CULTURE AND THE CONCEPT OF LANDSCAPE

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1. LANDSCAPE AS AN INTEGRAL WHOLE

Technology, which is the driving force of today’s society, has also played a key role in shaping the spaces we currently live in. The imprint of humankind can be found in each and every territory of our planet as humans have shaped and constructed the landscape for centuries, particularly for economic rather than environmental or social reasons.

The enormous economic activity characterising our era is rapidly transforming the centuries-old landscapes that surround us, turning them into yet another element of the relationship between humans and the natural environment.

In the majority of European states, the term landscape refers to areas that stand out for their natural, cultural or visual features. Indeed, the European Landscape Convention applies to all territories or areas - be they natural, rural, urban or peri-urban - that can be considered outstanding or everyday landscapes, recognising them as a criterion for the quality of life of citizens everywhere.

Landscape can therefore be defined as the part of the territory that can be seen and perceived by people; where territory is understood to encompass land, water and air. Following upon this, the landscape is recognised as having three different and associated dimensions:

- The physical dimension: The relief of the land is the foundation of the landscape and is considered to be the basis for its processes and elements. Landscape is the perceived territory where we can locate and identify the elements, uses, structures and systems that comprise it. The landscape possesses an objective physical dimension that includes its relief or geomorphology, the composition of its soils and rocks and its rivers and vegetation, among other elements. All of these elements permit us to analyse the different uses that human beings have made of the territory.

- The cultural, social and temporal dimension refers to the creation, transformation and evolution of the landscape over the centuries as a result of cultural practices, technical advances and human interaction with nature. The landscape allows us to interpret the history of a territory as it contains and mirrors the uses different civilisations have made of it. In spaces that have been intensively occupied by human beings, the landscape is largely an artifice as natural areas have often been deforested, ploughed up, parcelled out, built upon and subject to the irreversible alteration of their most basic natural conditions.
The subjective dimension of the landscape refers to the interaction between the physical components of the landscape and human activity. Contemplation of the landscape is the first interaction that human beings have with their environment; demonstrating the subjective and cultural dimension of these spaces. Visual perception is an active undertaking by which humans capture information about their surroundings and are capable of interpreting what they see before them. A landscape is created in the mind of those who perceive it and goes beyond merely objective elements to include experiences, reflections, studies, interests, occupations or culture. According to this dimension, humans attribute not only affective but also aesthetic, symbolic or spiritual values to the landscape as well as encountering their own identity, all of which is difficult to quantify.

Throughout history, humans have preferred varying types of landscapes. These tastes demonstrate a deep awareness that both functional and aesthetic features of landscapes provided the best means of satisfying people’s needs at a given time. From prehistoric settlements to modern or contemporary culture, every society has associated its landscape with the symbol or features that best define it, albeit how the landscape is perceived is an individual act that can often be of great emotional intensity. Indeed, the expression of this intimate act has given rise to artistic manifestations of extraordinary literary, pictorial, photographic, cinematographic and even musical beauty. These expressions of enormous artistic or spiritual value provide powerful evidence that how a landscape is perceived is a learned and thus cultural act which is unique and unrepeatable.

2. THE CULTURAL CONFIGURATION OF SPANISH LANDSCAPES

During humans’ short existence on the Earth, the landscape has been shaped in an abrupt and, in many cases, irreversible manner. The planet’s earliest inhabitants searched for basic resources for their subsistence, thus laying down the first building blocks of villages and towns and permitting these early settlers to gain control over the natural elements in their surroundings.

Numerous factors have conditioned and shaped the landscape of the Iberian Peninsula. Geographically, Spain is defined by two large areas of influence: the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean; giving rise to a wide variety of climates and land relief’s that make Spain one of the most biologically diverse countries in Europe. Historically, Spain is the result of the

1 Spain has 10,000 different plant species. It is estimated that there are some 20,000 species of fungi, lichens and moss and 8000-9000 vascular plant species (ferns and flowering plants), accounting for 80% of all the species existing in the European Union and
different events experienced by its inhabitants over centuries. Given the country’s Mediterranean climate and the long history of Spanish civilisation, the presence of man has become practically inseparable from the landscape. Indeed, the domestication of nature and the landscape have become a predominate element of Spanish culture.

To this we must add the numerous frontiers that exist between regions, kingdoms and neighbouring countries that opened the doors to the reconquest and repopulation of the territory, giving rise to highly populated areas or practically uninhabited regions. These processes have led to a diversity of landscapes, many of which have survived to present day due to their economic and social importance. An example of some of these include the small garden plots near towns and cities or the new extensive agricultural systems that have had a profound impact on the landscape such as extensive olive groves, the dehesa pasturelands or communal forestlands, among others.

One of the most important cultural events that contributed to the drastic transformation of the Spanish landscape was the disappearance of colonial farming systems; systems which left an ecological and cultural imprint on the Sierra landscapes. Following the abandonment of small irrigated surfaces and exiguous plots, monoculture forest plantations replaced the traditional communal forestland, thus giving rise to new landscapes to meet the evolving needs and demands of the population.

As a result of the industrial revolution, cities began to expand, making it necessary to build communication and transport routes, industrial estates and the necessary infrastructures to permit cities to function properly. As cities grew outwards, the natural areas on the outskirts were invaded and territories were given importance according to their contribution to society. In addition, due to improved methods of transport, artists, travellers, explorers, and the Romantic painters began to popularise the landscape to such an extent that the notion of landscape acquired an urban dimension in the parks and gardens of cities as well as in palaces and homes.

The First Agricultural Revolution (Lowe, 1986) following in the wake of World War II brought with it the development of high-input agriculture, or what is known as the Green Revolution. This transformation led to significant increases in agricultural production thanks to the introduction of intensive methods based on the use of agrochemicals and high-yield crop
varieties, as well as other tools to increase traditional production with a view to feeding a growing population with increasingly greater needs (Buller, 1992).

Nonetheless, this increased production exerted excessive pressure on the natural environment of rural areas, thus modifying the landscape.

In the 1960s, people living in industrialised countries began to value their natural surroundings and become aware of the constant threat to the environmental and recreational functions of the rural environment (Moyano and Paniagua 1998). This concern arose as a result of the economic growth and wellbeing attained in this decade and the fact that higher standards of living permitted many citizens access to natural areas for residential or recreational purposes (Lowe 1988).

As a consequence of the growing concern for the conservation of natural and rural areas, the development of intensive agriculture reached a turning point in the 1980s, gradually paving the way for the post-productive era (Ilbery 1992). This new scenario gave rise to internal and external changes in the agricultural sector, namely greater environmental awareness among European citizens and a growing demand for non-productive environmental services in rural areas (The Bruges Group, 1997), resulting in the first phase of a process known in Spanish as the Ambientalización del Medio Rural or Rural Environmentalisation (Moyano and Paniagua 1998).

Newly-gained access to the territory and the positive perception of natural areas permitted mountain areas, which were characterised by their low productivity and profitability, to be converted into nature reserves, thus providing landscapes, water and fresh air to an urban population seeking closer contact with nature. As a consequence of these changes, a new movement arose known as “Ambientalismo” or Environmentalism. The emerging market for rural tourism, which was funded by European subsidies, thus came to be viewed as the redeemer of depopulated and economically unprofitable rural and natural areas.

A changing landscape began to emerge following the repopulation of abandoned rural areas. Natural spaces were now closer to cities thanks to improved roads and transport. Moreover, as a result of 20th-century progress such as technology, better communication networks and higher buying power in general, these mountain areas began to be perceived as easy-to-reach, attractive spaces for citizens in search of recreation and leisure.
These landscapes, many of which are a legacy of the past, have survived and continue to be functional either because of their maturity or the different services they have provided and continue to provide to society. Today, many of these extensive natural agroforestry or even urban landscapes that remain in Spain can be considered “inherited landscapes”.

Of the different landscapes identified in Spain, we have selected areas that have a unique regional character as a result of their particular territorial history.

### 2.1.1. THE DEHESA PASTURELANDS

The enormous diversity of Spanish landscapes is closely linked to the marked heterogeneity of the Mediterranean region and the complex historical changes that have occurred within it; changes which have given rise to different biological systems of natural or human origin (Blondel and Aronson, 1999). Among these Spanish landscapes, the wooded dehesa pasturelands are an example of one of the most significant landscape units in a large part of the Iberian Peninsula.

This Mediterranean forestry system, which is characterised for its biological wealth and diversity, is based on clearing the autochthonous mountainous areas to obtain pasturelands or forage crops for livestock (Díaz et al., 1997). Due to the importance of these natural sites, they have been included on the list of systems protected by the European Union Habitats Directive.

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2 It should be noted that the natural state of the Quercus species is more shrub-like than arboreal. For these species to be used for livestock they must be pruned several times in order to obtain basic products such as timber, firewood, cork or acorns. In addition to pruning, it is necessary to clear the dehesa of brush, whose growth impedes the development of pastures and access by livestock.

3 This definition is almost identical to that of Bermejo (1994) for whom “the dehesas are defined as wooded pasturelands, which constitute a humanized ecosystem which is the sole result of the gradual clearance of Mediterranean forestland in order to open areas for grazing” (translated from the Spanish).
Although the origins of this peculiar agricultural system date back to Roman times, the dehesa pasturelands were not used for their most important function until the 12th to the 16th century. There is evidence, however, that human societies were already present in the southwest Iberian Peninsula thousands of years ago. All of these inhabitants needed to meet their demands for food and clothing with the few resources that could be obtained from the poor soils of these Mediterranean areas. Because of this, and due to the irregular and extreme nature of the Mediterranean climate, these resources have always been scarce. Indeed, few lands in these areas are apt for productive crops that guarantee a continuous supply of foodstuffs.

2.1.2. OLIVE GROVES
The olive tree, considered to be the classic symbol of the Mediterranean world, can be found in the most remote corners of the region. The origin of this crop in Spain remains unclear, although it is known that around 1050 BC, the Phoenicians made use of the olive tree. Later, the Romans would cover the Iberian Peninsula in olive groves, turning the peninsula into one of the chief exporters of olive oil during the Roman Empire.
The proliferation of these crops in Spain led to important changes in the configuration of the Mediterranean landscape. Indeed, in some regions of Spain, such as Andalusia, olive groves cover an area of 1,478,897 hectares, accounting for 30% of the cultivated surface.

The olive tree has become an indispensable element of many Mediterranean regions. The continuous spread of this crop has left a profound mark on the landscape, economy and culture of numerous communities for centuries. In some Mediterranean countries, this unique landscape has come to be called the “Cultural Olive Landscape”.

2.1.3. TOURISM AND THE COASTAL LANDSCAPE OF SPAIN
Since time immemorial, civilisations have taken advantage of the richest and most productive and ecologically diverse points of the Spanish territory to settle. But what were once considered small residential settlements, now constitute a threat to the natural resources and landscape of the Spanish coast.

Human activity and the cultures associated to it are the principal factors that have shaped the landscape. The concept of landscape and landscape systems continually undergo changes in step with society’s demands and desires to satisfy new needs such as summer resorts, road
and transport infrastructures, golf courses or marinas, among other facilities. This rapid evolution in what citizens demand of the environment has not only put the environmental equilibrium in peril, but also the social values associated to many landscapes, namely those related to heritage, culture and history, economic resources or our mere existence as human beings.

In recent decades, humans have been largely responsible for modifying the coastal landscape in Spain; a phenomenon which is chiefly the result of the large tourist influx that our coasts are subject to: the so-called “sun and sea” tourism. The dramatic growth of tourism in the last decades – some 59.2 million tourists visited Spain in 2007\(^4\) - has given rise to the rapid, and in many cases, chaotic urban development of our coastlines. This phenomenon has begun to threaten the landscape in an irreversible manner and, in turn, the quality of life originally sought by citizens in these areas. Indeed, 34% of the first kilometre of the Spanish coastline is already developed.

This profound change, which first came about in the seventies in numerous towns and cities on the Mediterranean coast, led to the rapid transformation from a primary society where agriculture and fishing were the main source of income, to a tertiary system providing services to society. Agriculture and fishing became residual activities that were often confined to a subsistence economy. For this reason, tourism – be it seasonal or residential - has been blamed for the transformation of the Mediterranean coastal landscape.

Seasonality is one of the aspects that best defines Spanish tourism as tourism tends to be concentrated in a given period during the year, normally during the spring and summer months. According to data from the National Statistics Institute, Spain has a mean population density of 77 hab./km\(^2\). In coastal towns, however, the mean population density reaches 350 hab./Km\(^2\), meaning that it is 4.5 times higher than the national average. In the peak tourist season, these figures can be multiplied by as much as 12 times over. Moreover, sun and sea tourism requires new and more modern infrastructures which have an increasingly adverse effect on the nature and landscape of the Spanish coast. These demands, which are manifested in better services, roads, hotels, golf courses and marinas have resulted in the loss of highly valuable coastal ecosystems (sand dunes, deltas, wetlands) that are frequently destroyed, in spite of being protected.

\(^4\) Spanish Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Trade.
On the other hand, we cannot forget that residential tourism is yet another factor - and no less important than the mass tourism of the summer months - that has contributed to shaping the landscape. Residential tourism is understood to be the sector of society – from Spain or abroad – who purchase a second vacation home or a residential dwelling.

With some 3.6 million vacation properties, Spain currently accounts for 16% of the total tourist housing market in Europe. According to recent estimates, buyers will demand some 150,000 second homes by 2010. Foreign investment has been the most active in recent years, with non-nationals owning 53% of the 3.8 million second homes that have been built on the Spanish coast. Although the British, Germans and French are the most assiduous home buyers, the Dutch, Scandinavians and Belgians are quickly surpassing the British as the principal investors in Spanish property. However, domestic demand for vacation residences is beginning to make headway in the sector. Indeed, 14% to 19% of Spaniards now own a second home.

These data clearly suggest that, after the seventies, tourism took the lead as the driving force behind the processes of social transformation occurring in Spain. These processes had an important effect on migration in Spain; a phenomenon that drastically changed the demographic composition of the territory (Casado, 1999; Rodríguez and Warness 2002). These processes have also given rise to profound cultural changes, leading to the disappearance of local cultural traditions which were substituted for the new global tourism demanded by increasingly cosmopolitan tourists.

Thus the territory is a space where historical and social factors merge to create the landscape we perceive today. When the landscape disappears and is substituted for new surroundings built around tourism, people need to create new spaces they can identify with; thus giving rise to different, yet well-built identities based on either these new social constructs or a yearning for the past.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON URBAN LANDSCAPES

Growing interest in the landscape is largely a consequence of greater public awareness concerning environmental issues in general. A clear example of this concern and interest is the increasing attention international forums and debates have paid to the landscape as a major component of nature and heritage. The landscape has begun to be acknowledged as the
manner in which the territory manifests itself; each with its own particular features and multiple social images. Indeed, the landscape has come to be considered a major factor in citizens’ quality of life. This aspect of the everyday, visited landscape plays a key role in regional and even local identity, merging the physical, biological and cultural elements of different areas, be they natural or urban.

Cities are perceived through their urban landscape. How people make use of these urban spaces largely depends on how they interact with natural spaces and how they utilise them. Citizens experience the city through the pattern of its streets, urban squares, parks and popular architecture and it is common for two different types of landscapes to coexist in the same space.

Just as ideas are sold and marketed in the global world, so are natural urban landscapes. The new trends imposed by urban designers, architects and city planners have given rise to the creation of urban green spaces which, in many cases, have nothing to do with our local identity.

The characteristic Arabic-style gardens found throughout much of Spain, which inundated cities with a sea of sensations, merged architecture and nature in beautiful harmony and where green spaces were used to combat the high temperatures and droughts typical of these areas, have been gradually substituted for “artificial” natural spaces with extensive lawns and abundant ornamental flowers that are almost always seasonal and require large amounts of water and care. To this we must add the severe and unwelcoming squares that can be found in many southern Mediterranean cities and in which heat-retaining materials such as granite and asphalt are often used in spite of the adverse climatic conditions characterising the region.

The inviting design of urban green spaces in recent decades has led to the loss of numerous natural resources. As a result, the urban green landscape no longer fulfils its function as an ecosystem, but has a merely aesthetic purpose. Moreover, these landscapes are designed independent of place. Indeed, they can be found everywhere on the planet, from Sydney to Santiago de Chile or even in the historical cities of Europe.

Thus there exist two types of natural landscapes. The first could be defined as a “Natural Manicured Landscape”. This is the landscape that citizens experience when walking through the squares and parks of cities. It is the landscape of wide stretches of mown turf, tree-lined streets, large planters on pedestrian walkways, flowerbeds flanked by benches, isolated trees
in unwelcoming squares and other similar elements. In short, natural landscapes of this type are, in reality, artificial as they contain few floral species that are practically incapable of sustaining wildlife. The second type of landscape is the “Natural Wild Landscape”. These are forgotten landscapes which citizens often ignore when wandering through the city. In many cases they are even bothersome to people as the plants found in them are not arranged aesthetically in either form or colour. This vegetation emerges from the cracks in houses and pavement, on rooftops and in the gutters of old buildings. The vacant lots of inner cities are overgrown with trees, bushes, plants and vegetation of all kinds that take root wherever they can. These plants and trees provide a new way of understanding vegetation within the city as they furnish a wealth of wild habitats not found in artificial natural landscapes. This type of vegetation is achieved at no cost or care and is able to withstand many of the most important problems encountered in cities including air pollution, sterile soils and the lack of irrigation water, among others.

Photo: Natural Manicured Landscape. Cordova, Spain. Priego, Carlos

How citizens use these urban green landscapes is an indicator of the type and design of urban nature that they want. Yet while citizens increasingly seek contact with “non-artificial” nature, city planners construct cold, natural spaces lacking in identity. As Michael Hough explains (1995), “If urban design can be described as that art and science dedicated to enhancing the quality of the physical environment of cities, to providing civilizing and enriching places for the people who live in them” there is no doubt that the current premises of urban design should be
re-examined and that the essence of the familiar places we live in needs to be rediscovered through the natural sciences.

As we said above, the landscape comprises any part of the territory as it is perceived by people as well as natural, architectural and social interactions. People have the right to choose homes in surroundings where the landscape is an extension of their lives as there is a link between their lifestyle and the environment in which they live (Terkenli, 1995). The urban landscape can therefore be interpreted in a multitude of ways; the most important of which are based on cultural, social and environmental factors. Each of us is a world of perceptions and sentiments and as such we choose the urban landscape which we identify with most closely.

4. THE URBAN LANDSCAPE AS A PROPER HABITAT

When referring to people, or rather landscape users, it is necessary to speak in terms of the "proper habit"; a term commonly used in the European Landscape Convention. This is an important concept because it brings together people and the community within the heart of the territory; strengthening their sense of identity be it emotional, cultural, existential or practical and in which memory, aesthetics, behaviours, ways of thinking and the everyday creativity of each inhabitant or user come into play.

With the understanding and knowledge that people’s landscape taste is closely related to their lifestyles, experiences and identity, we pose the following questions: What do citizens today seek in urban suburbs? Why do cities continue to expand? Were not cities with their historical quarters once places of encounter, communication and quality of life? In recent decades, people have begun to pursue more naturalised surroundings; places which allow them to reinforce their identity or seek fulfilment, in short, new ways of life.

As cities grow, their historical centres die out. These new urban models, whose aim is to create less populated areas with private gardens and swimming pools, means that many cities and towns will no longer have available land in coming decades.

As people evolve, so does their way of understanding the space they live in; prompting them to seek new ways of identifying with their environment. As a result of this growing concern for nature, people have come to view the city as an uninhabitable space. Yet as we are all aware, when supply is scarce, goods become costly and the increasing economic value of these green
areas and the higher prices fetched by homes near urban parks, squares or even tree-lined streets have encouraged developers and later local governments to speculate in land.

But while the urban green landscape may be economically advantageous for the coffers of local governments; many studies have also demonstrated the social benefits to be gained from natural landscapes. It has been shown that values such as identity, happiness, confidence and safety increase in areas with a large amount of vegetation. Moreover, communities involved in the design, management and care of their parks and gardens obtain major social and economic benefits, while reinforcing identity ties and a sense of solidarity and community among users.

5. REFERENCES


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