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**Landscape. Betrayal, innovation**

Alberto Clementi

We cannot simply take for granted that the value of the landscape is capable of transforming the culture of urban planning and design and, at the same time, having a serious affect on practices of spatial governance. Moreover, we must understand that it is not a painless experience. We are forced to continually reexamine deeply rooted convictions, often betraying that which has been handed down from the custodians of tradition; more often than not, we must confront, without a safety net, the most orthodox ideologies, little inclined to deal with the reality of our variegated landscapes.

Many of the experiences presented here are a result of this approach to research, an approach that leads, on a case-by-case basis, to an investigation of the meaning of the landscape produced by the militant interpretations of those who intend to affect change, spurred on by curiosity and an intolerance for a-critically inherited convictions.

Approached in this manner, the landscape becomes an ideal workshop for testing architecture and urban planning, together with policies of spatial governance. In fact, this theme, far from being slowed by the successful actions of the recent past, presents continuously new challenges that appear to elude both conventional representations and representative power structures.

It is a challenge that offers fertile opportunities for understanding cultural alterity and, above all, it invites us to constantly innovate frameworks of understanding and paradigms of action, abandoning the reassuring positions of those who

profess a rigorous control over the landscape, without providing the necessary conceptual and operative instruments.

*Betrayal*

As part of the continuous search for an *Italian approach* to the experience of the landscape, capable of emancipating itself from an inopportune pride in our traditions of conservation, and the poorly concealed admiration for countries with more mature design skills, the plans and projects represented here have attempted to explore a few possible profiles of innovation. In some cases this leads to the difficult betrayal of the basic principles that have rendered our lengthy history so noble, yet which appear out of touch with the complexities of policies required to deal with the contemporary landscape.

*The landscape: between heritage and resource*

In the midst of a vision of the landscape as a valuable heritage (Italy as an immense open-air museum, composed of historical-artistic structures and beautiful landscapes) and the vision of the landscape as a resource for territorial development (the strategic value of the landscape as part of a new economy of quality), the Italian experience - even if in a confused manner - appears to demonstrate a desire to *indicate the possibility of a third approach*. This is an approach characterised by the critical balance between the conflicts associated with different scenarios of intervention, in a mutually tense position that seeks new syntheses that refuse to renounce either the necessary distinctions between landscape, environment and territory, or the legitimacy of different traditions of study and intervention.

In dealing with concepts that radicalise our way of

understanding the landscape, what emerges from our most positive historical experiences, is the possibility of implementing an ambivalent and *multi-dimensional approach* that leads us back, each time, to the specific context of design and the research for a sustainable balance, oriented towards inclusion and assimilation, rather than the negation of alterities. With respect to current practices this approach, which tends to favour co-existence - and/or - rather than opposition - or/or -, requires a greater critical understanding that, in any case, rests on a rigorous respect for the landscape's insuperable *'diritti del testo'* [the rights of text] that functions as a dam against discretionary interpretations. Experience teaches us that this is the direction - if well implemented - for achieving the best results, restoring to the landscape a problematic strength and a complexity of meanings all too often sacrificed by the simplifications of *benculturalismo*, as much as the trivialisation of process of social and economic exploitation.

*Problematic identities*

An even more uncomfortable position may be found in the critical reconsideration of the very importance of identity, a cliché that lies at the base of any rhetoric regarding the landscape, as internal to traditional approaches as it is to the more evolved ones introduced by the European landscape convention. In fact, the landscape is not composed exclusively of values of identity to be restored, but is rather the result of a process of a comprehensive reinterpretation of territory and history in a contemporary condition, and part of a 'multiple modernity' that defines, in various contexts, a plurality of meanings and forms through which we also

regenerate the identities of the past, with respect to the present.

It may appear irresponsible to pervasively redesign the meaning of the landscape in an era defined by a more general dissatisfaction with the quality of current design, and a more acute understanding of the need to protect our country against the assaults of speculation that are devastating entire coastlines, countrysides, river valleys and mountainous areas so loved by tourists.

However, it is perhaps the lack of 'landscape sensitive' design, entrusted to the reflexive protagonism of modernity, that ends up weakening even the protection of the existing landscape, unfortunately now seen as being 'something else'. We require a great deal of courage, even to betray the conventional representations that have such a strong hold on the collective imagination, in order to rediscover, through design, the meaning of a shared responsibility towards the landscape, the fundamental 'theatre' of our everyday existence.

*Strategic Plans and Projects*

Another cliché that appears to represent a point of convergence for orthodox and more advanced positions is the demiurgic role attributed to landscape planning. Its missing elements are precisely that which makes it possible to build the numerous monsters scarring our landscape. A greater level of accuracy in the forecasts of plans, together with a reduced level of discretionary interpretation, perhaps accompanied by a reinforcement of the role of the Superintendent's offices, should represent a guarantee against the errors resulting from new interventions. However, what is truly required are new

instruments oriented towards design and action, privileging an active philosophy of sustainable conservation and transformation. The new landscape plans being developed by various Italian regional governments must, as a result, be profoundly modified, moving ever closer to the form of coherent frameworks of a limited number of strategically important projects, accompanied by an agreement between the multiplicity of actors playing an important role in the transformation of the landscape. There is no need for large projects, such as, for example, the reorganisation of important watercourses, subject to imposing works to secure their banks that, as a general rule, are so rarely attentive to the values of the landscape and the potentials of use by society. Other than the large unitary projects, there is a need for projects composed of a multitude of smaller scale interventions, comprehensively destined to notably improve the diffuse quality of urban landscapes, tougher with the liveability of the spaces we inhabit. The new generation of landscape plans promoted by the *Codice Urbani* [2004 Italian law governing the landscape - Ndt] will tell us whether these new approaches have truly matured.

#### *Innovations*

If a critical reflection on the ideas-guidelines mentioned above may lead to justified embarrassment or, worse still, prejudiced reactions, it should be less difficult to develop a consensus regarding a handful of innovations related to the possible improvement of disciplinary instruments and project quality. In particular, this has to do with the themes of recognising the identifying characteristics of the

landscape, the prefiguration of strategic scenarios and, finally, the possible reinterpretations of landscape urbanism as a new field of transdisciplinary convergence.

#### *Identifications*

The interpretation of the landscape as a *contextual totality with its own specific individual qualities*, generated each time by the different scales of the particular interweaving of its characteristics - morphological, natural-environmental, historical-cultural, aesthetic, social and symbolic - is a generally accepted one. Yet many of the current tools of understanding and investigation tend to maintain the analytical distinction between the evaluation of individual characteristics, working backwards towards the definition of identity by using simple processes of addition or overlapping that, only with great difficulty, are able to consider the mutual interdependencies that structure the physiognomy of a landscape. We thus become aware that in order to establish identity we require explanatory rather than complex models, capable of elaborating the chain of connections of causes or interactions that influence the defining characteristics of a landscape, recognising their specific qualities in their ability to combine the different variables at work within a single context. We are speaking of models that explore the rationale of the internal functioning of individual landscapes, highlighting their determinant and complementary variables in the pursuit of an overall recognisability. A useful contribution to this approach may be provided by the ecological sciences, if we can free ourselves of their sequential determinism and obsession for measurement. We must

make room instead for the qualitative evaluations and the subjective nature of the perceptions at play in various historical-cultural, aesthetic, social and symbolic processes.

The interpretation of the characteristics of recognisability of a landscape should, in the end, conclude with the identification of its *figure of meaning*: a representative image that synthetically reassumes an interpretation of the nature of the relations taking place and the comprehensive dominance of particular qualities over others. The figure of meaning may lead us to a particular image that evokes history, or the prevalence of particular values of naturalness, or an interweaving of meaning that ranges from methods of inhabiting the territory to systems of agricultural production. Associating each landscape with a figure of meaning allows us to render communicable the characteristics that are recognized as being identifying, assisting a process of comparison between different points of view that may lead to the emergence of the most appropriate strategy of intervention.

#### *Strategic scenarios*

Faced with the infinite variety of landscapes present in Italy, it would appear indispensable that we make use of progressively more articulated strategies of intervention at different scales that are carefully calibrated with respect to the specific identities of local contexts. What is more, the need to diversify strategies is not an exclusive result of the recognition of the value of differences. Of equal importance are the diversities introduced by processes at work and the resulting risks faced by the landscape.

Even while making reference to specific conditions, it is worthwhile considering a few recurring scenarios. In particular, it would be opportune to refer to:

- *Abandoned landscapes*: those landscapes that have exhausted - or are progressively exhausting - their life cycle, awaiting reuse by contemporary society and economics;
- *Congested landscapes*: landscapes that, on the contrary, suffer the excesses of use that may denature their meaning and thus require a reduction in the pressures exerted on them.
- *Landscapes of networks and knowledge*: evolving landscapes that embody the most important transformations taking place at present. For these landscapes, true factories of the contemporary, we can observe the need for innovative projects, capable of exalting their central function in an era of economic flows and deterritorialisations;
- *Ordinary landscapes*: landscapes with slower rhythms that act as a backdrop to everyday life. These landscapes require a reinforcement of their identity, a great deal of care for their visible forms and, above all, the creative assistance of a new culture of landscape sensitive architectural design and urban planning.

For all of the scenarios mentioned it is necessary to define specific strategies of cross-sector intervention, focused on the development of regional landscape plans. Through the use of these plans, the landscape should manifest itself as a truly transversal value, a vast cultural resource with important effects on the economy and society, capable of guiding processes of territorial change. Experience teaches us that the landscape cannot be exempted from the difficult

process of an ongoing search for meaning. We must first, however, cast off the naive idea of the aesthetic approach as the keystone to a constitutional agreement between society, culture and territory.

The birth of the landscape during the early stages of Modernism coincided with the first fundamental form of betrayal of the Eden of indistinct belonging to the contexts in which we live.

We thus inaugurated the birth of a new awareness that has turned us into a generation aware of its own history, and part of a story that is far from over.

We can still legitimately betray the idea that lies hidden at the base of our philosophy of landscape conservation, or even the belief that more explicitly supports a vision oriented towards social and economic development.

What is important is that we do not betray the underlying intention, the election of the landscape as a basic value capable of permeating, on its own, all of the mutations taking place in our territories, contributing in a decisive manner to guaranteeing the quality of our everyday lives.