

# The Accessible Frame

Research on ancient Chinese landscape architecture towards an interactive practice paradigm

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## Extended abstract

Human's perception of space is inhomogeneous and multisensory. While, mathematical projection drawing, the tool to represent space in the architecture field, tends to solidify, simply stabilize this complex perception; and it facilitates visual hegemony. This is not only a gap between the expression tool and the expressional thing-in-itself, but may be related to the essence of architecture. In contemporary architectural discourse, discussions on this topic are mostly put forward by phenomenological architects, which is the best evidence. They are critically thinking about architecture at the ontological level.

*Frame* is the symbol of mathematical projection drawing. As an operational fulcrum point in the translation of 3D spaces into 2D pictures, *frame* provides a boundary between real space and pictorial illusions. The boundary leads isolation, which means the completion and closure of creation. In the field of architecture, the built space is unilaterally controlled by the architect, in other words, the perception of the user about the built space is pre-set by the designer by a rigid expression tool. This is not in line with the nature of human perception of space. Especially in the contemporary era of globalization, the users of built space are so diverse, the limitation of this kind of boundary frame is more markable.

This Ph.D. thesis takes a spatial phenomenon, *Enframing the Scene*, from Chinese traditional gardens as the research object, and argues that here *frame* is accessible. Moreover, through cross-cultural comparative study, in-depth analysis of the philosophical foundation of this spatial phenomenon, it will demonstrate that this accessibility means a shifting paradigm of interaction between people and space on the ontological level.

Taking one spatial phenomenon from the Ancient Chinese landscape as a practical case to study is because that, as the same as modern architecture, it is a design system with space as the core focus. However, as *Leibniz* pointed out, ancient China is *another globe*<sup>1</sup>, Chinese landscape is another space design system, independently born and bred in ancient Chinese culture. This civilization has generally believed it might be complementary/supplementary with the western one.

The full thesis extending the discussion around a word - *frame*, contains three main parts.

The initial part begins with an introductory narrative analysis of a typical spatial phenomenon concerning the ancient Chinese landscape, called *Enframing the Scene*. The study tries to

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<sup>1</sup> "Their language and their character, their way of life, their artistry and their manufactures, and even their games are so different from ours that it seems as if they were people from another globe; it may very well be possible that even a simple, yet detailed description of their practices will give us more substantial and useful insights than the knowledge of the rites and incitements of the Greeks and Romans, to which so many scholars cling." BRIEF VON LEIBNIZ AN ANTOINE VERJUS IN PARIS V. 18. 8. 1705. IN: RITA WIDMAIER (HG.), LEIBNIZ KORRESPONDIERT MIT CHINA. FRANKFURT AM MAIN 1990, S. 21

explore the “another way of seeing” and its connections with “another way to follow this visual habits to create space” in ancient China.

For “another way of seeing”, briefly, by analyzing handscroll painting, it demonstrated that the pictorial space created by Chinese traditional painting, which extending two-dimensional horizontal - unlike Western classical paintings that extend perpendicular to the horizontal plane mainly- no need frame to mark the boundary between the illusion and real space, they are in parallel, won't interfere with each other.

Because of this parallelism, a person who reads the painting gets permission to enter the illusion world. The existence of frameless paintings provides the legitimacy of cultural roots for the existence of an accessible frame in a garden spatial organization. It is "another way to follow this visual habit to create space”.

Since then, the chain between human visual perception and architectural space creation in ancient China is pointed out. However, here the chain is quite different from the current and globally dominant one, which is mainly based on Western tradition and tamed by linear perspective, criticized as limiting humanization in culturally diverse contemporary society.

In *Enframing the Scene*, *frame* is not a boundary but can be *accessible*, which means, there is an interaction between the user and the built space.

In the second part, aiming at moving from observations of phenomena to extract a certain paradigm, the research has been extended to a retroactive investigation on the philosophical roots at the base of the ancient Chinese landscape. From the ancient Chinese cosmos model to the influence of *Tao Te Ching* on the Concept of Space, this research further points out that interaction between the user and the built space is a kind of user-involved on ontology level, it has accumulated experience and techniques at a broad epistemological level. (for example, the traditional Chinese painting) So, the inference is, in ancient Chinese spatial design, it is not only reflected in the space phenomenon: *Enframing the Scene*, but widely exists in the spatial composition.

This *interaction* happens in the field of human perception, is here considered as a sort of *intersubjectivity*. It works through empathy, both in designing and enjoying spaces. This deals with the phenomenology framework in many aspects. Thus, it may be expected that by some *reducing method*, this type of spatial interaction that was a design method itself in ancient China, could be also used in today's society.

It indicates a kind of shifting paradigm, which could face the requirement of more context-sensitive in this globalization and immigration era.

In the last part, it will explain one project on the bases of the mentioned interactive paradigm, as a practical application and a test-case of the proposed research findings. It is a home construction project, placed in a sensitive culture context with well-educated clients. The architect here would play the role of a guide/inspirer instead of that of a decision-maker. While users decide their own living space concretely.

The main aim of explaining and reflecting this project is to articulate some guidelines for a practice that might be more sensitive to the realities, values, and questions arising from the depths of context and lifeworld. From these guidelines, different implications may be drawn in different design conditions.

*Frame* here is the practical project's construction, and it is *accessible*, that is, the user is involved in the design-to-use whole process.

## **Bibliography**

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## **Design Driven Research**

(A short paragraph explaining the methods/techniques/instrument you apply in your work as Design Driven Research – max 250 words, Times New Roman, font size 11)

The emerging relationship between users and the built-space in contemporary is the main motivation of this research.

In today's era of globalization and immigration, from a practical point of view, space design has faced the requirement of more context-sensitive and function-flexible, this is because the service objects/users of the will-be-built-space will be more diverse that with various cultural and educational backgrounds.

For new situations, perhaps a shifting paradigm is called for, which is different from the prior based on certainty, which may contain ambiguities and flexible metaphoric thinking.

Taking a spatial phenomenon, *enframing the scene*, from Chinese traditional gardens as a research object, this research ultimately hopes to call for a shifting paradigm on the ontological level.

This is a cross-cultural study, and ethnography is one of its main research methods. This ensures that the analysis of the research object is based on its own cultural context. But its results are merely mainly reflected in the appendix: Brief history of Chinese landscape.

In the main body of text, narrative description and theoretical deduction are the main methods. Various forms of hand-drawn drawings are the main technique of this research, aims to restore the architectural composing that retains ambiguity.

A kind of anti-technical technique.

## **Keywords**

Perception of Space; Ancient Chinese landscape; Interactive Practice Paradigm;

## Bio

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The final stage of research

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I grew up in the reforming and opening up modern China, accepted the global general education system; in university, accepted modern architecture training, which was totally western imported. While, my hometown is located in the hinterland of China which maintains a deep traditional lifestyle, even though in a somehow hidden way. Parallel to formal education, I also accepted a traditional private education, which let me study Chinese painting and tradition general culture. These double backgrounds lead me to raise this thesis topic, and I believe it also supports me in the capacity to analyse it.

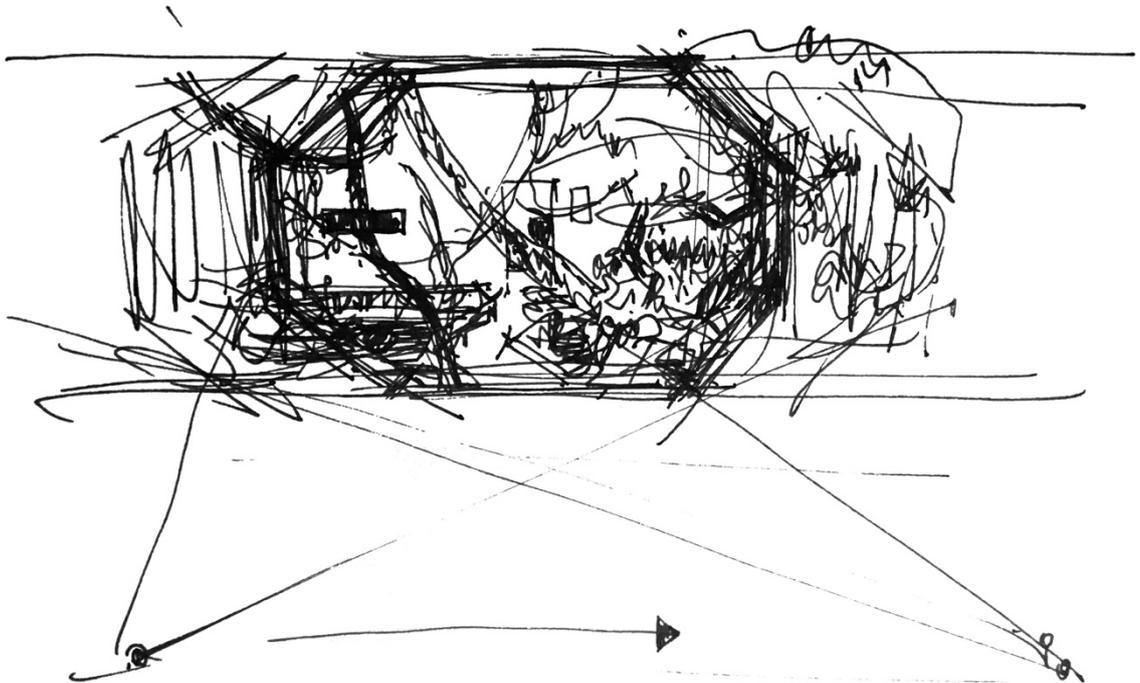


Fig. Sketch from 竹外一只轩 (A little chamber out of bamboos) : When a person is moving, the scene she /he saw through frame is diffused. By Author.