
AlmaTourism

Journal of Tourism, Culture and Territorial Development

The Geographic landscape as Cultural Heritage in the Post-Modern Age

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ABSTRACT

The landscape represents the geographical-historical context where any objects acquire a historical but not universal meaning. The protection of a monumental or architectural asset does not automatically translate into protection of the landscape where it is contained. We should also be aware that the «reading» of the geographic landscape doesn't map into research methodologies for cultural assets and, therefore, the geography cannot be credited as a privileged interlocutor in this field. No cultural asset has the same degree of complexity of the landscape; any cultural asset can be preserved, restored or reused without losing its meaning and its value. The landscape instead is a morphogenetic process in constant evolution and change that can be retained in its transformation but not preserved. The purpose of the following contribution is just to give the definition of geographic landscape as cultural heritage in the post-modern age.

Keywords: geographical landscape, cultural heritage, cultural asset

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1. The geographical concept of cultural assets

Cultural Assets is a generic expression, also ambiguous perhaps, that someone would like to express in more effective terms, such as Cultural Heritage, Patrimony. As a matter of fact, in many European languages, the Cultural Heritages are not so much conceptually related to the cultural events as to the idea of their transmission (as everyone's patrimony) and to the concept of wealth and capital. This inherited patrimony establishes an inter-generation connection, comes from the past and is for the future, through the filter of a present that functions as a selector and which should take over the responsibility of deciding what will be forwarded, adhering to the concept of sustainable development as it is drawn in the Gro-Bruntland report.

The natural and cultural heritage should be considered not as a static object to be admired, but as a vital element, featuring an experienced and livable environment, with features that can change over time. Hence the renewal of the heritage feature as a geographical object (Paratore, 2006, pp. 737-738). The concept of cultural heritage and cultural and territorial identity (Banini, 2009) connects to a set of tangible (cultural heritage, archaeological sites, monuments) and intangible (cultural events, intellectual production, identity) components that, as underlined in a recent European research (ESPON Project 1.3.3, Cultural Heritage. Thematic scope and concepts, 2006), are considered the key to local development. Van der Borg (2006), contributes to the establishment of the concept of cultural site-heritage (Prezioso, 2006) not only as an object of restoration and conservation, result of past and present creative acts, basis for a governmental policy of territorial and the regional economic revitalization, but also as a carrier directly associated with tourism.

The UNESCO World Heritage List considers the Cultural Heritage as "...what contains all the signs that document the activities and results of the human action in the course of time" (Feilden and Jokilheto, 1998, p. 11); the product and the evidence, different feelings and spiritual trends from the past, therefore an essential element of the personality of a people (Davidson, 1991); recognizing it as a relevant concept in the interpretation of today's society and its evolution, "a product of the history, an asset".

The Cultural Heritage is the dynamic aspect of the identity and evolution of a territory (Graham et al., 1998) and represents its distinctive character in the eyes of the population (Espo 1.3.3 project, 2005, p. 3).

The Cultural Heritage is directly associated with tourism in the thirteenth report on Italian Tourism (2005), issued by the Ministero dell'Economia, and becomes the strategic focus for the development of local tourist systems in the "Rapporto della Conf-Commercio 2005".

For international and national geographical research, cultural heritage is considered not only a set of cognitive actions with a predominantly conservative-philological character, but also the political-geographical synthesis

between different elements that sometimes cannot be measured directly, which concur in representing the complex and not always unique reality of a territory.

“Therefore, following some of these indications (Prezioso, 2007), the landscape, culture and history can be considered as a unified system that could allow a geo-political and geo-economic interpretation of the Italian and European regional cultural units or, more practically, contribute to the drafting of economic and territorial plans. For this reason, along with the historical and cultural analysis that characterizes the differences of status at local scale, the theme of cultural heritage will be treated along the lines of identification and evaluation: Identification of territorial reference units that combine the characteristics of the anthropogenic-settlement type with the natural ones, describing the morpho-territorial units of the Cultural Heritage, on which the level of the territory sustainability can be measured, as a basis for an evaluation of the projects/programme for the protection, conservation and enhancement of the cultural landscape.

«Evaluation in terms of the historical corpus of political-territorial application of landscape identity at different stages and conditions that led to the current conditions, returning the overall vision of the dynamics, starting from the verification of their compliance with the characteristics and vocations expressed by the territory» (Prezioso, 2007, pp. 220-221).

The annual report of Federculture (2006, p. 3) states that “culture is emerging as a key component of welfare as well as a factor in the economic development...therefore... the policies to enhance the art and culture, in an increasingly globalized society, are placed in the focus of the new strategies for the territorial competitiveness, the recovery of regional identity, the welfare of citizens”.

«The cultural heritage, in the contemporary society, is becoming a new centrality in regional policies; and because of this it shows up as a privileged and reference sign in the process of re-territorialization³ that characterizes the post-industrial society....cultural asset is considered any event or product of human ingenuity with exceptional nature or artistic value, any evidence of the tangible or spiritual mankind evolution and civil development, any object or natural phenomenon of scientific interest or that can touch the heart» (Dallari, 1996, p. 89).

It is very difficult to quantify the extent of our cultural and historical heritage; in fact there is not yet any systematic catalog of this immense wealth. A clear and precise idea on how widespread is this artistic and historical heritage constitutes the primary input for any project that identifies in the exploitation of the Cultural Heritage a development strategy aimed at the functional enhancement and renewal of the territory at macro and micro scale. «Knowing and preserving the fundamental traces of the shapes of a territory, means preserving the specificity of that place. This is why the conservation and

protection of “the territorial signs related to the historical territory and the cultural heritage” reveals to be a strategic project, where the cultural assets acquire not only a strategic territorial function for the relationships and communications, but also a function of innovation and ingenuity. In this sense the geography can reveal itself as “planning”, thanks to its ability in describing new orders and contributing to the making of territorial micro-systems» (Dallari, 1996, p. 91). «Within this territorial planning, based on the Cultural Heritage, the geographical contribution reveals to be strategic and allows geography to exploit its potentialities as a science of the “truly possible” and to redeem its condition of being the rhetoric of the “untruthfully necessary”» (Dematteis, 1995, p. 71).

Paola Sereno has provided a critical reading of the definition of landscape as a cultural asset: «The identification of the landscape as a logical category of the geographical description and the landscape as a cultural asset, that seems to be implicitly accepted, seems somewhat questionable or at least requiring some mediation» (2001, p. 129).

2. The landscape in the geographical literature

«The landscape in the geographical discipline constitutes a central theme and a primary source of knowledge, even though its history is characterized by various evolutionary stages that have assigned to it different meanings and importance» (Micoli, 2010, p. 132).

In an international perspective two German geographers, towards the end of XIX century, dealt with the concept of landscape: A. Oppel who gave a definition associated to a simple meaning of a scene with some unity and J. Wimmer, who gave an idea of the landscape even more vague, but «with the certainty that the purpose of the geographer is to determine the typical landscapes in which to split the various regions» (Calafiore, 2008, p. 131).

In France, Paul Vidal de la Blache (1845-1918) set the foundations for a new conception of geography and Jean Brunhes (1869-1930) gave a very important contribution to geographical studies outlining the anthrop-geographical elements that humanize the natural landscape and represent a significant step to reach the concept of geographical landscape. Among the first masters who have tackled the theme of the landscape, in Italy there is Roberto Almagià (1884-1962). According to him, the geographical landscape from simple object of study ends up taking a central role, becoming the main thread of research in the field of the anthropic geography. Renato Toniolo defines the geography «as science of the landscape, the latter intended as the synthetic expression of inter-dependent phenomena localized in specific spatial units» (1917, pp. 56-7). In contrast to him, Olinto Marinelli (1874-1926) says: «The concept of landscape is necessarily something abstract and individual that depends on our ability to

describe over and above the appearance of the things: a country can exist without us, not a landscape» (Marinelli, 1917, pp. 136-8).

Renato Biasutti (1878-1965) in 1947 presents the “Paesaggio Terrestre”, a work of great importance in the geographical Italian literature, whose title implies full acceptance of the concept of landscape. Biasutti started from the sensitive and visual landscape, made up of what the eyes can capture at a glance up to the horizon, to arrive to the concept of geographical landscape. “Only few characterizing elements should be considered, among the very many composing the sensitive landscape, that are able to identify and compare the main shapes of the earth landscape” (Biasutti, 1947, pp. 1-6). In the last issue of his “Fondamenti di geografia generale”, Almagià gets to the belief that just “the classification and the description of the geographical landscapes, as final objects of the geographical investigation, lead to the overcoming of the dualism and get to the unification of the two traditional physical and anthropic branches of geography” (Almagià, 1961, vol. I, p. 84).

Also for Toniolo, who did not change this idea, the geography becomes the “science of the landscape *par excellence*” (Toniolo, 1970, p. 25). At this point two other eminent geographers completed the construction of the concept of landscape with a number of clarifications: Umberto Toschi and Aldo Sestini (Calafiore, 2008).

According to Toschi (1897-1966), the analysis of the geographer must be very thorough, and must distinguish between the constituents (hydrographic, plant, construction) and the determinants (climate, social life, earth’s dynamics). Therefore he declares: «there is nothing more concrete than the landscapes, that can be observed by the geographer, who can never immediately observe other entirety, even though concrete, such as a region or the earth» (Toschi, 1966, pp. 16, 386-9).

Aldo Sestini (1904-1988), promoter of the *teoria possibilista* of the humanized landscape, will then systematize this set of concepts, reaching the notion of rational geographic landscape, that for many years will be the ending point of this field of research. The rationale for this goal finds a concrete realization in the book “Il Paesaggio”, unanimously regarded as a classic of the Italian geographical literature. There obviously was some criticism by other scholars, such as Lucio Gambi. In 1979, Costantino Caldo makes a reference to a “landscape geography that was developed between the two World Wars” and Piero Degradi introduces the concept of agricultural landscape, characterized by farming techniques, in harmony with the conception of Paul Claval (1983) (Micoli, 2010). Additional analytical studies have been undertaken by Franco Farinelli (1980), Adalberto Vallega (1978, 1985), Giacomo Corna Pellegrini (1986).

In Italy, since the sixties, the geographic research has put back the approach to the landscape, as a form of information, replacing the study of vertical relationships between humans and the environment with that of horizontal

relationships generated by flows of people, goods, capitals; relationships that are not always of easy perception through the landscape.

Recently, in the last twenty years, the theme of the landscape has instead returned to be in vogue with new connotations. The “perceptive” that identifies the visual aspect of the environment subject to individual and social fruition and the “ecological” for which planning is a necessary result of the cooperation between men and ecological world. In other words, the space should be utilized according to the predispositions of the environment that makes it up.

3. The landscape as cultural heritage

The heritage places can be perceived as examples of geographical landscapes where elements and factors of physical, environmental, anthropogenic, economic and social nature have assumed greater importance. In fact, the protection and enhancement of Cultural Heritages has been changing over time, expanding from the monument as such to its surrounding area up to the intangible heritage, in an effort to promote the peculiarities, varieties and identities of the cultural landscapes.

“The human settlement in its temporal aspects, pertaining to the history of human and spatial events, correlated to the occupation of territories, has stamped on the environment distinctive “signs” of the peoples’ culture and their spatial, cultural, social and economic organization. These “signs” are then recognized, perceived and read by humans in different ways, on the basis of their levels of sensitivity, cultural background and knowledge” (Micoli, 2010, p. 107). For a scientifically sound reading of a system of “signs” in a cultural landscape and of the motivations that over time have generated it, it is essential to lead its development, safeguarding the continuity of its distinctive and fundamental characters. This is the fundamental condition to also create that added economic value, which should be seen as the “black gold” of our country. This is the direction taken by both the institutions and various sectors of the relevant scientific researches, that are no longer considering the landscape a limited and well defined space, but as a series of colorful landscapes that, each one with their specific contribution, characterize the entire Italian territory. In this context, given that the cultural landscape is the privileged meeting point between the cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) and the cultural diversities, the geographical scientific research has a very important role. As a matter of fact, the cultural landscape is one of the central subject matter and primary source of information for the Geography, even though it is characterized by different developmental stages with different importance and meanings. The ability to protect and manage our prestigious and vast cultural heritage and our places of culture, is then a major component of the ability to properly manage and plan the development of the cultural landscape, intended as the evidence of a specific socio-economic environment, of its evolution over time and its cultural human fruition.

For this reason, starting from the laws of 1939 (and before), passing through our Constitution, up to the recent legislation introduced by the so-called “Codice Urbani”, the Institutions have tried to protect and improve this immense treasure. To address this need, in 1975 the “Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali” (MiBAC) was established, that shared, and still shares, the same tasks with the regional institutions. This dichotomy has been partially overcome by the issuance of the “Code of the Cultural Heritage and Landscape”, which introduced the principle of State-Regions co-planning, according to which some Protocols of Agreement have been implemented, i.e. a set of guidelines for the Regional Territorial Plans. This road-map, which started at a national scale, has progressively evolved, opening to European standards that in 2006 have brought Italy to the ratification of the European Landscape Convention and, furthermore, to worldwide regulations, such as the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of World Tangible and Intangible Heritage and for the enhancement of Cultural Diversity. A basic principle of this Convention is that the protection of the landscape should not be in conflict with the economic development but, on the contrary, must promote sustainable development with the involvement of the social communities. Therefore the local populations are the ones that set the targets to be reached, supported in this effort by the experts in the phases of the landscape identification and relevant peculiarities. It is stated that the whole territory is characterized by the landscapes that have to be protected; the concept of “quality of the landscape and network” is introduced, in a way that all the information have to find the right location in a geographic information system within a multiple scalar perspective.

4. Conceptual evolution of the landscape as a cultural asset

The “ideological” concept of cultural landscape belongs to that branch of the English school of humanist geographers that refers to the “historical materialism” (Daniels, 1989). These scholars have taken the old concept of cultural landscape², stated by the north-American cultural school founded by C.O. Sauer, for which it is not sufficient to analyze the landscape only in its “visual” aspects, i.e. those ones only related to physical-naturalistic and historical-social components. The meanings and representations that overlap with the structural elements, such as the natural and economic aspects, are the values that must instead be considered in the analysis of the landscape. In this regard it is important the definition of landscape given by Denis Cosgrove in the 90’s of last century: “it is composed of three elements: the physical and tangible characters of an area,.....the measurable activities of the population, the meanings or symbols imprinted in human awareness”. This definition, however, was previously conceived by Edward Relph and then used by him only to define the “place”. This is the “place” as defined by the humanist geographer belonging to the phenomenological orientation, the best known school of

thought in the American Humanist Geography. These scholars definitively abandoned the term landscape because it was seen as inextricably linked to the cultural landscape as it was conceived by the Berkley school and decided to use the word "place".

"However, accepting the definition of Relph and Cosgrove, the place/landscape can be interpreted as consisting of three elements: a natural basis on which a socio-economic structure is organized (the many human activities) and a set of meanings, the "genius loci" and the symbols associated with it, engraved into the culture of the society acting there" (Lando, 2001, pp. 262-263). These three elements are inextricably intertwined in our experiences and are an expression of past and future values. For this reason, according to Relph, they constitute a series of dialectical processes that define the identity of that place (1976, p. 48). "The landscape therefore calls for a human presence, even where it takes the form of the essence. It speaks of a world in which the human being fulfilled his presence as a circumspect and busy life" (Dardel, 1986, p. 35).

Landscapes shouldn't be looked at only because they are composed of materials or defined by products, but mainly for the meanings and values that have been assigned to them (Lando, 2001).

²See: Cosgrove (1978, 1983, 1987, 1989a, 1990), Daniels (1985, 1989) and Cosgrove-Jackson (1987).

The concept of landscape and sustainable development cannot be separated from the concept of region and sustainable development. It is not a coincidence if Maxmilian Sorre argued that landscape and region are two entities that may coincide. This theory will be then confirmed in the seventies, when the environmental issue will be proposed as a priority at the UN Conference in Stockholm (1972).

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio in 1992 has marked a historic turning point in world geopolitics: the concept of "growth" of the planet was distinguished from the one of "development". On that occasion it has been established that the first is not always indicating an increase with positive implications, while the second is the gradual attainment of a more comprehensive state that includes also the idea of a qualitative growth. In short, a clear cultural distinction in the way of understanding the development has been established. Growth and development are no longer coinciding, because also the environment is included in the internal rules of the economic systems. This then implies an improvement of the quality of life, of the landscape, of the cultural heritage, and also entails the assertion of values related to nature and society.

Conclusions

The purpose of this contribution was to demonstrate that the landscape is fully part of the Cultural Heritage, as it is defined by UNESCO World Heritage List: «...what contains all the signs that document the activities and results of the human action in the course of time».

As a matter of fact the landscape cannot be preserved into a museum or restored; its complexity is the one of every geo-system with an additional degree of complication: the time. The landscape is the historical-geographical context where an individual object acquires its historical but not universal significance. The protection of an architectural or monumental asset does not automatically translate into the protection of the surrounding landscape. We should also be aware that the reading of the geographical landscape does not directly generate research methodologies for the cultural assets and, therefore, the Geography shouldn't be accredited as the privileged interlocutor in this field. No cultural asset has the same degree of complexity as the landscape; any cultural asset can be preserved, restored or reused without losing anything of its meaning and value. The landscape instead, is a morphogenetic process in continuous evolution and change and, therefore, can be supported in its transformation but not preserved. The role of geographers in the first place, then, is to point out the risks of the current situation and to work towards the formulation of methodologically homogeneous criteria for the landscape management. This role is not their prerogative as the concept of landscape has always been a heuristic category of the geographical description, but because inside the geography both the experiences, the shapes reading and the principles for the territory organization, have been matured. The governance of the complexity of the landscape goes through the ability to combine the ordinary management of the territory with the instances of the active protection of the landscape. The inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary nature of the geography can therefore concur to pinpoint the most diversified parameters and strategies to be used to preserve and maintain this huge asset for future generations, within a sustainable perspective.

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