A review on Cultural Landscape approach as a base for Regeneration Strategies on Rural condition. Gran Canaria Island

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Abstract

The rural territory presents nowadays a complex situation with serial difficulties for the development of the traditional activities (agriculture, stockbreeding, etc). This leads to a decline of these environments, with consequences at very diverse levels. But in a particular way it is influencing in the abandonment of the settlements and in the deterioration of its tangible and untangible heritage. Thus, there is a need for planning tools that promote the sustainable development of the Rural Territory. The aim is to preserve the endogenous potential of these areas providing reactivation strategies that encourage the local development in its physical, social and cultural dimension. The case of Gran Canaria depicts how the Cultural Routes can configure an efficient tool for this. In this way, the touristic potential of these rural environments is not incompatible with the preservation of their heritage values. And the interpretation of the landscape and its memory can be a clue in this sense.

Keywords: Cultural Landscape. Heritage. Local development. Cultural route.

Introduction

The rural landscape is rapidly changing. The weakening of rural societies due to subsistency conditions and migration movements towards the cities, is endangering some communities' continuity and its heritage. As a result, certain landscape logics are impoverishing. Meanwhile, the abandoned crop fields have to adapt to new economical activities. In this sense, tourism and leisure activities become an important mechanism of territory transformation. In this scenario, multiple questions come up, with refer to the compatibility among these territories' heritage and environmental values and the touristic development. Or about the effects of this industry in our landscape. Then, what opportunities does the leisure offer for the preservation and improvement of the rural territory in a sustainable way?¹

Urbanism discipline has developed a wide knowledge about the urban territory and the city shape. However, there is still a lot to know about the dynamics of that territories nor belonging to the city neither to the countryside. This is the case of the systems of scattered settlements throughout the territory, whose huge heritage variety appears nowadays as an important value to be administered. Contrasting with the constant methodological update about the urban space, rural territory has often

¹ This article is part of the Research carried out for a Phd Thesis still on process. Theme: "Rural Territory Organization Logics in Gran Canaria, Sustainable Reactivation Strategies". Author: Carolina Rodríguez Martín. Director: Joaquín Sabaté Bel. September 2011.

been considered as a residual entity. Nevertheless, the current worldwide crisis is accentuating the existing problems in multiple issues. In this context, the environmental deterioration has reinforced the presence of ecology in the social debate. And all this has caused a change of paradigm enhancing as a value the environmental culture.

In this way, in late years a certain consensus about the importance of local cultures and the traditional territory systems has reemerged. In this sense, their manifestations in the heritage form a models reference catalogue valid at the local scale², whose interest can also be extended to other contexts. The heritage result of the traditional culture represents the experience of a community development in an specific stage. Thought the memory conservation will partly depend on the protagonism of the resident population. A place can maintain some inherent characteristics, but its inhabitants play a crucial role in the transmision of certain identity features. Thus, it is necessary to make clear that there are some planning and design mechanisms able to **reactivate some territories in decline.** And there are some tools that can be very efficient to interpret the landscape and to enhance the value both of the tangible and untangible heritage of that territories.

Territory transformation in Gran Canaria

Gran Canaria insular territory (Canary Archipelago), is characterized by its volcanic geography, its circular shape, an abrupt orography with radial gullies, its coast and beaches, altitudinal gradient, climatic variety, its endemisms, its historic and sociocultural heritage, etc. All this form a very heterogeneous collage, which is reflected in the insular landscape.







Figure 1: Satellite images of Canary Islands. Gran Canaria.

Source: GOOGLE EARTH

But its rural territory has suffered an accelerated transformation process. The tourism phenomenon has been determinant referring to this in the Canary Islands. The absolute importance of this activity in the productive system has lead to the increasing shift to a tertiary economy. And this is one of the factors that has influenced in a very particular way in the rural territory, remarkably weakening its heritage. So, the crisis in the agricultural and stockbreeding activities comes up in the production decrease, the land abandonment, the loss of rural population, etc. Specifically, in late years it has been noticed a production fall in little estates, in the favour of the specialized concentration in vast agricultural plots. The shortage both of natural resources (water and ground) and human capital, and the difficulties to compete with other outside markets have lead to a situation of clear decline. But what has been decisive is the indisputable protagonism of the touristic activity, which has deeply transformed the territory.

The decadence of the primary sector has generated a considerable amount of negative circumstances in both the tangible and intangible insular heritage. Cause the trascendence of agriculture and cattle farming in the Islands goes beyond the purely socioeconomic or environmental aspects. The culture of cheese, wine, or even some handmade production systems, can be examples of resulting cultural expressions. In despite of being submitted to the current requirements, they are expressions that can contribute to the maintenance of the etnographic values linked to this important part of the territory.

The "sun and beach" Tourism model in the insular context

² Jaime Izquierdo Vallina works in this direction in many publications, among them we quote this interview for El Mundo. Suplement "Natura" nr.35, 14th April 2009, with the title "It is necessary to redefine the 'contract' between the city and the countryside".

The islands are, in essence, paradoxical scenarios. There is a permanent tension among the meanings that are attributed to them: enclosed and hermetic territories, together with utopic scenarios and idilic places; inaccesible geographies, and heavenly locations. But their isolation and separation, their singularity and size transform any island in a perfect starting point for the design of ecoturism sustainable programs.

Particularly, in the Canary Islands, the magnificent climate and landscape conditions, together with their politic and socioeconomical features, their accommodation offer, and the international flight connexions, make of the Archipelago an excelent touristic spot. Tourism has achieved such a protagonism in the regional level that has become the dominant basis of economy. This has pushed into the background activities formerly essential such as agriculture, stockbreeding and fishing, that had characterized the insular landscape in earlier times. So, the dominant tourism model has been the one of "sun and beach". This model has generated huge touristic resorts, that have left a trace with big consequences in environmental terms. Nowadays, a big amount of the territory natural values has dissapeared. Specially in those areas meant exclusively to tourism, mainly located in the southern coast of Gran Canaria.

In addition, the touristic offer does not promote the discovery of the rural territory of the Island. What is sold are dreams, images and atractions. But oftenly these enticements fit to an standardized visitor's wishes. The logic of a destiny for the mass tourism is then far away from the heritage values linked to the rural tradition. But neither the deterioration of the overexposed zones nor the decline of areas in regression are good for the insular territory. Solving this sort of problems requires really complex strategies aimed to get a better territorial balance. All this implies the need of **rebuilding a tourism model** that does not imply the uncontrolled transformation of the landscape nor the loss of the territory heritage values.

Rethinking the tourism model

The potential of the tourism in the island's economy is undeniable. But it can not be denied neither the value of that primary activities that have configure for a long time the landscape transformation. The inclusion of new uses without the proper room and time to coexist with the primary activities, comes along the loss of associated heritage. The purpose is using the tourism as a revitalizing activity, not only aimed to the creation of new leisure offers, but also to the implementation of Local Development Plans for the recovery of typical economical and social activities. So, this sort of tools make it possible to connect heritage resources by means of routes that benefit from the existing territorial and social structure.

The design of a valid strategy requires to consider the specificic features of the territory. In this sense, Gran Canaria has its own particularities. But, on one hand, the rural territory is submitted to a decline process that endangers its heritage. And, on the other hand, the dominant tourism model of "sun and beach" does not consider that heritage as something essential. The Island offers landscapes able to be readed with the knowledge of the endogenous culture. However, the tourism industry tends overall to the recreation of typical landscapes located inside the resorts or the temathic parks. These are new landscapes, physically and socially isolated, with hardly ever dialogue with the context. Their thematic has not much to do with the nature, the culture and the lifestyle of the rural areas' inhabitant. If ever, this is translated into a recreation of his values presented depending on the visitor's expectations.

But there are some **reflections** that have questionned this kind of logics. The works of Dirk Sijmons³, John Urry and some others, have tried to give some answers considering the influence of leisure in the European landscape. In this way, it would be possible to typify the transformation at a local scale as a gradual change from a productive landscape to a consumer landscape. There are also very useful **experiencies** set from different contexts. These are reactivation operations in some territorial areas with a significant rural component. At the European level, this is the case of the proposal for the

³ "Greetings from Europe", Landscape and Leisure. Project instigator: Dirk Sijmons, Dutch Government Advisor on Landscape. Editorial. Team: Niek Hazendonk, Mark Hendriks, Hans Venema. Publisher: "010 Publisher", Rotterdam 2008.

improvement of Sicilian ⁴ leisure and landscape, the proyect for the Sustainable Territorial Development in Menorca Island⁵, the proposal for the Rural Territory in Pajottenland⁶, or the design for an agricultural development area in Tilburg⁷, in the South of the Netherlands. Also remarkable, among the Spanish examples, the landscape management proposed in the Parque Agrario in Baix Llobregat⁸. And focusing in the Canary Islands' regional context, there are several experienced aimed to the development and protection of the rural heritage. This is the case of El Cardón⁹ and Teno Activo¹⁰, where ecoturism works with activities related to the natural and cultural heritage; also the case of innovative and participatory social experiences in El Rincón¹¹, Tenerife; or some local development proyects¹², and initiatives such as the ones carried out in the "Rutas de los Sabios Intérpretes" ¹³ (Wise Interpreters' Routes) in Gran Canaria island, with the purpose of building communication and gathering espaces that would allow the permeability of the rural territory with regard to the visitor.

Some ideas to start with

Rural tourism can be a good natural ally for the agricultural-metropolitan perspective; and then, it wouldnt exist without open ways, gastronomy, local products or landscapes directly linked to the territory values. But rural, natural or cultural tourism has its limits, both on the availability offer, and the way in which it is developed. Consequently, it is necessary to set a new frame for the relationship between rural and urban entities, promoting the integration of tourism in the rural environment according to the environmental preservation and the local identity features.

In this sense, there are some general **hypothesis** that can give us some orientation in this sort of experiences. In the territorial support we can detect some guidelines or patterns resulted from the process of exploitation and occupation of the rural environment, so that the touristic intervention must dialogue with the preexisting materials. These materials (paths, agricultural buildings, walls, crop terraces, caves, etc.) constitute an essential part of the territory and landscape heritage values. Consequently, instead of inventing a project or an alternativa, it is mainly about the rediscovery or interpretation of this one. It is crucial to recognize the territorial logics of the rural territory and landscape as a cultural expression able to enhance the identity and the heritage resources of a particular context. From this point it is possible to settle some models that warrant its transformation by means of project and management mechanisms based in that cultural heritage. And there are some tools such as Cultural Routes, Endogenous Development Projects, etc, that can be very efficient in this

⁴ Studies presented by Karlsruhe University by Ulrike Bautz and Lisa Pfisterer in which they seek to combine agrotourism with "slow tourism", displacing the "speed tourism" towards the coast.

⁵ Proposal by the Madrid Politechnical University for a Sustainable Development project from the study of the increasing coastline consumption by means of the expansion of touristic edification in the coast, the territorial impact of the crops abandonment, and the transformation of the "sun and beach" touristic model in a phenomenon where leisure and entertainment management becomes more and more complex.

⁶ In this province on the West of Brussels, the proposal of the Brussels Architecture Faculty suggests the creation of a continuous green area by means of mosaics that make possible the agricultural activity and the introduction of new development areas.

⁷ Proposal of the Tilburg School which seeks to introduce farms in the landscape, interspersed with recreational spaces.

⁸ "Proyecto de Parque Agrario del Baix Llobregat" (Agricultural Park Project in Baix Llobregat), in landscape Management. Landscape Protection, Management and planning Manual. (pp. 643-658). Ariel, Barcelona.

⁹ "El Cardón" is a social economy firm founded in 1999 in Tenerife. It is a firm specialized in Environment and Responsible Tourism or Ecotourism, whose objective is the promotion and conservation of the natural and cultural heritage of the island through the diffusion and environmental awareness (specially in Teno municipality).

¹⁰ Firm with similar characteristics which works with the diffusion of natural and cultural heritage of the islands, and particularly, of Tenerife. http://www.tenoactivo.com

If El Rincón is located in the Northwest of La Orotava Valley, municipality in the island of Tenerife. Characteristic for its high agricultural and landscape value, with an area of 210 Ha. where we can fin the banana tree as dominant crop togethe with a wide variety of natural resources and coastlines, among which we can highlight a protected mountainside and a cliff of among 30 and 70m height, with four beaches that constitute the zone's main touristic spot.

¹² Examples such AIDER - Asociación Insular de Desarrollo Rural (Insular Association for Rural Development), San Mateo; experiences and local projects from agricultors and cattle farmers associations (Tejeda, Gran Canaria), protectors of the Almond crop, etc.; experiences and projects carried out in the Mancomunidad de Sureste in Gran Canaria island; dynamization groups for the Local Development in "Chirche", Tenerife, etc.

¹³ In 2011 was published the Guía Canaria de los Sabios Intérpretes (Wise Interpreters Canary Guide) that the Fundación Canaria Lidia García (www.fundacionlidiagarcia) is developing with the financial support of Canarias Government (Dirección General de Cooperación y Patrimonio Cultural). It is a regional project to recover the historic paths and to offer a new image of the heritage richness of the Canary Islands

direction. "Telling a story" can even become a tourist lure. And this strategy can contribute to an economy compatible with the conservation, promotion and restoration of spaces and architecture in disuse. Then, connecting the place economical efficiency with its memory conservation and the revaluation of landscape can be a key asset.

The debate about the reactivation tools

The protagonism of the "sun and beach" model has caused that in Gran Canaria the rural, natural or cultural tourism has been pushed into the background, promoted only by eventual initiatives lacking of a continuity in time. To face this sort of questions there are no undisputable strategies. Thought the experiences with ecoturism and agroturism carried out in other contexts are useful references in this sense. The introduction of the touristic activity in the rural territory could lean on small interventions, as the case of the implementation of agroturism in some estates. Nevertheless, this strategy does not ensure a reactivation in a bigger scale of the heritage values of the territory. Because of this, it is necessary to think about proposals at a territory scale that promove economic, social and cultural activities whose purpose is the protection and spreading of the tangible and untangible heritage.

An instrument backed up by some successful experiences for the sustainable reactivation of a rural territory are what have been called cultural routes or cultural tracks. A **Cultural Route** is organized around a theme that characterized it and give its name to it, offering a sequence of places and leisure activities related to its distinguishing elements. The creation of cultural routes seeks to an optimum use of sources, to consolidate the productive culture, to dynamize the regional and local economy, to raise awareness of the importance of cultural heritage, to incorporate to the main national tracks some other touristic tracks located in marginalized spaces, to preserve and publicising lifestyles, working conditions, buildings, archaeological remains, traces from indigenous populations, and to promote the productive local development by means of an strategic plan for the cultural heritage and its touristic valuation ¹⁴. In conclusion, cultural routes allow a region growth not only from the tourism perspective, but also from the point of view of the heritage preservation and the social awareness about it.

A route in elaboration process

The ellaboration of a **Cultural Route for the case of Gran Canaria** constitutes a methodological experience aimed to the introduction of the territory heritage values by means of certain tools closely related with the tourism. The proposal requires a definition of its physical structure, its social and cultural structure, and its political-administrative structure.

A-Physical structure

The proposed route goes through the northwestern quadrant area of the Island, in which the geomorphological conditions with high slopes towards the interior, offer to us three clearly distinguishable zones: the coasline, the half-way areas, and the interior. Thus, we are given a wide diversity and contrast, with a preeminence of scattered edifications. But also the island's larger surface or protected natural ground, with a very high rate of endemic flora.¹⁵

In the coast the topography has allowed the development of a larger amount of settlements and infrastructures. Nowadays this area depicts the development of a progressively more industrialized agriculture with plots of a certain size and use intensity. Along the coastline we find Gáldar and Guía, two settlements with an important commercial activity; Agaete with a harbour for interinsular communication with Tenerife and a modest touristic settlement ¹⁶; till we reach La Aldea de San Nicolás, a mainly agricultural settlement located over the island's bigger underground aquifer, and relatively isolated among cliffs and mountains.

¹⁴ Fernández, G., Guzmán; "Desarrollo regional, turismo y rutas culturales", in Revista del Foro CEIDIR, No 6, 2005.

¹⁵ Macaronesia Archipelagos own the highest rate of endemic flora with a 32,4% in the Canary Islands. V.V.A.A. (2005), "Basemac", Rincones del Atlántico, nº 2.

^{16 &}quot;Hacia una Estrategia Territorial". (Towards a Territorial Strategy) Gobierno de Canarias (Canarias Government). Consejería de Política Territorial. Damian Quero Castanys 1987.





Figure 2. Source: Evolution of the ground for agricultural use in the coastal Municipality of Gáldar. In the picture on the left Geography Faculty of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. Aerial flight of 1954. In the picture on the right aerial flight of 2010, provided by GRAFCAN.

In the **half-way areas** is where the settlements of Teror, Moya, Firgas and Arucas are located. Part of their economy remains based in the primary sector, and other part in the service sector. These are settlements where, in despite of their rural character, the proximity to the capital of Las Palmas has contributed to the proliferation of first and second residence edifications, causing a certain degree of territory transformation.

The **mountain and peak areas** contain zones of high natural value protected by the Unesco and some other entities. Here we find less developed settlements like Valleseco, Tejeda, Artenara, etc., submitted to an ageing process and population decrease. This is a community with an economy still based in agriculture and stockbreeding, in an area with a big amount of natural and cultural heritage indicators. And its historic sedimentation process since the aboriginal phase till the present has crystallize both in a tangible and an untangible way (musical folklore, beliefs and myths, spoken literature...).



Figure 3. Source: self ellaboration.

B-Social and cultural structure

The inhabitant of the rural areas of Canaria has traditionally worked in the primary activities: agriculture, stockbreeding and handicrafts. Despite the fact that his traditional lyfestyle has been inevitably transformed, the current social demands are overlapping to some old customs and habits (use of caves for the cattle, survival of some tools like the Canarian stick, etc.).

In this context, the choice of an specific **subject matter** can consider, among some other things, the enhancement of agriculture, stockbreeding and handicrafts; together with the promoting of some local resources in decline that are interconnected with heritage elements. This strategy must have a certain social demand potential that makes it perdurable in time; and that, at the same time, allow the improvement both in the primary and the service sector. But it must also make possible the involvement of the local population, to favour some interaction between visitors and inhabitant. It is thus about creating gathering spaces around that subject matter, which allow an administrative

management shared by the population sector that participates in it. All this must be understood as a reflection resulted from the sociocultural context to which this strategy belongs.



Figure 4. Source: self ellaboration with Google Earth images.

C-Political-administrative structure

Such an strategy must be structured in political-administrative terms to promote the involvement and participation in its management by the local inhabitants. For what is necessary the creation of gathering places and communication platforms. But what is more, the territorial scale component of a proposal such as this, implies to think beyond the municipality level taking into account the relationships among the different urban sectors and centers.

On the other hand, to undertake such an strategy it is also indispensable the involvement and coordination among all the committed parts (Cabildo Insular, municipalities, private firms, handicrafts groups, guides, managers, mediators, salesmen, etc.). It is about considering all this wide variety of factors that participate in the administrative organization, defining a management model that get materialized in the improvement of colective self-estime and the heritage revitalization.

"La Ruta del Queso" (Cheese Route) as a tour and cultural landscape

In the studied territorial area there are several characteristic elements. But one of the more reknown ones of its gastronomy is the named as Queso de Flor (Flower Cheese). This is partly due to the fact that it is made through a traditional process that characterizes its ellaboration, making it distinguishable from other types of cheese. Made with goat and sheep milk, this cheese curdles with a flower instead of with the same milk. Then, its main peculiarity is that no animal rennet is used (as with the others Canarian cheeses), but vegetal rennet (the down of the cardoon flower), in a system that has hardly any similarity in any other place in the world. The cattle is brought up and guided in the interior of the Island, and the the product is nowadays ellaborated in the cattle farms of the municipalities of Guía, Gáldar and Moya. The ellaboration process enhances several sectors as the stockbreeding, the agricultural, the handicraft one, etc. But it also has implications at some other levels that affect both landscape and architecture, and even the culinary art.

The Queso de Flor has been ellaborated for centuries. But in last editions of the World Cheese Awards, the Canarian cheeses have achieved many prizes and acknowledgements, including several qualifications as the best cheeses in the world, together with the first mention of Designation of Origin for the Queso de Flor from Guía. The flowers cheese is then a product known by this name for historic, economic and social reasons. Its ellaboration touches different subject matters closely related, that ramify and connect to activities and elements from other disciplines. In this cultural network, a wide diversity of heritage elements appear as doors and nodes.

Because of this, "telling the story" of the ellaboration of this cheese would allow to build up a route linked to all that interesting features related with this subject matter. This brings also the possibility to interconnect and settle multiple links among places, landscapes, activities and cultural expression forms; the Parque Rural de Doramas as the route gate, the cultural knowledge of the municipalities in the half-way areas (traditional architecture, cattle farms, dairy, handicrafts, etc.), the walk along the Reserve of Los Tilos de Moya or even through the Parque Rural of Tamadaba y de la Cumbre (Biosphere reserve), the harvest of the flower in its original place, the path along the sepherds' route (with the seasonal migration of livestock among the half-way areas municipalities, coast and peak in

^{17 &}quot;Ruta del Queso" (Cheese Route). Route developed as a Master exercise in the UPC Doctoral Program. Author: Carolina Rodríguez Martín. Director: Joaquín Sabaté Bel.

the search of ideal grazing in every season), the visit to aboriginal caves (currently in agricultural and stockbreeding use) or the archaelogical remains of La Cueva Pintada (The Painted Cave) (Gáldar) and the Cenobio de Valerón (Guía), the accommodation in rural houses, the visit to the places for restoration and purchase of products (the cheese, the arabic coffee from Agaete,...), etc.

Final remarks

We have seen the potential of certain reactivation strategies for the rural territory based in the enhancement of its heritage and landscape. In this way, the idea of cultural landscape implies the ellaboration of a description of the territory. But this description requires a geographical representation of the reality. It is not just an arrangement of athe existing data, but an extraction of the latent meanings. And this is the field of interpretation: the intentioned selection of elements beyond a simple purely "objective" reading, that also assumes the posibility of finding out new interpretations along the time. Therefore, what is aimed is an interpretation of reality, where the idea of heritage is linked to a selection of valuation criteria and the settlement of a certain purposeful strategy. In this sense, the idea of heritage can be understood as a social and cultural construction linked to an specific geographical and temporal context.

This conceptual frame makes it possible to connect the ellaboration of landscape interpretaion strategies with the recovery of the rural territory heritage values. In this way, the "construction" of cultural routes is undestood as a process aimed to the reactivation of some segments of Gran Canaria's territory. This process seeks to combine the preservation of its inherent values with the implementation of some activities associated with the touristic phenomenon. But tourism and its imagination constitute and emergent process that gets more and more potent, whose origin is very difficult to unlink from the urban culture itself. Because of this, tourism can be understood as a valid tool for the revaluation of territory and its heritage values, in the benefit of local environment. But at the same time, this reflection questions the conceptual limits that aparently exist between rural territory and "urban culture". And with this it is about demystifying the sense of a tradition that can only be read and reinterpreted in the present. Thus, the territory can be understood as a living and complex entity, in which the construction of a cultural route would be a new layer aimed to its reactivation.



Figure 4. Project initiated as part of the Phd-Master Program of the Barcelona Polytechnic University directed by Joaquín Sabaté Bel. Author: Carola Rodríguez Martín.

Source: Self ellaboration.

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