Landscape Values

Place and Praxis

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Tim Collins, Gesche Kindermann, Conor Newman & Nessa Cronin (eds)

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Landscape quality objectives as vectors of landscape transformation: A new approach to landscape quality assessment

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In the convulsive change that occurs due to deterioration, stretch marks and expansions, our everyday landscapes seem to have no strategy to define their image, always faded, always out of focus. Nowadays, urban landscapes, more than any others, transform their configuration quickly, changing their footprint in the imagery of people, in their memory and future projects. Those ancient, readable scenarios, which were the result of a constant compromise between human needs and natural necessity and that for centuries traced in the landscape clear horizons of sense, seem to be lost.

Faced with the speed of transformations that occur in the global economy, the current planning instruments, including strategic plans and structural plans, are failing to keep up. In this process of acceleration and inertia in trajectories not concretely defined, spatial planning has become too slow to meet the needs of global society, so that the 'government of the territory' in many cases, such as Italy, has become an oxymoron because of the bureaucracy it implies and the slowness of its responses. Today only design approaches are capable overcoming the discrepancy between social demand and formal response in proposing and building a city model that offers a viable alternative to the scattered city. Today's need to transform the city calls into question the necessity to recover a sense of place.

> '*As an essential factor of individual and communal well-being and an important part of people's quality of life, landscape contributes to human fulfilment and to the consolidation of a European identity.* ' (Déjeant-Pons 2014, 3)

Living in a quality landscape then becomes an issue of primary importance, both for European policies, and for research and design thinking. The European Landscape Convention (E.L.C. 2000, Firenze) is born in the wake of this need, unanimously felt and shared. As Déjeant-Pons (Ibid. 3) puts it, the ELC aims to '*respond to the public's wish to enjoy high quality landscapes*' and thus improve the quality of people's lives.

Therefore, it has a primarily ethical mission, but whereas the protection, the management and planning of environmental, cultural, artistic and architectural heritage are practical consequences of this approach, they are conceptually secondary.

The failure of today's practices of planning and spatial governance, which produced the landscapes we see, is in having reversed this logical connection, misrepresenting, or rather, not accepting the meaning of the new definition of landscape introduced by the Convention, that clarifies finally the distinction between Landscape (article 1a European Landscape Convention 2000), Environment and Territory. Landscape is '*an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors*, its quality therefore cannot reside in or arise from only the natural, aesthetic or ecological characteristics of a given territory for it is shaped also by an assignment of values and an emotional charge that is strictly dependent on the people who inhabit it, and varies according to spatial, temporal and cultural contexts. Given the different nature of landscape, which in fact acts as a subject and not as an object (Turri, 2006), the tools and approaches used in reaching and assessing its quality must be different. The ELC in fact demands a revolutionary change in landscape quality assessment by foregrounding perception as the main vector of landscape evaluation.

Determining the quality of the landscape is entirely different from determining or assessing the quality of the land and the environment, to which end there exist long and respected traditions of study, methodologies and research produced by the various scientific disciplines. The epistemological misunderstanding, described above, has resulted in a methodological error that until now has dealt with the issue of Quality Landscape according to an inductive rather than deductive logic, with an operating model oriented towards Evaluation (understood in the scientific sense of measurement) rather than Design. In Italy, for example, until a few years ago, landscape analysis was influenced by our long, national tradition of spatial and urban planning that has always regarded measurement of the quality of public space to have an objective character. This objectivity was arbitrarily interpreted according to thresholds and standards of

quality values which, in the case of the landscape, were represented, in a first instance by biological indicators and, in the second by 'Landscape Quality Indicators', measurable through mathematical models and indices of ambiguous composition. Based on this approach, over the years there has been a plethora of reflections, research and experiments, internationally, which have been, in different ways, assembled to give a precise definition of indicators for the landscape, and to define a suite of criteria capable of covering the whole spectrum of landscape's components, to describe it and to be universally applicable. Here we refer to work by O'Neill et al. (1997), Colombo and Malcevschi (1999), Vallega (2008), Socco (2003), the Landscape Observatory of Catalunya (2009), Dale & Kline , Cassatella and Peano, Cordara (2011), and many others.

It is wrongly assumed that these instruments should be able to provide a scientific and rigorous evaluation of landscape quality (Vallega 2008), when, in fact, it they have led us off the road, confusing means with ends: we concentrated on evaluation methods forgetting the project that can lead to Landscape Quality. But even if you want to establish a shared framework for assessing the quality of the landscape, at no point in the Recommendations set out in CM/Rec(2008) 3, it is specified that the landscape quality indicators should consist of a finite number of uniquely defined tools, and that they should work across parameters and mathematical models.

This *modus operandi* bears witness to the degeneration of a well-established tendency to conceive the 'construction of knowledge' as an empirical approach, which requires an absolute domination of phenomenal reality with respect to the processes and systems of relations. Bateson noted this degenerative trend already at the end of the 1970s. In his 1977 *Verso un'ecologia della Mente* (Steps to an Ecology of Mind) he said that to counter this drift it was necessary to '*create a bridge towards those sciences that explore issues of form and not of substance*', thus promoting a systemic view of the phenomenal world and a new perspective from which to read the man-nature relationship.

Nowadays the contents and objectives of the ELC reverse completely the conceptual and operational pre-eminence of the Analysis of the Project. The paradigm shift consists of converting the empirical approach that has proved its ineffectiveness in managing the complexity of territorial phenomena and dynamics, into a deductive one, that is certainly more far-seeing and better suited to understanding the dimension and magnitude of human desire. This is essentially the meaning of a conception that sees 'Landscape as a Project' (Zagari 2010), which makes it the end goal, the intrinsic reason for every plan and every project, while retaining the humility and the awareness of not being able to completely dominate it. 'We cannot plan or design Landscape' (Paolinelli 2011) however, we can think in terms of objectives and plan for the area in accordance with the maximum shared criteria, sustainability and resilience. The present study questions current landscape quality assessment and highlights the need, which is clear in the Convention, to stop trying to *quantify* landscape quality and assume instead a *qualitative* method that sees perception and the satisfaction of people as the only valuable landscape quality indicator. To answer the urgent demand of transformation and quality, and solve the current impasse of our landscapes, rather than ask 'Can we 'measure' the quality of landscape?' (Cassatella and Peano 2011) we should ask: 'Which landscape do we want to have in the future?' (Neugebauer and Stoeglehner 2011). '*Quin paisatge volem*?' (Nogué and Sala 2005).

Is there a tool, defined by the ELC that responds exactly to this question, which is having considerable success in the European scene and that is informing the spatial planning practices even in those countries that have not signed the Convention?[i] It is Landscape Quality Objectives (LQOs)?

According to article 1c of the European Landscape Convention, landscape quality objectives are the shared synthesis of the social perception of landscape and of the wishes for transformation expressed by all the main actors of the landscape. The same definition of LQOs is a synthesis of all the epistemological pillars on which the European Landscape Convention relies: the centrality of the people, the landscape intended as a common good, protection intended as active practice of sustainable transformation of the territory, and the economic value of landscape. Therefore, the formulation of LQOs not only results in a snapshot of the current quality of the landscape as perceived by people, but it is also able to anticipate future sustainable possibilities to achieve quality and at the same time to be monitoring tool.

Likewise, in the words chosen to describe them is already encapsulated their application potential. The first term of the expression highlights the scope: Landscape Quality. The ELC finally frees this concept from an

unbalanced interpretation moving it towards the aesthetics and ecology. The result is an unconventional and brilliant definition of landscape quality, which reveals itself in the form of tension, as well as the 'unfinished' of Michelangelo, depending, strictly, on people. Since the ELC tells us that the landscape exists only as it is perceived by people, it follows that its quality becomes real only when we can enjoy it.

The second term indicates the right approach. An 'objective' is the purpose of a strategic operation, the result of a ripe intention or a desire that you want to realize, therefore, it requires a design approach–that famous Design Thinking (Simon 1969) that is in vogue in the world of business management. To define an objective, as well as to define a project or solve a given problem, three complementary actions are actioned: the ability to observe (critical thinking), creativity, and interpretive synthesis (practical sense). These are the characteristics of so-called 'Diffused Design' (Manzini 2015), that is, design capacity potentially accessible to everyone as part of the human capacity. If it was enough to merely define landscape quality objectives, we would have thousands of particular visions, whereas the LQOs must form a 'common program'. So a third dimension has to support this widespread design capacity as a continuous check on the feasibility of envisaged solutions, vis-à-vis a pre-vision of the realized objective for its translation within the formal and social relations system of the territory. The intervention of cultured knowledge is necessary, therefore, to the Expert Design, which in this case is the result of the combination of scientific and humanistic knowledges called Sciences of Landscape (Donadieu 2015) that the Convention addresses ultimately to the competent authorities (ELC articles 1c, 5c & 6d). An intervention of this nature will assess the adequacy of the envisaged solutions, and facilitate revisiting and adjusting of the targets identified at the discussion stage, until the long-awaited 'A-ha moment' (Saloner 2011), ie the synthesis of shared scenarios, namely the 'possible futures' (H. Khan 1950). In the concept of landscape quality objective the Project is of essential value, and LQOs prefigure Design Oriented Scenarios (DOS), whether the objectives aim is the protection, enhancement or entire reconfiguration of certain landscapes. Prescribing the formulation of landscape quality objectives in all the territories for which it applies, the Convention states that the whole territory must be designed (CMRec (2008) 3. I.1.H Part), whether it be "in urban areas and in the countryside, in degraded areas as well as in areas of high quality, in areas recognised as being of outstanding beauty as well as everyday areas;" (ELC Preamble).

> *The definition of landscape quality objectives combined with an approach which gives them a decisive role in the interpretation and research of landscape quality, does not claim to be the only tool for the analysis and management of Projects, but surely it constitutes an instrument coherent with the principles of the ELC and easy to apply because it is uniquely defined and shared by all signatories.*

It strengthens a deductive and systemic approach able to be translated into action and policy measures for the government of territory, with the advantage of being understandable and transversal to different target users; site specific and transcalar, or suited to application in regional and local contexts. This approach and this method does not exclude but rather integrates and makes the most of empirical analysis methods specific to each discipline. In fact the intervention of Expert Design, presupposes that there must be specialist knowledges that constitute the sound scientific basis for the study of landscapes and the phenomena affecting it.

We can think of the Landscape Quality Objectives as *vectors* of landscape transformation. Interpreted this way, a system of LQOs can describe the landscape and can be described with respect to three essential elements: Magnitude, Direction and Way.

Magnitude [Interpretative function]
Magnitude, as well as vector, represents the content of each objective. It indicates the topic, identifying the scope to which it refers, geomorphological, ecological, social, cultural and so on. The definition phase of landscape quality objectives, of their precise content, is preceded by a phase of careful study and consultation, and finally is the result of the interaction between People and Expert Design. The content of a group of landscape quality objectives thus always reveals the peculiar and strongly identifying characteristics of the landscape, or else what are considered the most pressing issues. Through their magnitude the LQOs express the salient features of the area and they define the landscape structure of the examined territory. They are therefore effective interpretative and communicative synthesis tools oriented to the project.

Direction [Managing function]
The action that they define expresses a clear design intent, a shared choice of land transformation, Landscape quality

objectives, therefore, always have a *direction* that is necessary to stimulate creative and innovative solutions, establishing the development trajectory and ensuring the coherence of the project.

Way [Monitoring function]
LQOs take account of all the reasons that have led to a certain model of transformation and its effect, thus allowing the attribution of the merits and responsibilities of certain choices. Once formulated, the LQOs have a deadline for their completion. By their own definition, their fulfilment satisfies the expectations of the population, so it can tell a lot about quality as perceived by the citizens. Attributing a positive or negative way to their path, they become monitoring tools. They are easy to verify and they ensure consistent monitoring with premises and an estimated time of completion.

Based on this reasoning, landscape quality objectives constitute an absolutely innovative tool: '*Landscape quality objectives represent the end result of the process of devising landscape operations, which implies knowledge production, public consultation, policy formulation and action and monitoring strategies*'[ii] the scope of which is implemented when, evaluating their fulfilment or process of creation, they assume the function of monitoring tools indicative of landscape quality.

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Notes

[i] Vital Landscapes.Valorisation and Sustainable Development of Cultural Landscapes using innovative Participation and Visualisation Techniques. Work package 3. Joint definition of CE landscape quality objectives. Georg Neugebauer and Gernot Stöglehner. March 2013

[ii] Crf. CMRec (2008)3 Part II.2.2. Definition of landscape quality objectives.