

The historic and cultural dimensions of landscape*

by Paul Dury

The landscape of Europe reflects the interaction between man and nature over many millennia. Thus it is an *historic* environment, in the sense of being a document or archive which can tell the story - from the Palaeolithic until yesterday - of how people have interacted with the landscape that they inherited. It is also a cultural environment, a major component of the *cultural* heritage of people in Europe today. Indeed, it might be seen as the very foundation of cultural identity, for whilst language, literature, music and other intangible cultural traits are readily transported, they are ultimately rooted in, and shaped by, the landscape in which they originated. Thus the *historic* dimension of the environment is essentially the sum of the surviving physical impacts of people on the landscape, whereas the *cultural* dimension of the environment can be seen as the sum of the intangible meanings, values, attributes and associations that people attach to its physical components, whether an individual building, a distinctive area, or even an entire continent. Hence the very few areas of Europe on which the physical impact of people remains very limited can still be invested with high cultural value by people whose culture is grounded in them, for example the Sami in the arctic region of northern Scandinavia and Russia.

A changing landscape

Our European landscape has tended to change incrementally, with occasional major interventions that have been more often as a result of economic or technical factors than political ones. The majority of Greek and Roman urban centres, for example, are still occupied today, just as much of the most productive agricultural land has remained in more or less continuous cultivation for millennia. Thus an apparently commonplace element of our surroundings, like the line of an urban street or a field boundary, may have been established one, perhaps two thousand years ago. Only quite recently have the complexity, antiquity and continuity of the palimpsest within which we live become widely recognised, and archaeological study developed from a focus on individual sites to the spatial, social and political dynamics of communities in their landscapes. With the consequent realisation that, in terms of the information about the past that it contains, a landscape is more than the sum of its parts, has come the realisation of the need to manage this irreplaceable resource on a more global level.

An eroded complex heritage

This recognition of the historic and cultural values of landscapes is linked to an increase in the pace and scale of change, as a result of which this complex heritage is being eroded at a dramatic rate. The regional distinctiveness that arose naturally from the predominant use of local materials in building, in forms that reflected interrelated influences such as climate, economy, social structure and expressions of cultural affiliation, is being replaced by modern forms of building and agriculture that are European or international in their range. Complexity and texture give way to simplicity and blandness. But this tendency towards cultural homogenisation is not new. It was a major force in the nineteenth century, as industrialisation replaced traditional means of production, and railways cheaply transported the results. What has changed, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, is its scale and pace, as it has become an aspect of the phenomenon of "globalisation". Thus an increasing public appreciation of the value of sustaining local and regional identity and distinctiveness has grown up as a response to experience of the consequences of their loss. It has been reinforced by the realisation that many of the changes of the past half century have proved to be inherently unsustainable, both in social and environmental terms.

Universality of values

protecting their setting, and protecting historic urban centres and landscapes whose cultural value has been increasingly recognised. But this widening of perceptions of what is "valuable" still left the "heritage" as something set apart, rather than the framework within which we all live, a dynamic construction that will never be complete. Increasing designation cannot of itself achieve the management of the cultural dimension of the European landscape. Indeed, it can be counterproductive, for not only does it appear to dilute or devalue the significance of what is designated: if it extends to a substantial portion of the landscape, it can appear to denigrate the rest. Importantly, the European Landscape Convention recognises that the whole of Europe comprises landscapes that are "an essential component of people's surroundings, an expression of the diversity of their shared cultural and natural heritage, and a foundation of their identity". If all landscapes embody cultural values, it follows that we should everywhere be seeking to manage change so as to sustain (and indeed enhance) those cultural values, based upon an understanding of the nature and evolution of the place, and the values that people attach to elements of it. The term "integrated conservation" must necessarily expand beyond the original concept of integration with spatial planning, to encompass other fields, like agricultural policy, which play a major part in shaping the evolution of landscapes, and consequently cultural heritages.

Identify and seek to protect

The increasing tendency for individuals and communities to identify and seek to protect what they value has been a driving force behind the expansion of the designated cultural heritage. There is now clear recognition that we must add the "bottom-up" value judgments of individuals and communities to the "top-down" value judgments of experts like archaeologists and architectural historians. The basic building block of the European heritage should be the local, the values perceived by individuals who form communities (which may be composed of people sharing common values, rather than being geographically defined, and so may include communities now separated from some elements of heritage which are important to their identity). The emphasis has shifted from monuments to people -in all their diversity. It has become democratised. Thus the definition of a landscape in the convention as "an area, as perceived by people" is an elegant statement of principle. The extension of the concept of cultural heritage to encompass the cultural environment, the need to sustain its cultural values as perceived by people, and the idea of a right to cultural heritage as a form of human right, are being developed under the auspices of the Cultural Heritage Committee, in the form of a draft framework convention which could provide a dynamic structure for working out good practice in implementing these ideas. There is a particular need to develop an understanding that heritage is constantly being created and destroyed; the process is a negotiation between past, present and future. This perhaps needs to draw on concepts developed in the protection of the natural environment (critical, consistent, tradable capital), to shift the emphasis from preventing change to managing change based on knowledge - from preservation to conservation. We must also consider where the threshold of public interest lies, for heritage values are essentially a public interest in largely private property. How many people does it take to form a community, identify the cultural values or significance they attach to a place or landscape, and legitimately influence its management through democratic, public process? How can such value judgments be made more transparent, accountable? Is it possible to develop standards for understanding, by communities as well as experts, since understanding is the essential basis for first assessing significance and describing cultural values, and then taking steps to sustain them?