

The boundary between urban and natural landscape

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Abstract

The images of empty cities in the pandemic era surprised us, every economic activity, every type of transport has stopped making urban centers like ghost areas.

The frame that shocked the world is certainly the one captured by Copernicus, a space satellite of the European Space Agency (ESA). He showed us a planet earth that returns to breathe, for the first time in decades the smog clouds have no longer enveloped the earth's surface.

Despite the negative aspects related to health and sociality, there were many positive aspects that allowed us to think about how important the environment is about a naturalistic-environmental point of view as well as for psychological well-being.

Many minor historic centers and naturalistic areas have welcomed smart-working workers, favoring a repopulation of ancient uninhabited villages or countryside areas disconnected by large urban centers.

These are decentralized places that are marked by a boundary between urban and natural landscape, a boundary that in recent decades has proved increasingly weak and susceptible.

The human evolution has shown us that migrations occurred to find food and comfortable places, hence the formation of the first villages to create places for the exchange of goods and knowledge, understood as cultural exchange.

From the primordial human evolution up to contemporary history, needs have changed and cities have changed because of these.

The pandemic has reminded us, however, how important are the places that contain memories.

That border, so vulnerable, is the sustainable development goal for the future, human beings must invest to protect.

It's time to ward the memory, the cultural identity and the natural capital of these places.

Re-inhabiting, re-evaluating and rehabilitating these places could be the way to achieve a sustainable future.

In the waste era increasing by pollution and frenetic city life, many people are trying to reconcile themselves with nature rhythm, with an ancient well-being of self-production daily food.

The communities that live these places need to be included into a political-social process, they must be the subjects of planning.

The past can be the way to approach the future.

Keywords: Natural landscape; urban landscape; identity; culture; memory

1.INTRODUCTION

National and international urban policies are directing funds towards what are considered places on the margins, not only from a social point of view but also urban contexts rich in cultural heritage that are in danger of disappearing completely.

These are small settlements, characterised by a limited spatial extent and a certain morphological typology, which show signs of transformation and history within them.

These settlements, hamlets and villages, unknown as "rural" or in any case "non-urban" places, with their territorial surroundings, represent a large part of the earth's surface and have not yet been incorporated into urban systems.

These are settlement forms that we might define as "simple", as opposed to the "complex" forms of socio-economic and spatial organisation typical of the modern and contemporary urban phenomenon. They are often found on the margins between the urban and natural landscape, appearing as real "meteorites" coming from other historical periods but at the same time being contemporary.

Throughout history they have represented the reality of a closed society, made up of slow rhythms that self-maintained through the use of local resources, today they acquire a new role as an alternative way of life in relation to urban contexts, alternatives also to the recent events linked to the health emergency, the inhabitants of the contemporary city have found themselves in a no longer idyllic bubble.

The question therefore arises as to what role small towns can play as places of new habitability and from the point of view of sustainable development.

2.URBAN LANDSCAPE AND NATURAL LANDSCAPE

The terms environment, territory, landscape are present and take on different meanings in different disciplinary and cultural fields.

We use the term environment according to its physical-naturalistic-ecological meaning as a set of biotic and abiotic resources that are interrelated and interacting.

For the term landscape we refer to Article 1 of the European Convention offers a definition of landscape that opens up to the direct involvement of the community, defining "Landscape" as a certain part of the territory, as perceived by the populations, whose character derives from the action of natural and/or human factors and their interrelationships. Emphasising the subjective component of the landscape, the community should be considered as a determining element in the construction of the landscape identity because together it perceives and transforms it.

All these definitions are decisive in defining the urban landscape and the natural landscape, each depending on the other and interacting with each other to give them meaning.

The urban landscape can be defined as the surface of designed spaces and other more or less natural ones. What is certain is that the European Landscape Convention refers us to the role of the relationship between people and places, so urban landscape can also be landscape.

It is certain that when we talk about natural landscape, mention of eco-geography is inevitable, the scientific community is still active on this subject, and indeed it could be included in any of the definitions of environment, territory and landscape mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph and be linked to the concept of ecology. Ecology includes the concept of sustainability, the ability of an ecosystem to maintain all ecological processes, purposes, productivity and above all biodiversity.

Basically, we include in the natural landscape all those contexts that are ecologically relevant to the preservation and protection of biodiversity, therefore places with protected fauna and flora or with important historical and cultural landscapes.

3. MINOR HISTORICAL CENTRES AND NEW URBAN POLICIES

These small villages are subject to phenomena of demographic weakening and depopulation that often reach the drift of total abandonment with the consequent transformation into ruins, often entailing the end of a civilisation; on the other hand, they are the object of rehabilitation interventions that sometimes do not entail effective rehabilitation by new communities, but simply a tourist and commercial use. There have been many 'Albergo Diffuso' interventions that have shown how a design focused on a single action and not on global rehabilitation interventions can fail.

These are fragile objects, often due to the antiquity of their forms, which translates into a lack of malleability to be transformed, except for processes of replacement or maintenance, resulting in the loss of their identity connotations and the distortion of their morphological genetic code.

And yet it is precisely these fragile realities, which have almost no resilience or capacity to react to the catastrophic natural events that increasingly affect the territory, that are now becoming increasingly important because of the negative externalities that poor maintenance or abandonment produce on the more distant urban realities.

Small towns and cities therefore pose many complex issues for debate.

The new PNRR, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan, includes funds for the recovery of what are defined as minor historic centres, calling on bodies and administrations to respond with innovative projects and ideas for a plan to rehabilitate these places, as a resource of our country and a community asset to be safeguarded.

4. THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN URBAN AND NATURAL LANDSCAPE

The boundary between the natural landscape and the countryside is a very difficult subject and is treated with not a few prejudices. A true definition does not exist, but we could start from the etymological meaning of the word itself, which derives from the Latin adjective *confinis* 'bordering'[1]. Il significato può essere però anche inteso da un punto di vista geografico o politico, il confine geografico è, infatti la zona di transizione in cui scompaiono le caratteristiche individuanti di una regione e cominciano quelle differenzianti. In senso strettamente politico, è il confine inteso tra Stati/Regioni/Province/Comuni è il segno rappresentato da una linea stabilita per convenzione.

Ambedue i significati risultano molti interessanti per uno studio approfondito in quanto corrispondono, in parte, all'uso fornito anche in pianificazione soprattutto nell'utilizzo all'interno dei Piani Paesaggistici dove spesso vengono utilizzati per la definizione degli ambiti di paesaggio o, nei piani virtuosi, vanno a delimitare aree di paesaggio che sono definite però da un'unione omogenea tra vari tipi di confine ovvero derivanti da una lettura morfologica, identitaria del territorio e di tipo amministrativo.

Il territorio italiano con i suoi grandi conglomerati urbani delle città metropolitane spesso si affaccia su aree naturali e questo tipo di confine viene definito da coloro che studiano l'ecologia come corridoi ambientali o aree buffer da tutelare e salvaguardare.

Nei contesti della città-campagna il confine è più labile è quello che definisce il contesto periurbano dal paesaggio agrario. However, the meaning can also be understood from a geographical or political point of view: the geographical boundary is in fact the transition zone where the identifying characteristics of a region disappear and the differentiating ones begin. In a strictly political sense, the boundary between states/regions/provinces/municipalities is the sign represented by a line established by convention.

Both meanings are very interesting for an in-depth study because they correspond, in part, to the use provided also in planning especially in the use within the Landscape Plans where they are often used for the definition of the landscape areas or, in the virtuous plans, they go to delimit landscape areas which are defined however by a homogeneous union among various types of borders or deriving from a morphological reading, identity of the territory and administrative type.

The Italian territory with its large urban conglomerates of metropolitan cities often overlooks natural areas and this type of boundary is defined by those who study ecology as environmental corridors or buffer areas to be protected and safeguarded.

In the city-countryside contexts the boundary is more blurred and is that which defines the peri-urban context from the agricultural landscape.

It becomes even more complex in some of the smaller urban remnants of historic villages or hamlets where the border is often with nature reserves and protected areas.

It is certain that this border is fragile and at risk, and must be protected and safeguarded.

The transformation of the territory today is sudden and subject to continuous variables from a natural, urban and social point of view. Sustainable development aims to safeguard and protect, but also to expand and increase.

The border can therefore be the new challenge for marginal areas and minor historical centres, a link that becomes interconnection and exchange not only from an economic-social point of view but also from a natural point of view, and therefore, of sustainability.

A central role is played by future urban policies that will have to dictate parameters for safeguarding, protecting and expanding the natural boundary. One thinks of the issue of the continuing loss of biodiversity on planet earth, the lack of green lungs that are fundamental for the presence of living beings.

A first step has been taken with the introduction of necessary parameters at the planning level to include more nature in agricultural landscapes, rows of trees, and more green corridors on the edges of large cities, but all this is proving insufficient.

As time goes by, it will be necessary to modify our territory by inserting more and more buffer areas, and the challenge could be to start from the border between urban and natural.

5. REHABILITATE - NEW APPROACHES

The concept of rehabilitating is the basis, replacing the term planning, as the area no longer needs new projects but needs to renew and reformulate itself.

At local level, the new drive to recover the identity of places is trying to open up new horizons by developing territorial marketing projects.

The great turning point comes from digital technology, which through web developing exploits applications via smartphones and tablets to reach the general public and inform/train new 4.0 citizens. This has led to the emergence of new apps offering Community Labs to regenerate smaller historic centres, and apps enabling circular economics and promoting sustainability by purchasing trees to repopulate planet earth.

The digital environment remains a fundamental resource for educating the present and future generations, and together with the participation of professionals and organisations it is possible to create innovative urban regeneration circuits. The basis remains the inclusion and participation of the inhabitants of places as the main actors living the territory.

The boundary between urban landscape and natural landscape should be considered as a resource, expandable and reproducible on different scales and in different contexts. Promoting sustainable development parameters may have to do with a new model of expansion of the natural territory that permeates directly into the urban territory, a new 'revolution' that expands the boundary from urban to natural.

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