Spatial planning for landscape; mapping the pitfalls or buttering the parsnips and avoiding the weeds

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In English we have a proverb “Fine words butter no parsnips”. Parsnips are root vegetables, very tasty and almost unknown in France. The proverb means that clever talking does not get the job done, and is particularly apposite to my talk here, because it takes us straight to the heart of the matter – not only land and landscape but food, and people working. Many years ago at the Conference at Blois which Landscape Research Group organised with Paysage + Aménagement, it became clear that the United Kingdom and France were both busy devising new methods of providing money for small-scale farm enterprises. The driving force in England was “fine landscape” and in France was “good food”.

Throughout Europe, and elsewhere, there have been many attempts to protect landscape by legislation, and similar devices often have very different names. What in Norway might be a Park Nasjonal might be a Parque Cultural in Spain, an écomusée in France, a Regional Museum in Russia or an Environmentally Sensitive Area in the United Kingdom.

I want to look at some of the problems which are the side effects of landscape legislation. I want to consider only for a few moments the problem of buttering the parsnips, but spend rather longer looking at the weeds that grow with the parsnips and how we might manage them. I am well aware that I am following a boring tradition of Englishry by being pragmatic and judging things by whether they work, rather than their logic. At conferences in England, I always yearn for French logic, but at conferences here, I do the practical thing.

And we do need to learn from each other, and quickly. It may not be necessary to use the same terminology, provided we learn the lessons. I believe that cultural landscapes are being designated so quickly across Europe that we are in imminent danger of having half of the continent designated as “outside current economics”. Both Britain and Germany are examples. We need to decide on the criteria we might use for making judgements about landscape legislation. What are we trying to achieve, and what are we trying to avoid?

There seems more agreement about the former than the latter. The maintenance and enhancement of the qualities of landscapes throughout the continent is quite a good start. Of course, we agree that this is a conservationist approach, and thus includes the possibility of improving landscapes, and not merely a preservationist approach. Also there is considerable agreement that the qualities are not only visual. Work by the team based at the Universidad Autonoma in Madrid has made it quite clear that the aural qualities of landscape are also of great human meaning, perhaps even greater than the visual. The mapping of Tranquility Zones has not proceeded very far in the United Kingdom, and I wonder who is ahead of us in that field? Olfactory qualities may also be significant although very little work has been done on this area. Back in the 1930’s, the English geographer Vaughan Cornish divided the landscape quite close to my home in Devon into three Zones of...
Fragrance. Nor am I going to forget “taste” and the French concept of terroir is very useful there – landscapes also taste.

Bourgogne is not just an area on a map, and Strasbourg has both geese and sausages.

Surely we are also now agreed that the Kantian aesthetics of detachment will not do in the landscape field, as Berleant has argued. Indeed I was careful not to use the word “aesthetic” in describing the qualities we were trying to promote. The aesthetics involved in judging landscapes are much more post-modern, concerned with meanings and values rather than absolutes inherent in the objects themselves. Those meanings then belong to a whole range of people, not merely an elite group of connoisseurs.

In landscape conservation, we will sadly be aware that very much of the most important elements in landscape are not conservable. John Constable, the English painter, said that the “sky was the chief organ of sentiment”, while many of the Dutch artists painted little but sea and sky. There is a real danger of “chasing after rainbows” in much landscape conservation.

Perhaps also we have, throughout Europe, developed an understanding that the protection and enhancement of the economic well-being of the inhabitants of the landscape is as important as the objects of the landscape itself, not only for their own benefit but also for visitors from outside. This recognises the fact that landscape is not only a view (landskaap) but also a place (Landschaft) with its own customs, as recently detailed by Olwig. The ancient Landschafts to which he refers are those of Frisia and Jutland, small legal tribal entities, largely self sufficient. So he sees Landschaft as essentially about custom and local control, and landscape as about external (usually national) control. This view of landscape, as a way of looking validated by external forces, by those who wish to control places, therefore, may not be something that a democratic Europe wishes to support at all. Although there may be the same frisson of the memento mori about the conservation of such landscapes as there is with the conservation of former palaces, whether Versailles, the Gartenreich in Germany, or monastic ruins in England.

One of the really exciting elements of heritage in the last decade has been the increased realisation that heritage is not a dreadful cost to be borne by society but a wonderful opportunity for economic regeneration – and not only tourist development. This realisation has been most obvious in its urban form – the regeneration of Glasgow was European Landscape Convention/Convention européenne du paysage only one of the successes of the European City of Culture programme. This use of conservation as the fundamental plank in economic regeneration now needs to be extended to the broader landscape. Many cultural landscapes are already foci for tourism, but the challenge is to become the central feature of a working place where tourism has a role within a more varied economy. So the landscape is not the empty and still countryside so beloved by modernist photographers, but a working place. It is the parsnips as well as the field.

I shall declare my incurable optimism by supposing that we are largely agreed about these desirable outcomes, but I now want to move on to consider how we should manage conflict, and how we should destroy the weeds that will inevitably emerge with any attempt at serious conservation. Recent work within the rapidly expanding area of Heritage Studies, immediately reminds us that all heritage is dissonant, as Graham Farclough has demonstrated. There are disputes between the various fields of heritage – between saving that butterfly and saving that archaeological ruin. Then
there are the conflicts between different stakeholders, between owners and governments, between scholars and tourists, between school parties and connoisseurs. And there are plenty of disputes between nations, between nations and regions, between local needs and European requirements. So there is no shortage of weeds to choke our emerging crop of parsnips.

The first weed is that of designation. By far the most common approach to conserving landscapes consists of designating those that are special, drawn on a map. But, in one sense, landscapes are not regions, they are views. There are plenty of cases, such as the Lincolnshire Wolds in England, where the hills are protected, but all the guidebooks will tell you that it is the wonderful view from the hills that is the chief attraction. But the view has no protection. We conserve the viewpoint and lose the view.

But designation has a more insidious problem. There are two sides to the lines. Every time we say “This is precious” we inevitably say “And this is not”. But this is not really the truth in this little continent of ours. When we were planning the Blois conference a decade ago, there was a debate between British and French as to what a “designed landscape” was. Did it include agricultural landscape? Eventually the only American in the group, David Lowenthal, reminded us that to American eyes, “All Europe is a Garden”. So what we really need is not some areas designated as special, but a system that recognises that all areas are differently special. There is nothing new in this. Vidal de la Blache stressed the importance of the French pays eighty years ago.

English Nature has recently produced a map of Natural Areas, and would like to move towards a system whereby each Natural Area has its own set of management guidelines. But neither lawyers nor developers are very enthusiastic. They like things simple – can I build my factory there or not? The Florence Convention recognises the need to cover all landscapes, but we are a long way short of developing the means to do it.

Arising from that problem, I want to ask “What about the banlieues?” Having edited Landscape Research for a decade, I became wearily aware that the vast preponderance of landscape research either concerned the rural countryside (especially non farmed hill country) or the inner cities, with their parks and urban spaces. The places where most of the people lived, the suburbs, were scarcely ever given serious consideration. Are these landscapes not cultural enough? If we are concerned about the amount of travel undertaken by all these people from the suburbs going to visit “proper” cultural landscapes, in their own country or abroad, perhaps the first action is to ensure that their perception of their own home areas is so ideal that no-one would want to leave. Designated special areas now carefully draw their lines to exclude the places where most people live. So we badly need a re-appraisal of the suburban landscape, and we may have to accept that the suburban landscape is the genuine expression of our globalising world, a landscape that represents the real culture of our time, much the same from one Galicia to the other, and the most important legacy we shall leave for our great-grandchildren to understand how we lived.

How do we keep Nature conserved? The arrival of the cultural landscape as an important element has been a great pleasure to me as a cultural geographer. Far too often, landscape conservation was confused with, or run by, nature conservation. But we must remember that all cultural landscapes have significant natural elements, not just the fauna and flora, but also the geology. I remember sending out a group of post-graduate students studying heritage conservation to look at various heritage sites. One student, a graduate biologist, was angry to be allocated to Exeter Cathedral as he
thought heritage concerned animals and plants. A few hours later he returned, really angry, because he discovered that Exeter Cathedral had the “best collection of lichens west of Bristol, and the architects were scraping them off!”. At the recent meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, English Nature made a plea for more countryside to be given over to housing, especially houses with large gardens. The future of several species would be much healthier in the hands of gardeners than of farmers. Conserving the church tower implies also conserving the bats inside it, the lichen on the wall and the falcon on top. How do we prevent gentrification, the best known of all my weeds? In northern Europe, it no longer causes any surprise that areas designated and conserved for their attractiveness soon become the property of comparatively wealthy migrants. A whole range of legal frameworks have tried to restrict this. In Exmoor National Park all new building is restricted to local people with local jobs. But if they wish to move on, ten years later, to a job in an expensive part of the country, they cannot then get a proper market price for their home. In any case, in these days of the internet, what constitutes a local job? In the Czech Republic the houses in the village of Hola_ovice, a world heritage site, now host mostly large cars with Prague number-plates, and several with Nürnberg or München number-plates, despite the ban on foreign ownership.

European Landscape Convention/Convention européenne du paysage In southern Europe, the flight from the land has been much more recent, and the return to it by the wealthy is only now beginning, but the problems will be similar. In many cases, the wealthy incomers will be foreign. The British and Dutch colonies in France or on the Spanish coast are only the best-known examples. If the move to protect cultural landscapes actually merely creates ghettos for the wealthy, we shall have a job justifying ourselves to local people. Every attempt to control this process needs to be carefully monitored and the results effectively promulgated throughout Europe. We need answers fast.

Then how do we protect landscape when it is claimed by different cultures? Many of our cultural landscapes are along borders, present or past. The Sˇumava/Bayerischerwald has quite different meanings to Czech visitors and to German visitors. In this case there are scarcely any inhabitants with a continuous family settlement in the area, and Czech scholars have advanced the idea of the central district with economic capital and the periphery with cultural capital. And here we are in Alsace! We cannot in Europe forget that much of our landscape was forged and changed as result of power struggles, whether between princes or between nations, or between regions. Belchite in Spain is a village protected in its ruinous state to commemorate its defence by nationalist villagers in the Civil War. The Austerlitz memorial near Brno is the intellectual cultural property of at least three nations. The poor Welsh are asked carefully to conserve their World Heritage Site of the castles built by the English to eradicate Welsh identity. But such cultural differences are not only international. In Northern Ireland there are two opposed cultural landscapes almost on every corner. I was recently taken to Solovetski, islands in the White Sea, where the Russian Orthodox church is busy restoring the cathedrals to magnificence, almost completely ignoring the use of this island and these buildings as the first great Gulag.

If we are agreed that we must enhance the economic lives of the local inhabitants, how do we stop them becoming “domestic pets”? The Sorbish people of Niederlausitz and the Spreewald now have their language and way of life carefully protected. So do the Sami of northern Norway, and in southern Italy they are now working on protection for the Greek speaking villages. But how easy is it for a Sami girl to graduate as a nuclear physicist? Or does such protection involve keeping a group of
people in cultural servitude to provide camera fodder for the tourists? In Bulgaria I believe there were villages maintained as living and working museums, where the people were simply not allowed to advance. A living history museum full of volunteers is very different from compulsion.

Planners must not assume that local inhabitants want to be a designated place – a growing number do not. We must recognise that many local people wish to be part of the real, modern, world, and that they would like a McDonalds, and a hypermarket. Local people on Dartmoor cannot use mobile phones because of the aesthetic problems of erecting masts. And local people do see things differently. One study in East Anglia, after the great gales which destroyed most of the forests, showed that the local people largely preferred the landscape without the trees!

Should we involve artists? Art seems to be commonly perceived as part of the solution in cultural landscapes that need an economic boost. I have worked for many years in an Art School, and quite close to Dartington, and I regret to say that art is more likely to be part of the problem despite some honourable attempts by, for example, Common Ground. Artists are the shock troops of the gentrification process. Most cultural committees are packed with Fine Art, Drama, Music and Literature, and agriculture finds it difficult to find a seat. At Pentedatillo in Calabria where the local Greek speaking inhabitants have already fled, then the plan to convert it to an art village may be viable. Similarly those carefully designed landscapes which we call gardens are sufficiently full of artifice that the artifice of art can be absorbed. But the “community” that is served by “community art” is very rarely that of the local inhabitants. Is a local custom or a local handicraft served well or ill by becoming an artform with all the metropolitan attention that involves? Is Guggenheim at Bilbao better than McDonalds, simply because the social class of the visitors is different? How do we allow our perceptions of cultural landscapes to change? Research on the landscapes painted by English artists was helpful in demonstrating one possible way of measuring the cultural significance of places. How many paintings were done of this place compared with that place? But it very clearly demonstrated that preferences change. The landscape that the mid-nineteenth century thought was wonderful has now been superseded by later tastes. The love of open moorland only dates from 1870 in England, earlier in France with the Barbizon painters. Nowadays artists concentrate on the extreme vernacular – the very opposite of a tidy hygienic, packaged and conserved cultural landscape. Culture now embraces the empty coke can, the broken greenhouse and the roll of old barbed wire and corrugated iron. Are we doomed to conserve the landscapes that we love, only to be damned by our grandchildren for having destroyed the ones that they come to love.

What do we owe to the rest of the world? Do we substitute the subsidies paid to farmers for growing crops a different subsidy in order to maintain the landscape (which is the British version) or to provide better traditionally produced food (which is the French version). Will these subsidies be any fairer on Africa than the present ones? Is the cost of protecting our cultural landscape a continuance of the protectionism that Group 21 so determinedly resisted during the World Trade Organisation meeting in Cancun?

And finally, what degree of environmental responsibility do we owe to the rest of the world and to our children? The carefully maintained landscape of the Waddensee has, European Landscape Convention/Convention européenne du paysage as its main local product, prawns. Everyday in the Bauernmarkt of the area you can buy fresh Waddensee prawns, caught yesterday. True, but last evening they were flown to Morocco to be peeled and returned in time for the market. Cultural
Landscapes may not be bio-diverse, and are not necessarily sustainable. Certainly special cultural landscapes that act as tourist magnets, such as many of the great gardens of Europe, here at Tivoli, must accept some responsibility for too much travel.

Honourable efforts by the National Trust in England to promote public transport have not been overwhelmingly successful.

So there are plenty of weeds in this field of parsnips. One I have not raised is authenticity. Most of us would love to find an entirely authentic cultural landscape somewhere in Europe, where the local people, quite unselfconsciously, continue their way of life. These days you can have authenticity, or you can have unself-consciousness. You cannot have both. The wonderfully authentic Norwegian farms, complete with transhumance, are run by people with at least one other job – almost certainly professional. In my own village, the characters in the pub are actually doctors, lawyers and professors quietly playing the part of locals.

Despite all the weeds, there have been some extraordinary success stories. In Britain the work of the National Trust (my own village is NT owned) is surely one. The Czech Village Restoration scheme, where the village itself determines the priorities for action, is another. Some of the best French écomusées – I am particularly fond of Lozère – Cévennes, with an extraordinary programme of animations. Also the regeneration of Versailles after the millennium storm is a lesson in a particular kind of cultural landscape.

We certainly need critical reviews, where neutral specialists write seriously critical reviews of cultural landscape developments against a tough set of priorities. Books, plays and films have to face harsh reviews, but very rarely those responsible for the landscape of our continent.