

Chapter 14

Postscript: Landscapes and Health as Representations of Cultural Diversity

Klaus Seeland

14.1 Introduction

Cultures are reflected by their varying representations in landscape and perception of nature. The perception and acceptance of shaping the landscape as spaces according to social needs and preferences in urban and in rural areas are important dimensions of identification and health and well-being of the population inhabiting these spaces for long. Wherever human beings live, they appropriate nature as culture (Seeland 1997), i.e. they are inevitably shaping landscapes in developing their own culture. This process is a practical and symbolical one. These perceptions, beliefs and values find their material and immaterial expressions in planning and preferences for certain elements such as forests, parks, or open landscapes. In processes of encoding and enciphering culture into landscape and its re-modelling from time to time due to new ideas and demands of its use and management. In order to understand these cultural key concepts, they have to be read and interpreted. Landscapes are thus representations of entire life-worlds and each of these cultural views reveals that natural surroundings can only be understood by deciphering the social essence which is represented in them. Therefore it requires keys to read and understand the various cultural landscapes of the world.

Landscapes are phenomena that include the natural, the social and the built environment in a state of constant shaping and re-shaping. They are dynamic configurations of many interests and actors working on and in them as a space in which political power and economic development aspirations matter. For instance, the transformation of pristine nature into agricultural land or the transformation of arable land into construction sites in the wake of the enlargement of the built environment through rapid urbanization are a representation of socio-cultural changes in the respective landscape. This happens within a range of cultural and biological diversity and the climatic limits of a distinct geographical region.

K. Seeland (✉)
Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH),
Institute for environmental decisions, Zurich, Switzerland
e-mail: klaus.seeland@env.ethz.ch

Landscapes indicate as well the political history and the material culture of a region. They represent the economic potential as well as the cultural character of their inhabitants, their humour, aesthetic taste and preferred life-styles. The assessment of these elements as core themes in landscape planning is fundamental to meet the expectations of various cultural groups and sections of the society in the future.

14.2 Landscapes and the Challenges of Modern Life Styles

Landscape aesthetics represent the cultural values of a region's residents and their economy and political institutions at a given time (Sheppard and Harshaw 2000). It generally depends on how people do actively interact with particular landscapes and whether the respective landscape is embedded into their social activities or vice versa. Perceiving landscapes as cultural metaphor for regional and national identity means, for instance, that lakes, mountains, forests, cities etc. make up a unique blend. High standards of publicly appreciated landscape beauty represent a high standard of emotional and cultural attachment that becomes visible in the landscape.

Plachter (1995) argues that there is no common ground of understanding of what a particular landscape means to whom. Just for the same reason one could say, landscape always remains something opaque which is impossible to grasp as there is a multitude of cultures and cultural legacies to be found in a larger space. A landscape reflects the social diversity in a common and thus unifying space. Social and distinct cultural values and aesthetics are exposed in landmarks of intrinsic quality which are reflected in the mood of the landscape and the impact it has on people, in which social norms of what is generally accepted and flavoured by local characteristics have shaped a visible whole. Any landscape is therefore a socio-cultural definition, a process by which diverse landscape phenomena are related to phenomena of a particular human life style and a code of conduct which perceive these phenomena as natural.

14.3 Close-to-Nature Landscapes as Cultural Constructions

Landscapes are social and cultural interpretations of nature and constructions of the human mind to define the position of human beings and their social institutions towards it. In this sense a landscape always denotes a social relationship between the landscape and the inhabitants. Such as the peasant has "his landscape" in mind when talking about landscape in general and the ecologist and the green activist may have an imagination of how it was or should be for future generations: landscape is the experience of surroundings which may physically be the same but are perceived by people in a different way. There are short-term and long-term aspects

in every landscape which are more or less prone to change within the live-time of three or four generations living together in the same era.

Where industrial mass production pushes aside small farmers and artisans, where city-life-styles become usual phenomena, wherever the insignia of civilisation spread, nature is claimed to be threatened and vanish. Technical progress, and this point of view is almost taken for granted, goes along with phenomena of de-naturalisation of the environment. The more the living standard improves, and this has as well since long become a common sense notion, the more polluted and the poorer in biodiversity nature becomes.

What does cultural construction mean in this context? Similar to societal change, which denotes the totality of continuous social action and development, cultural construction means the confirmation of what is generally claimed as cultural reality by all those who participate in public everyday life, being taken as representative for their culture. Norms such as aesthetics in nature and cultural heritage conservation are agreed upon in laws and regulations, referring to tradition and social conventions. These norms are based on assumptions and implicit meanings which are taken for granted. It can thus be widely taken for generally accepted today in economically advanced societies that closeness to nature is a common value in almost any modern industrial society in the world, whereas anything being far from nature or natural is perceived as less desirable. Whether they are productive or protected landscapes, whether they are managed or not, they have to look as if they were natural landscapes.

14.4 Culture, Recreation and Health and Well-Being

The strong and still increasing trend towards urbanisation meets the challenge to link urban upper middle class notions of what is perceived to be an appropriate life-style pattern for themselves with the amenities of high value peri-urban recreation areas, with a variety of sports facilities and entertainment parks, country restaurants etc. Good health and beauty is an important nexus between one's own body and mind and the spa landscape reflects this and promises to provide these values to its visitors. These values are communicated very much among the peer groups of the same or similar social strata and are important criteria for one's social self-esteem and an indicator to define one's social rank in society.

The regional identity and community ties are also derived from landscape characteristics providing those who live there with advantages (i.e. more sunny days, marvellous view, less noise, less smog or fog etc.) and respective admiration by others who live in less favoured areas. The prominent position of certain landscapes in comparison to others is a quality-of-life standard of high value. The fact that there is a socially relevant ranking of landscape qualities underlines the importance of perceptions and cultural preferences related to them in landscape planning. For the low and middle class sections of society who cannot afford housing sites in a predominantly green sub-urban or peri-urban location, cultural diversity of the

landscape matters substantially for their health and recreation. A recreation landscape therefore is a macro-economic benefit to the whole society as it potentially contributes to the maintenance of a good health status of the population and thus helps to reduce costs in the health sector.

14.5 Landscape and Diversity

Landscapes are principally characterized both by cultural diversity and biodiversity of its flora and fauna, by their smell, light intensity and sound and always unique configurations of this diversity. As similar landscapes may ever look, they are never the same. In an era of globalization where international standards of technology and consumer taste tend to prevail, diversity has become a rare quality and uniqueness a value in itself. Cultural diversity is a distinct configuration of cultural patterns which are designed purposively different from those of other cultures (Benedict 1989) with respect to the place where they are located. As geographical places are themselves distinct, cultures are likewise distinct from each other. Yet, assimilation and acculturation have been and are still happening ever since. To maintain cultural diversity is an even more delicate undertaking in a globalized world than it was in previous times of little or sporadic communication between cultures living in isolated places. Cultural identity is distinction from patterns of other cultures but also a response to the conditions of a unique place or habitat. As more cultures can inhabit one habitat but respond to it in culturally distinct ways, the question arises what makes cultures distinct from each other if it is not their habitat? This question has been discussed and was disputed for generations in environmental sciences (Milton 1996, p 106) Floating between environmental and cultural determinism, and finally uniting both approaches, this discourse of what is adapting to what has never really succeeded to solve this theoretical problem. The most convincing answer to this question is that cultures perceive, interpret and understand a landscape in different ways. May the physical facts of a landscape remain identical, their meaning and emotional qualities are differently perceived according to the cultural background on which they are reflected.

14.6 Cultural Diversity and Healthy Landscapes

Landscapes are ubiquitous phenomena. There is no place in the world without landscape. Analogous to this fact, health is a ubiquitous demand of humankind ever since and anywhere in the world. In the wake of a rapid urbanization throughout the world, no matter in whatever culture, green and healthy surroundings in an urban environment will become scarcer and less affordable for the urban masses. Linked to urban centres healthy surroundings are a luxury product and well-being cannot easily be satisfied by access to healthy but remote landscapes as the metropolises

and the mega cities are more of cityscapes than landscapes. Indoor oriented lifestyles and escape into the cyber-world of the electronic media and online realities will sooner or later dominate technologically advanced societies.

Landscapes outside the big cities are visited on weekends or on holidays by the city dwellers and the countryside is a metaphor of a romantic but no more authentic lifestyle for them. Landscapes are visited like open-air museums or sanatoriums by city dwellers. But what happens to the knowledge and wisdom, not to speak of the symbolic cultural value encoded in the landscapes that have become or are truly exotic in due course of time? Will nature and landscape education, i.e. to learn how to 'read' and interpret a landscape, follow environmental education one day? The alienation of post-industrial society from nature and landscape and their inherent meanings, which are more than health benefits and recreation, will then become a threat to culture itself. A society that cannot understand the meaning of its landscape anymore has lost its cultural legacy and no message in this respect to the future generations. Then the landscape will have become a remembered landscape and will be preserved at a stage of an era when society had withdrawn from using it actively and make a living from it. Landscape management will then be a realm of conservationists and either it will turn into a planned wilderness or maintained as a society's 'garden' with a substantial financial input, where landscape gardeners manage the aesthetic imagination of the past and not a primary productive sector as it was ever since.

In landscape architecture and therapy research landscapes and gardens have been found to have health properties and can be efficiently used for various forms of therapy (Burnett 1997; Gerlach-Spriggs et al. 1998; Sachs 2003; Tyson 1998; Ulrich 1979, 1986). Little attention, however, has hitherto been given by scientists as well as by administrators to the cultural dimension of landscapes and gardens which is an inherent quality, but has to be made explicit to assess the role of culture in landscape design and planning. The interconnectedness between plants, animals and humans is a constituent in the development of any culture and thus also a part of the medical history before and still after the advent of allopathic medicine.

The same phenomenon, according to recent research, applies to the healing properties of landscapes that are related to cultural perceptions and interpretations of their inherent healing potential for stress (Grahn and Stigsdotter 2003), Alzheimer disease, burnout syndrome, dementia, disabled, and elderly people in general. Comparative epidemiology shows that the extent and spreading of disease varies geographically and is largely influenced by the development status of a society. In post-industrial societies in which people have a remarkable distance towards natural life styles and primary production, landscape and garden therapy has therefore gained increasing importance during the past decades. Irrespective of the cultural background of the users they provide their services to those who are seeking recreation, relief from everyday hassles and recovery from diseases in landscapes. The user or spectator, or one can even say, the consumer of a landscape can feel and experience the cultural content in a landscape even if he cannot always detect and decipher its history and meaning. Thus, the cultural diversity of landscapes means enrichment in perception for alien visitors of how other cultures

express themselves in their surroundings. It is a chance for new experiences in the animal, plant and human world across one's own cultural boundary (Selin 2003). The unusual, the new which is encountered in a landscape, particularly if one expects a healthy effect from visiting it, may have unpredictable consequences on the landscape consumer, such as any cultural encounter. Whether a landscape reveals its healing properties to someone depends largely on a mutual responsiveness between the landscape character and the receptiveness of the person who thus represents the openness of a culture and its ability to absorb other messages encrypted in different landscapes. The unveiling of the encrypted landscapes by reading, interpreting and understanding them can be taken as an important factor for recovery, if not itself the very process of healing.

14.7 Conclusion

With a view on any landscape one is automatically confronted with cultural diversity for the reasons given above. The various value dimensions of landscapes, be it that they are given or achieved by transformation, contributed to the fact that the most prominent ones have been and are still declared world cultural heritage sites. All of them represent uniqueness under an overarching concept of appreciation of diversity. The attention that was given to culture in landscapes was since times immemorial partly an unconscious and partly a conscious development driven by the rise and decline of cultures. The cultural dynamics of modernization has led towards a standardized way of shaping the built environment in the cities all over the world. The landscape in the countryside has thus become more than ever a characteristic marker of cultural identity and national character.

The challenges to the physical and mental health of citizens living a modern life style have come along with economic development and are a widespread hazard to the future of post-industrial societies. In order to allow for a healthy environment an adequate landscape design has to care for what was previously a replication of an autonomous landscape design in more or less secluded regions over the ages.

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