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The Aesthetics of the Road, Road Art, and Road Traffic

Yrjö Sepänmaa

Abstract

Three things are required for a good road: economy, safety and beauty. A key concept of this trinity is *fitting*: how to fit the road into the landscape. Together, the road and the landscape form a work of road art. Art attached to the road environment - in this case the other meaning of road art - is at its simplest art works placed beside a road. Art in a more demanding form gives the landscape new dimensions of meaning. Road and art in unison are more than the sum of their parts. Furthermore, travelling is a way to get from one place to another, but it can also be more than that: Travelling in itself can be a source of pleasure and a memorable experience. The joy of being "on the road" comes from the road and the road environment, as well as from the vehicle and its characteristics and the skill of the person using it.

Key Words

road art, road criticism, road architecture, traffic, traveller, road provider, road user

1. The Symbiosis of the Road, the Traveller, and the Vehicle

a. Defining a Road

"A good road is a living, total work that arises from a vision, which demands impeccable professional skill in its designer, as well as the ability to understand and create aesthetic landscape totalities." This is how Martti I. Jaatinen, a Finnish architect, defined a (good) road in his book entitled *Tie suomalaisessa maisemassa (The Road in the Finnish Landscape)* in 1967.^[1] The basic demands he presents are economy, safety and beauty. How the line of the road -- the road itself -- fits into the landscape depends on all the essentials, that is, on economy, safety and beauty. "Tricks performed later are a matter of nursing the road and the landscape, good design beforehand is health care," says Jaatinen.^[2]

A road is an aesthetic object with its own characteristics: straights, curves, cambers, rises and falls. Related to this is its environment: villages and towns, farms, forests and lake views. Ranko Radovic talks about the core and shell of the road in his study *Tie kokemusmaailmana (The Road as a World of Experience)*.^[3] The core is the road structure from verge to verge, the shell is the landscape extending beyond it. The crucial question for the designer is the relation between them.

Thus a road is never alone in the landscape but is tied to its surroundings, while nevertheless strongly affecting them. Often, for better or worse, it dominates the image of the landscape; road building is environmental construction and the designers are landscape designers. A road opens passages in the landscape, as do open boundaries, large power lines and

smaller power and telephone lines. As such it is an architecture of passages.

A road, together with its associated structures - bridges, tunnels, noise barriers, embankments, traffic roundabouts and lampposts - is a total work. The environment closest to the traveller is other traffic; a road by itself, without traffic, is like a town without inhabitants. Moving on the road, being 'on the road,' is a public and social event.

A road is always a total work, even when it is a failure. Some time it is also a total work *of art* - at least it can be seen and experienced as such. The road and road environment can be interpreted as large-scale environmental art, literally or symbolically. In this totality, independent works of art have also begun to appear frequently: in traffic roundabouts, at rest areas, next to the verges. The art can also be intermittent, such as ready-made objects picked out by lights during dark.

b. The Traveller, the Road User

The traveller is in a symbiotic relationship with the road itself, which is more than just a pavement: It is the traveller's partner. The road becomes personified as a carrier, guide, obscurer and leader; even though the ultimate entity is actually another person, the road architect or road artist who usually remains invisible. The road presents not only itself, of course, but also the landscape and its landmarks; it reveals or only shows a glimpse, displays and arouses curiosity by hiding. The road awakens for the traveller: The landscape runs like a ribbon in front and besides the traveller's eyes.

The road provider and its user are brought into interaction as persons and, on a broader scale, also as institutions. The road provider provides road services without restriction or for specific targets. Public roads can be used by anyone, as can private roads with some restrictions.

The road facilitates travel, opens a route and connects, but it also defines the connections and the speed. A roadless area is regarded as backward (although water routes, for example, have compensated for a lack of roads). But a roadless area can also be a valued wilderness, and forestry roads have been criticized for making wilderness areas too accessible to too many and thus disturbing the peace of nature.

The road restricts the traveller, who must stay on it, but by providing a passage, it connects and frees. The freedom of movement is always relative. First of all, it is limited by the connections available, and then by traffic regulations and other traffic. Traffic must be observed in its totality: those driving in front, those coming from side roads (not to mention elk or moose that may charge from the forest at any moment), as well as those behind when changing lanes, overtaking and turning.

The road is not a road without the traveller, its user. Unused paths become overgrown and abandoned and unused roads also vanish. Sparsely populated areas become even more sparsely populated; correspondingly, growth centres develop and demand new traffic arrangements.

c. The Vehicle

Besides the road, the vehicle is also praised or criticized. People form a symbiosis with it; A person becomes a kind of cyborg.

Car tests speak of the pleasure and comfort of driving; in the case of public transport, also of the comfort of travelling. This is not simply a question of a feeling of relaxed well-being. A powerful sports car will take over control from an inexperienced driver. A motoring correspondent writes, in the spirit of the advertising slogan "put a tiger in your tank," about *Mercedes-Benz SLR McLaren*, a car model that few have the opportunity to drive:

"What about the accelerator then? Even the strongest language cannot describe its effect. In normal traffic even light pressure races the engine enough to realize that flooring it will demand a longer stretch of clear road.

"When such a stretch appears, time stops, the earth shakes, and the trumpets of doom awake. The thunder from other side of scuttle doubles the motorist's pulse, but when you add the acceleration that tears the flesh from your cheeks and glues your back to the seat like a magnet, a heart attack is not far off."[\[4\]](#)

Cars, like drivers, have characters. Car tests and one's own test-drives help to find the right one; through press articles one can also present, for example, more general points of view on motoring.

A car limits or at least directs observations of the outside to visual aspects and shuts off the stimuli of most of the other senses. We do not smell, hear or feel the environment in a strong and direct way. Instead there is the interior of the body of the car, which has its own heat, oscillations and vibrations and air quality, the sound world flooding from the radio and the ergonomics of the design of the passenger compartment. We are encased separately from the milieu that slides past us. In his essay, "Strange Landscape - Images from behind the Landscape," Lauri Anttila, a professor and an artist, compares motoring and walking as ways to travel; his sympathies are on the side of the walker:

"We are used to closing our ears to the hellish noise of traffic, we sit in metal boxes as we move in the landscape, away from the reach of sound, our world is odourless, or smells of fuel. We are forced to walk for kilometres on roads that are more suitable for cars than pedestrians."[\[5\]](#)

Driving and motion itself create a sense of speed and excitement: the experience of driving, which can of course be imitated in a driving simulator and computer games. A car is as different when it is driven from what it is in an exhibition or when parked on a street. Tests deal with both aspects: the car as the product of design, but also as a device that exhibits the behaviour characteristic of its make and model, or even of the individual car.

2. Road Art in Two Senses

The road, together with the structures that inseparably belong to it -- bridges, intersections, noise barriers, embankments

and green zones - can thus be seen literally as an art, or at least like an art. The road has not only its own permanent characteristics deriving from its surface materials, but also, for example, provides conditions for driving that vary with the weather.

The speed of travel substantially affects the feel of the road and the direction and selection of observations: How the road is experienced. The user of a motorist's road atlas is introduced right at the start to the underlying philosophy in this way:" . . . the point of view of the roadmap is behind the windscreen. When driving at one hundred kilometres an hour, the landscape becomes simplified, so that only the essential is important."^[6] The faster we move, the more our observation becomes centered on the road. As speed increases, any art associated with the road must be even more road-centered , unless the art is intended precisely to decrease speeds.

Landscape trees and erratic boulders form natural points of attachment to the road milieu. In Finland's uniform forest coat, such features are hills, rocks, lakes and rivers, and also the fields, villages and towns produced by culture. The distant landscape is becoming increasingly obscured by the near landscape becoming overgrown.

A natural landscape gallery is created next to the road by caring for and improving the available natural elements. Natural landscape paintings framed by trees are made by opening lake views and keeping them open; rest areas are built next to views of landscape that are valued; and lights are used to emphasize objects as kinds of ready-made works.

Besides road architecture, road art includes environmental art relating to the road and its immediate surroundings. Road and art mean more together than separately. By going to where the audience is, art also reaches those who do not otherwise actively go to it. Road art is thus a kind of introduction to art, in the way that art in airports, metro stations and underpasses often is.

The same position could be demanded for road art as for art in public buildings: the percentage principle, in which a specific share of the cost would be reserved for art. Art would then be part of the design process from the start and the artist a member of the design team.

Road art must firstly be sufficiently visible to be noticed at normal driving speed. It must be quickly perceivable, as taking a driver's attention for even a few seconds will endanger traffic. On the other hand, we are accustomed to art requiring concentrated and contemplative examination; the examination of road art, however, is often fast and restless, simply because there is no more time. Art is seen like advertisements and hoardings; it becomes mixed with them. Therefore, could there be art that would precisely require movement to examine it, speed to perceive it? Such art might be noise barriers and the rhythm based on them. A barrier of varied materials and patterns acts like a film running at the right speed, single frames melting into a moving picture.

In his leader "Art along the motorways?" Harri Hautajärvi, the editor-in-chief of the Finnish architectural review

Ark/Arkkitehti, emphasizes the architectural value of the road, but is doubtful about bringing art into the road landscape. In his opinion, a well-designed road should suffice.^[7] This is a functionalist's attitude, similar to that on decoration, although art in the road environment should certainly not be reduced to decoration. This view is close to Jaatinen's emphasis of the primacy of road-line design as health care compared to beautification afterwards as nursing.

Does art relating to the road then belong to nursing? Jaatinen makes no reference to art as a sub-factor in a good road; the whole idea of road art seems to have arisen later, along with the rise of environmental art. Radovic certainly uses this concept, but based on the designer and not the artist. ". . . the designer must place elements, themes, and signs beside the road, to increase the quality and interest of the road. But how, and in what way - that is **road art**, or at least part of that art."^[8]

Art adds its own dimension to the road environment, though more is not necessarily better. Even though road art, in the sense of art relating to the road, is not really essential, it is undoubtedly an opportunity, a resource. It requires skilful use if it is not to turn into a detriment to the environment.

3. Road and Road-Art Criticism

In criticism, it is usual to distinguish depiction, interpretation and evaluation. In the criticism of established art this division is obvious, but even as a form of writing, environmental criticism is often less formal and even not recognized. Where to search for road criticism? It certainly exists, in road maps, travel guides and brochures, in car advertisements and, above all, in travel books, but also in literature. The sources are varied and on many levels.

The essential feature in such criticism is the examination, experience and personal analysis of the relationship between the self and the subjectmatter. How do I understand the subject, how do I interpret it and how valuable do I consider it? In its basic form, such writing is essay-like speculation. Henry David Thoreau's *Walking* from 1862 is a classic example of a work in which an examination of the physical environment starting from a walking trip expands into a meditation on the philosophy of life. Works like John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*, 1962, and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, 1957, are similar.

Travel books and route guides do not stop at simple depiction. They are aids and recommendations to those leaving on a journey; they offer planned routes with stopping places and sights; and they prepare for the trip by giving necessary natural and cultural historical information as a framework.

Road criticism extends from the road to its environment and its relationship with the landscape, to the road in the landscape and the views from the road. Plain road-reviews are seldom written; the reputation of a road depends more on what it shows. Sights are not, however, only on the roadside; instead the road can be a sight in itself as a museum road, with its own artistic, cultural, and historical interest and value.

The journey and all that is associated with it are the subject of criticism: A "good trip" is a summary and conclusion concerning the totality. Such a journey progresses in time; it is a process, like a film or play with its peaks and slow passages. It has a beginning and an end, and even a long journey nearly always returns home.

Profound criticism is also cultural criticism. The questions it raises are, What is the road needed for? For what kind of traffic, and why? Cadillac Farm in Amarillo in northwest Texas by the *Ant Farm*, a group of artists, can be seen as a criticism of technological culture: The ground and rock that provides the raw materials of cars finally swallows the same cars. Nature remains;, human creations vanish.

4. The Traffic Game

"Playing the game keeps you moving," was the slogan of a traffic-safety campaign in Finland some years ago. In this traffic game the aim is not to win, but to keep going, or at least it should be. Education, supervision and penalties are used to control queue-jumping and cutting in, speeding and risk-taking in general, actions that endanger our own lives and others'.

When it succeeds, the traffic game goes smoothly and safely. The rules of the game are stated in traffic regulations, and those using the road are assumed to know them and to agree to abide by them for the common good. Thus traffic is strongly a social event. The metaphors of road traffic come from the river, which as a water route is provided by nature and has been used through the ages. At best, traffic flows, runs and glides. Something is wrong when it starts to crawl and become sluggish, never mind becoming blocked and jammed.

The fascination of speed, the attraction of danger and enthusiastic tales of near-misses all challenge the monotonous feeling of smooth, safe traffic. Driving styles are becoming more competitive: witness the comparison of journey times and the testing of the performance of increasingly powerful cars even in everyday traffic. This kind of an attitude means conscious risk-taking for adventure and excitement.

There are numerous sayings that liken life's progress to a road. They refer to uphill and downhill, to twisty roads, to dangerous places, to smooth paths. You find yourself going around begging in a dead-end or the road rises up in front of you (concretely in the form of a bascule bridge). Road forks are places demanding strength of character and determination, where otherwise you can take a wrong turn.

Comparable to the road are the path and the ski-track: Someone opening a ski-track is a pioneer, who pushes through snowdrifts on behalf of others, and is usually highly conscious of his or her own importance. "I've skied a trail for singers/ skied a trail, snapped a treetop/ lopped off boughs and shown the way:/ that is where the way goes now/ where a new track leads," says the singer in *The Kalevala*, the Finnish folk epos, in her/his final words.[\[9\]](#)

A cartoon by Sam Cobean in *The New Yorker*, September 1947, shows a motoring couple noticing that they have gone

astray into Salvador Dali's landscape of melting clock faces. The wife, the voice of reason and wisdom after the event, scolds her husband, who is driving: "I knew we should have kept on Route 66 out of Flagstaff."[10] Perhaps, perhaps not: daring to go into strange places may open another road of feelings and experiences, the road of art.

Endnotes

[1] Martti I. Jaatinen, *Tie suomalaisessa maisemassa* [*The Road in the Finnish Landscape*], (Helsinki: WSOY, 1967), ref. on p. 114. "Introduction," translated by H.P. Martin, pp. 14 - 17.

[2] Jaatinen, p. 6.

[3] Ranko Radovic, *Tie kokemusmaailmana* [*The Road as a World of Experience*] (Helsinki: Tielaitos, Kehittämiskeskus, 1993), ref. on pp. 37 - 48.

[4] Velimatti Honkanen, "Paholaisen kätyri" ["The Devil's Advocate"] in *Tekniikan Maailma* 1/2004, pp. 46 - 51; ref. on p. 50.

[5] Lauri Anttila, "Vieras maisema - kuvista maiseman takana" ["Strange Landscape - Images from behind the Landscape"] in *Maiseman kanssa kasvokkain* [*Face-to-Face with the Landscape*], edited by Yrjö Sepänmaa, Liisa Heikkilä-Palo and Virpi Kaukio (Helsinki: Maahenki, forthcoming).

[6] *Autoilijan Suomi -kartasto* [*The Motorist's Road Atlas of Finland*], Editor-in-Chief Anneli Pitkänen (Helsinki: Oy. Valitut Palat - Reader's Digest Ab., 1994); ref. on p. 3.

[7] Harri Hautajärvi, "Taidetta moottoriteiden varsille?/Art along the motorways?" in *ARK/Arkkitehti* [*The Finnish Architectural Review*] 3/2001, pp. 16 - 17; ref. on p. 17.

[8] Radovic, p. 35.

[9] *The Kalevala. An Epic Poem after the Oral Tradition* by Elias Lönnrot, translated from the Finnish with an Introduction and Notes by Keith Bosley and a Foreword by Albert B. Lord, *The World's Classics* (Oxford - New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); ref. on p. 666.

[10] *The New Yorker*, Sept. 1947, p. 57.

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