

From landscape to territory: urban sprawl justice and sustainability.

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Abstract

Looking at the satellite image of Europe at night we can have the perception not only of light pollution, but also of European urban sprawl. This sort of quick look about landscape organization leads to a series of research questions to investigate the level of social justice behind urban sprawl. Starting from the European Landscape Convention, the present paper aims to explore the relationships between population and landscape. The European Landscape Convention (ELC) assigns a essential role to participation of local actors and to consultation of population in the processes of landscape identification and assessment and in the definition of landscape quality objectives. The reasons of this participative option is rooted in the Aarhus Convention (1998) (explicitely quoted in the preamble of ELC). There is an issue not completely expressed in the European Landscape Convention related to the social costs and benefits of decisions related to landscape. Landscape issues are normally embodied in protests and disputes related to off shore wind mill power plants. Landscape is not the kernel of environmental and territorial disputes, normally triggered by environmental or health claims. However, even if landscape transformations do not produce social opposition (or happen with social acceptance), it becomes important to understand the gains of developers and to explore the relationships between landscape (and social) impacts and economic (or social) benefits. Social acceptance of landscape transformations should be investigate to understand if is the result of low intensity of social impacts or from a lacking awareness of the rights of high quality landscapes.

Keywords: Landscape, justice, urban sprawl

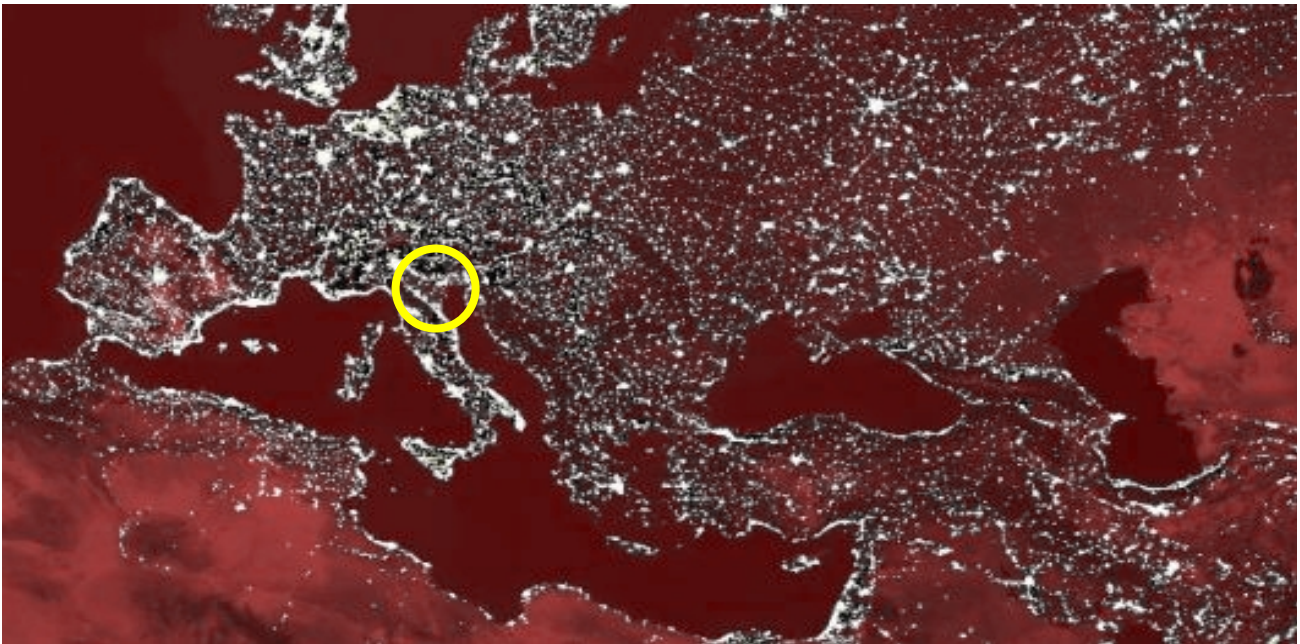


Figure 1. Europe at night, representation of urban sprawl and localization of Veneto Region

1. Landscape and population: some initial elements

Looking at the satellite image of Europe at night we can have the perception not only of light pollution, but also of European urban sprawl. This sort of quick look about landscape organization leads to a series of research questions to investigate the level of social justice behind urban sprawl.

Starting from the European Landscape Convention, the present paper aims to suggest some initial remarks on the concept of “democratic landscape”, as a key for a deeper way of reading the relationships between population and landscape. Veneto plain and its urban sprawl is the case study to interface the theoretical

framework. As everybody knows, the concept of landscape can be considered by many points of view and be interpreted by many various reading ways and by different disciplinary approaches. It is possible to identify some pairs of opposing polarities in which we can put the different conceptions of landscape (Castiglioni, 2007). The European Landscape Convention subscribed in Florence in 2000 at the article 1 defines Landscape “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors”. Dealing with spatial sciences, it means to manage different concepts related to place and geography (this is the watershed of the authors of this article) uses to distinguish among four concepts: space, territory, land use/land cover, landscape.

“Space” represents the geometrical dimension of a determined site, or the natural and physical dimension of ecosystem before human action (physical geography).

“Territory”, as defined by the geographer Reclus “*l’histoire dans l’espace*” (the history inside the space), is the result of social actors’ work on space; social actors manipulating space become territorial actors (Raffestin, 1981; Turco, 1988; Vallega, 1990). A territory is the combination of physical transformation, social relations, organizational control. Inside the territory many elements are not visible and in one geometrical space many territories can exist.

“Land use/Land Cover” (LU/LC) describes the physical features of human management of territory, it is what we see now in satellite images or (before remote sensing) in topographical maps.

Landscape represents the combination of LU/LC plus people perception. As stated by the European Landscape Convention and before by geographical sciences (see Brunet, 1974, or Pinchemel, 1996, Turri, 1998 or Turco, 2002 among a wide literature), the involvement of people in perception and attribution of values and significances means the landscape contains an immaterial dimension not only expressed by physical features. However, landscape witnesses the presence of human and natural factors, from one side, and from the other side, landscape is also the empirical manifestation of territory (Turco 2002; Raffestin 2005). Here, in particular, we aim to discuss about three different dimensions regarding landscape:

- where is landscape?
- who can, desires, must deal with landscape?
- who gains or loses in landscape choices?

The first dimension lies on the x-axis and declines the concept of landscape included between the “landscape of emergencies” concept and the opposite one, the “total landscape”.

According to the first concept, landscape is only something exceptional, something significant from a natural or cultural point of view. Therefore, very often it is considered something rare to preserve and to protect from degradation. To the opposite pole, the conception of “total landscape” is linked with the idea that landscape is always a good, aside from the value given to it. It is considered as the visible manifestation of the relations between a population and its territory. Therefore, there is landscape in every place, exceptional as well as common, where such interactions occur.

Concerning the territorial dimension, “landscape” in the Convention is surely a “total landscape”. The article 2 claims that the Convention “applies to the entire territory of the Parties and covers natural, rural, urban and sub-urban areas. It includes land, inland water and marine areas. It concerns landscapes that might be considered outstanding as well as everyday or degraded landscapes”.

On the y-axis, there is the social dimension of landscape, where we wonder about the ways of interaction between population and landscape and about the roles among territorial actors in this relationship. We consider the two opposite ideas: the “elite landscape” and the “inclusive landscape”. According to the first idea, only few people build the landscape and therefore have the right to make choices about it: experts, people who study landscape and its dynamics, stakeholders, but also the institutions in charge of the territorial and landscape planning. The “inclusive landscape” refers to the concept of “including everybody”. This kind of landscape is based on the idea that everybody has the right to live in a high quality landscape, but also the duty to play an active and responsible part in managing landscape transformations and in making precise choices and decisions about it.

The European Landscape Convention refers to this idea of “inclusive landscape”. In the Preamble it is stated that the member States of the Council of Europe wish “to respond to the public’s wish to enjoy high quality landscapes and to play an active part in the development of landscapes”, but also that “the landscape is a key element of individual and social well-being” and that “its protection, management and planning entail rights and responsibilities for everyone”. In the Convention, the “population” is often called directly upon. It underlines that the “landscape quality objectives”, the linchpin of landscape policy, protection, management and planning, are formulated on the basis of “the aspirations of the public with regard to the landscape features of their surroundings”.

The Convention proposes a “total” and “inclusive” landscape: it is everywhere and belongs to everybody.

According to this conception, humans act in landscape so as Turri said (1998). They play the role of actors and, at the same time, of spectators in a landscape which is considered a “theatre”. As spectators, humans have the right to live in a quality landscape, but as actors, they have also the duty to take care of their surrounding landscape and to act in it with the awareness of being landscape creators and transformers. For this reason, the Convention emphasizes the importance of sensitizing people about the themes regarding landscape (art. 6). Through information and education, they can become aware of the importance of such matters and consequently play a responsible role in the decision making about landscape (Zerbi, 2001).

Is it enough to say that landscape is everywhere and belongs to everybody to be a “democratic landscape”? Which are the practices enabling to implement a substantial democracy of landscape?

There is another issue not completely expressed in the European Landscape Convention related to the social costs and benefits of decisions related to landscape. Landscape is often reduced to one flat aesthetic dimension supposing that its impacts are related only with cultural and perceptive aspects denying any social effects. Landscape issues are normally embodied in protests and disputes related to off shore wind mill power plants. Landscape is not the kernel of environmental and territorial disputes, normally triggered by environmental or health claims.

However, even if landscape transformations do not produce social opposition (or happen with social acceptance), it becomes important to understand the gains of developers and to explore the relationships between landscape (and social) impacts and economic (or social) benefits. Is social acceptance of landscape transformations resulting from low intensity of social impacts or from a lacking awareness of the rights of high quality landscapes?

2. From landscape to territory: landscape change and citizens' participation

Landscape change (here considering only the human – and not natural – influences on landscape) arises from the interrelationship between complex social and territorial dimensions: “who” and “where”. Two different categories of landscape changes can be observed :

- Landscape changes deriving from an “explicit” plan (or “explicit changes”). They are top-down planned by specific institutional contests, based on specific rules, laws, bills. They can either result from specific landscape planning and landscape policies, or as a secondary effect (an externality) of other territorial or sectorial policies. In some cases, changes are forecasted and managed, in other cases they are not (as a landscape externality of other policies) or they are almost unpredictable. This first category applies to a regulation context.
- Landscape changes deriving from “free” and “creative” actions as “implicit” projects, outside the control of plans and rules. As “inhabitants” of a landscape, all people are directly or indirectly landscape makers and landscape changers, directly or indirectly, as they live in it (Turri, 1998). Even if it is an almost unaware process, it sharply acts as a process arising from the bottom. In a self-regulation context (in many cases not conflicting with the official planning rules), the project rules depend on the aims of the actors, as individuals or as social categories. It is clear that different aims of different actors (or group of actors) can conflict ones against the others. These conflicts can be prejudicial to other’s “right to landscape”. Landscape changes are strongly linked to the economic structure of each region and to its social and cultural frame.

Integrating social and territorial dimensions with the two categories of landscape change and underlining problems and perspectives of the relationship between people and landscape, we can introduce the theoretical limit-concepts of “exhibited landscape”, “abused landscape” and “lived landscape” (see fig. 3).

From a territorial point of view, the “exhibited landscape” can be linked to the concept of the “landscape of emergencies”. According with a restricting-conservative approach, this kind of landscape is considered particularly worthy of being protected for its natural or cultural features,. In some cases, a landscape is subjected to restricting rules, in order to avoid that any spontaneous modification could change or degrade it. In other cases, only the changes maintain typical elements of a place and incline to “replicate” these typical features are allowed. Landscapes become stereotypes reflecting people’s image of a place. The effects of this policies are evident in some rural landscapes or in mountain zones where we can find new-built houses conserving “traditional” details and elements.

Landscape becomes “exhibited” when its spontaneous evolution is stopped to be turned into a memory of a past period. People have to know and recognize landscapes’ characteristics, also when they are not connected to the current socio-territorial processes anymore. These landscapes are only heritage, they are signs of a past time often considered better than the present one. Who chooses which elements have to be preserved and why? The question is related to the social dimension of the “exhibited landscape”. Who is

really involved in taking decisions about it? Experts' role is surely significant, but is also important to underline that landscape protection, (i. e. environmental protection) is often a means to reach economic advantages (i. e. tourism). However, problems connected to an intensive tourist exploitation of the territory could clash into the preservation action, causing a conflict in which the main actors are experts, politicians and stakeholders. According with a top-down approach, these social actors are the most involved in making decision about "exhibited landscape". Common people don't seem to have the possibility to express their opinions and choices concerning landscape. "Exhibited landscape" can be considered as an "élite landscape" regulated by a quite small group of individuals estimated "entitled" to manage it thanks to their authority and competences.

In the "exhibited landscape" only changes coming from explicit plans are provided, while self-regulation and spontaneous evolution are stopped.

The word "abuse" has a lot of meanings, including "excess" and "violence". We use the expression "abused landscape" in the sense of a modified landscape without respecting its peculiarities and its historical stratification. The "abused landscape" can be considered a sort of "total landscape". It is an ordinary landscape which doesn't present any special element of beauty or natural/cultural relevance. Not subjected to protection laws and in a context of frequent lack of regulation, many ordinary territories have been modified in a rapid and uncontrolled way. The result of this accelerated degradation includes problematic cases, like "eco-monsters": unauthorized garbage dumps or mountains' faces devastated by caves, or quite normal phenomena, like the central Veneto region landscapes.

Concerning the social dimension of this "abused landscape", we could say that "it belongs to everybody". It doesn't mean that everybody has contributed to the transformation of this landscape through a public consultation process. On the contrary, it belongs to everybody because no laws regulate its transformations. Unaware self-regulation processes draw landscape changes and they often lead to open or hidden conflicts and to degradation, a sort of tragedy of commons experienced by landscape (Hardin, 1968). An "ordinary" landscape can be "abused" when nobody recognizes its value.

"Lived landscape" lies in an intermediate position between "exhibited" and "abused landscape". It means that it is nor completely "mummified" nor completely changed and twisted in its typical features. "Lived landscape" goes forward in co-evolution with the society, in continuity with the past and in accordance with actual values and significances. It is "lived" in the sense that it is the visible evidence of virtuous relationships between society and local environment. In its territorial dimension, "lived landscape" refers to the "total landscape" concept. In the social dimension, it refers to the "inclusive landscape" modified and perceived by people that live in it who are consciously or unconsciously decision makers. Assuring the "right to landscape" both to present and future generations is committed to the regulation processes and instruments, while self-regulation gives chances and opportunities to new driving forces and to creativity for new forms of landscape.

Going deeper inside the different roles of actors in this "lived landscape" or – as we are going to call it– "democratic landscape", both regulation and self-regulation processes should be taken into consideration. In regulation processes, beside the roles of law-makers, local administrators and planners, the implementation of participation processes is stated by the European Landscape Convention. "Landscape quality objectives" arise directly from "the aspirations of the public" (art. 1) and "each Party undertakes (...) to establish procedures for the participation of the general public, local and regional authorities, and other parties with an interest in the definition and implementation of the landscape policies" (art. 5). In self-regulation processes, the importance and the necessity of awareness, responsiveness and landscape education (art. 6) are unmistakable in order to "to increase awareness among the civil society" of the landscape values and to share the "right to landscape".

As "learning processes", participative approaches provided by regulation, could become places to develop the essential consciousness to achieve self-regulation.

3. Urban sprawl in Veneto: justice and sustainability?

In the second half of the twentieth century, Veneto, within the most general context of the North East of Italy, underwent mercurial development, characterised by the rapid transformation of the rural economy into an industrial one supported by small and medium enterprises. Urbanization process exploited the traditional polycentric structure of the territory based on a repeated micro-hierarchy of cities, towns, villages and isolated houses, directly linked with the agricultural lands. Development was sprawled everywhere in the central plain and the whole society sensibly enriched, so that this growth¹ was called the "North-Est miracle".



Figure 2. Images of some characteristic areas in the province of Padova (Veneto). From above: Villa Contarini (Piazzola sul Brenta); Colli Euganei; the center of Este; the Rocca of Monselice; the church of Santo Antonio in Padova:

“A house a shed”: for every village a small industrial area (the average is four); for every scattered old rural house one or two new houses built close to the old one. Territory has been exploited in an apparently anarchical manner. After a first phase of increasing density in the main towns, since the Eighties the population density directly increased in the countryside, out of the historical cities.

This widespread construction of disparate, yet highly urban elements onto a predominantly rural social fabric has dramatically transformed the Veneto cultural landscape, well known for its walled towns and Palladio's villas. This was probably one of the reasons why intellectuals were rarely interested in this settlement pattern if not to criticize it strongly. How to accept a pattern that doesn't respect the traditional categories of town and countryside, and ruins the landscape cultural heritage? In the academic environment, probably influenced also by Anglo-Saxon ideas (from P. Abercrombie to P. Hall), urbanization was mostly studied as a problem of “soil consumption” (agrarian soil is a scarce resource that we must preserve). Sprawl was negatively often judged and called with derogatory names, from “settlement jam” to *villetttopoli*, etc.

In 2002 the national newspaper *Repubblica* wrote: “This is the “Veneto model”: 450 thousands of businesses, 97% of them with less than 15 employed workers, the GDP/inhabitant at 23.000 euro (the Italian average is 19.000), 3.000 bank branches with 41 millions of euro banked, unemployment between 2 and 2,5 %. From this triangle (it is the area among Venice, Padova and Treviso) flooded by sheets – only from this triangle, not from all Veneto – the 22% of all the Italian exports leaves” (F. Ermani “La città diffusa”, *Repubblica*, 24 luglio 2002).

This idea had (and still has) some reflects on the Veneto urban planning, but doubtful effects. Divided between protection and exploitation of territory, urban plans and specific laws actually permitted the construction of this particular settlement pattern.

What do people think about living in the *città diffusa*? Some field analysis show that there are some prejudices that we need to clarify.

Firstly, it seems to be not true that people living in the *città diffusa* come from the cities, as victims of gentrifications. On the contrary, they normally move from a village to another, maintaining strong relationships with the birth family and the old friends. They use the territory as a large village, whose “squares” are indifferently shopping malls and historical centers, that can be traveled over by car. Besides, they normally chose to live “in the countryside” or in this “urban-rural structure” (as some of them called it), because they consider city as a place of traffic, chaos and conflicts, “an extraneous dwelling place, not beloved, not desired” (Dolcetta, Mittner, 2005). They appreciate the possibility to stay close to “nature” and connected with countryside, to have a private garden, to keep pets and other animals, to move by car, to park easily, to know everyone, to be free.

Secondly, it seems not to be true that this sprawl, as many says, has no rules. On the contrary, also besides the planning rules, basically respected, there are many not-written rules, due to a society that is moving rather compactly towards the development. If everyone is involved in increasing richness and urbanization process, none will protest.

So, until Veneto sprawl is judged awful and bad only by a part of the Veneto society (very often concerning an *exhibited* or *elite* landscape), and useful and good for most of its inhabitants, it is easy to say that it is a rather self-regulated landscape (and often perhaps an *abused*), consequence of a not-written pact, suitable to their desire. Considering how largely this pattern is going to spread over western countries, becoming the place where most of people live in Europe, some authors propose to consider sprawl as a sort of spontaneous experiment, a first attempt towards the creation of the XXI century city. It can be imagined as able to absorb cities, monuments, villages, sprawl, countryside and nature in a new territorial configuration, really further the old city/country pattern (Munarin, Tosi, 2001). In these last years, the *città diffusa* is going to face a new framework: increasingly difficult transportations of people and goods, diffused pollution, strong building debts, strong amount of houses prices, etc., increasingly different economic possibilities for people, territorial ongoing differences, the passage of European corridors in the centre of the plain, the marginalization of mountains and southern plain. In this polarizing scenario, mountains, increasingly marginal, are going to be considered only a stock of energy, water, nature, wilderness, instead of an inhabited place. The southern plain risks to be left aside. Together with some monuments or historic centers of the central plain, are mountains and the southern plain going to become an “exhibited landscape”?

Taking into account that the present configuration of power among territorial actors is not the same as the last decades, is sprawl arrived to its inherent limits, or are there still some possibilities to imagine a new sprawl more conscious of the territorial and environmental constraints, to design here a truly *democratic landscape*? Will the present planning season be able to drive the processes between a strategic regulation and an aware self-regulation?



Abano Terme



Carceri



San Giorgio delle Pertiche



San Donato



Piombino Dese



Piombino Dese



Casale di Scodosia



Correzzola

Figure 3. Images of “first sprawl” during the decades 1960-1980. In this period sprawl allowed the accessibility of individual house for families witnessing a economic miracle with immediate effect on a wide part of population (or wide apartment in the areas located near the existing settlements). In this period residential and occupational activities (commercial, craft) were combined in the same building as it is possible to see in the last two photos: house and production of chairs (Casale di Scodosia), or house and bar (Corezzola). Below the picture the name of the municipality.



Affi (Province of Verona)



Caldiero (Province of Verona)



Marsango (Province of Padova)



Feriolo (Province of Padova)



Due Carrare (province of Padova)

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Figure 4 Images of “second sprawl” starting from the last decade of past century and on going. In this phase sprawl related to residential needs is based on apartments or portions of houses. The majority of population can not afford the building of individual house. The sprawl related to commercial or directional activities still growing.