralising effect of overseeing cultivation, defending boundaries and owning property.

Pilgrim-ways and similar routes are now being transformed to meet contemporary needs. The promotion and enhancement of such paths can attract an entirely new audience of participants, enabling engagement in a different way to say the users of the existing network of long distance footpaths or cycle routes. Also receiving renewed attention is the field of psycho-geography - as pioneered by the Situationists - with its emphasis on chance and randomness, and the desire to study or subvert the paths and patterns we create as we walk through cities. There is certainly a desire for more than function and information in our environment, and a need for deeper connections.

For the penultimate statement, I turn to Aaron Betsky (2003)

“In its intellectual engagement with the world, architecture is perhaps one of the last activities that can aspire to monumentalizing and giving meaning to the archaically obvious. I’m referring to the world of sensations and primary contact with the cosmos and its forces - water, sun, gravity, wind, earth - ...in place of fictitious experience”

But finally, this from Bruce Chatwin (1987):

“ Sluggish and sedentary peoples, such as the Ancient Egyptians, with their concept of an afterlife journey through the field of reeds – project onto the next world the journeys they failed to make in this one”

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<sup>11</sup> The Via Francigena is a historical itinerary leading to Rome from Canterbury, a major route used by thousands of northern European pilgrims on their way to Rome. At the beginning of the 11th century mainly, a multitude of souls "looking for their Lost Heavenly Home" began to travel across Europe. Places of worship, market towns, obligatory points of transit and tollage, monasteries, "hospitals" and places to stay had to be established beforehand as essential reference points during the journey.

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