"Landscape is luxury": searching for images of sustainability

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space is luxury

Peter Ache, Mervi Ilmonen (Editors)

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"Landscape is luxury": Searching for Images of Sustainability

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Landscape can give an expressive form to ecological processes, give a vision for "green" policies and plans, and allow the public at large to understand what is at stake. Because most territorial changes are planned on the basis of various forms of representations and rendering, the power of images has grown more and more. What images of change are planners and designers putting forward? Are these images able to represent innovative scenarios of sustainability? The paper presents some case studies.

The landscape is close to the way in which people perceive their own living environment, so it can be a powerful visioning tool for participatory democracy. It is proposed that the landscape debate should be re-oriented, from the prevailing attention paid to the identity, as an heritage of the past, to a stronger focus on the "aspirations of the public" (European Landscape Convention) and to the creation of new landscape identities.

The power of landscape images and the "green methaphor"

The relationship between territory and landscape has been reversed: the latter is no longer a byproduct of the former, indeed the image of landscape precedes the territory, which can be shaped to reflect our preferred rendering. We have passed from the domestication of nature to its simulation (Raffestin, 2005). Because by now almost all of the manmade environment is the result of planning and design, those who propose images of transformation have an enormous responsibility. What images of change do designers propose? Do they reflect ideals of sustainability, other socially shared ideals, or are they merely the fantasies of a professional elite?

The growing popularity of the term landscape would appear to spring from a demand for "global" answers. What, indeed, does landscape offer, other than the concepts of environment, of territory, of the city? A representation. The illusion of reassembling the fragments of objects and activities that today's schizophrenia has sundered; the chance to construct a story, a narration of our history, and of our future. The ability to

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reflect, the esthetic and emotional dimension, the relationship with common perceptions and experience, which is also the ability to share something with others.

Environmental issues, images of endangered nature, regions devastated by the hand of man: all now occupy a significant space in the collective imagination. Among the possible "ideals" that landscape design can seek to express, there is thus the environmental sustainability of settlements. There can be no doubt that this is an ideal shared by the international community, though it now seems a bit time-worn, little more than a bureaucratic formula, to which every new project is obliged to give lip service, but does not necessarily believe. In landscape planning, moreover, the question of environmental sustainability is nothing if not delicate, as it stirs the tensions between the concept of landscape as ecosystem, and the concept of landscape as representation. It is from the latter that we take our cue.

What does an environmentally sustainable contemporary landscape look like? Despite the possible variety, as demonstrated by traditional landscapes regarded as being sufficiently in equilibrium with natural resources, the image that springs first to mind is that of a lush green place. For many people, the idea of sustainable landscape evokes strictly traditionalist archetypes, like the self-sufficient village whose inhabitants can go everywhere on foot, but brought up to date with bio-building, energy independence and maybe even growing one's own food. The press will occasionally report a rare exemplification of this model in Nordic villages or sparsely populated areas. It is unlikely that images of urban or metropolitan landscapes will come to mind.

Project for a Biotower for city farming (from the site www.verticalfarm.com) (SOA Architects)

This utopia, however, is far from the everyday experience of most of the world's population, and the realization that environmental problems such as diminishing resources and climate change would appear to be moving us towards scenarios of innovation where technology trumps green: new forms of energy generation, bioclimatic construction, "alternative" and collective forms of transport, waste treatment systems, and methods for saving and storing water are a few of the factors that will change the shape of our cities and towns, while other technologies affect rural landscapes. And so we are seeing new proposals, like using "bio-towers" to farm in cities (dubbed "vertical farming"), or, more simply, guaranteeing greenery even for

people who life in skyscrapers through "vertical forests". Consequently, our "sustainable" city landscape is as likely to grow upwards as outwards.

Landscape solutions to more specific environmental questions are no less contradictory. Take, for instance, energy production: what can we say about setting up wind farms in the Italian countryside, or installing photovoltaic solar systems in the "roofscapes" of our historic cities? For some time now, there have been attempts to develop an esthetic for energy landscapes, and to win acceptance on the part of the community. But even greener policies can have significant impacts on the landscape: for example, urban forestation, which involves creating forested belts fulfilling an ecological function, means canceling the existing agricultural landscape. These are only two examples of the possible contradictions between the content and image of environmental policies. Measures that seem to be the thing to do but do not "look good", contradictions between ethical sense and esthetic habits, between the needs of the landscape and the needs of the environment, which emerge every day in the chronicles of territorial transformation.

But we can also see the opposite phenomenon at work in the relationship between ecology and esthetics: the "green-washing" of high environmental impact projects, where the drawings depict greenery shielding buildings, production areas and shopping centers from view, and flower beds bordering the new infrastructures. But the ornamental effect masks the irremediable consumption of land, water and energy. And finally, we have projects where nature is reduced to mere symbol: the new artificial islands shaped like palm trees (Arab Emirates), or tulips (the Netherlands). The new landscapes that result are an artificial product, artificially maintained, but one that plays with stereotyped and globalized "green images".

Project of a Tulip Island for windfarms in Netherland (Innovatieplatform, 2007-09)

In the hybridization between architecture, urban planning and landscaping, there are as many reasons for fascination as there are for worry. Other ambiguous alliances contribute, like those between landscape and ecology, or between landscape and greenery. The urgency of environmental issues calls for greater caution, and points to new types of content for urban and regional projects, but there is a dearth of images capable of

giving shape to the myth of sustainability, of offering a vision, of alluding both to a target content and a new form of landscape.

Success stories

Experiments in sustainable settlements are under way around the world, with sizes ranging from that of the single neighborhood, to the cities for millions of inhabitants planned in China. In Great Britain, the government has launched a program for ten new "Eco-towns". The program has not been as well received as was hoped, and was thus scaled down after the impact assessment and public consultation. The ecological aspect of the program has been widely criticized, chiefly because the model involves a rather low housing density, and hence a larger consumption of land than the alternative of increasing the density of existing settlements. A clear feature of the program is its reliance on housing models that can be regarded as traditional – stylistically, at least – in order to attract the market. Judging, however, from the stiff opposition mobilized against the program, the image of the traditional British garden suburb, freshly enlivened with porticoed squares lined with shops, is not perhaps strong enough to draw a new community around a shared project. In any case, the program is still at the beginning.

In the meantime, a few consideration are in order concerning proposals that have enjoyed a greater critical success. One is the Internationale Bauausstellung Fürst-Pückler-Land 2000-2010 initiative, a landscape program concerning a former mining district extending over 80x100 kilometers. Using the traces of the area's industrial past, topography and waterworks, eight artificial lakes have transformed it into Europe's largest water park, provided with recreational facilities and vacation accommodation. The landscape is also the mirror – or the mirage – of a new economic and social system, and thus holds out hope for the local community.

Internationale Bauausstellung Fürst-Pückler-Land 2000-2010, views of the region, of the mining landscape, and of the project (www.iba-see.de)

Creating landscape can be a way of implementing environmental policies together with social policies: another such case is PlaNYC2030, the sustainability plan for the City of New York. In this case the area involved is one of the most densely populated metropolises on the planet. The part of the plan that deals with urban landscape is not limited to considerations regarding the environmental function of green space, but concentrates on its social functions, on the wellbeing it brings to individuals and groups, and to pursuing the goal of providing every inhabitant with a park no more than ten minutes' walk from home, reclaiming undeveloped sites to create parks and public plazas in neighborhoods that do not have such facilities, opening schoolyards as public playgrounds after school hours, and planting trees wherever possible. There is an extraordinary shift in scale between the complexity of the metropolitan ecosystem and the size of the sites targeted by the plan, which though individually small are spread across the entire city. An interesting aspect is the role assigned to public participation. One of the programs that has attracted most attention is MillionTreesNYC, whose aim is to plant one million trees over the next decade: inhabitants can indicate streets and other public or private spaces where they would like trees to be planted, help with the planting, or make donations to the project. A greener city is a shared dream that stimulates the collective construction of the urban landscape.

It will be noted that the landscape is not at the center of attention in these projects. In fact, it is only a means: the mental picture of a better world. And is this not its most authentic nature? A greener planet, taken care of personally by each of its inhabitants, as in the celebrated metaphor of the "jardin planétaire" (Clément 1999).

Landscape visions as tools for public participation

In these last examples, "creating landscape" is not the same as landscaping. It is a process whose formal outcome is not predetermined, more like spontaneous morphogenetic processes or forms of strategic
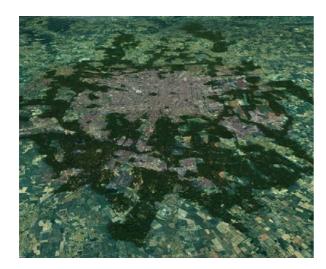
planning. We must now return to our initial question regarding the designer's specific activity and the images constructed, a question which also hinges on esthetics.

In the landscaping debate, after years in which ecology was at the center of attention, esthetics is once again a topic of discussion: now, the emphasis is on the potential relationships and synergies between esthetics and ecology. Considering ecology as only a technique, using form to highlight natural processes, are proposals that were advanced more than a decade ago, but have recently been theorized in a manifesto: the manifesto for "Sustaining Beauty" (Meyer 2008). Beauty is to become a vehicle for raising awareness of the environment: "the experience of designed landscape as tool for sustainability". Esthetics, in accordance with contemporary ecology, must be rooted, not in the concept of harmony as in the past, but on those of resilience against disturbances, dynamic adaptation and process. A similar idea emerged during the last European Landscape Biennial (Barcelona, September 25-27, 2008): if the major social concern of our time is the loss of nature, the culture of the landscape must reassess emotion as a key for accessing nature.

Thus, landscaping culture's answer to the appropriation of the term landscape by many architects, for whom it is chiefly a stylistic factor, has been to return landscape to its meaning as a quest for emotion and beauty, as managing processes and flows of matter and information (the opposite of the culture of design), with a renewed sense of nature that takes phenomena at different scales into account.

In reality, many forms of planning do not permit formal control over their outcomes (landscape planning itself is far from able to do so). Urban planners' forecasts, moreover, lag continually behind the curve of economic and social dynamics… In these cases, one might say, there is nothing we can do. Except trying to influence the ideals and imagination that move the market and its operators, promoting and disseminating innovative visions. The esthetic question, then, is crucial, if it becomes intersubjective experience, capable of representing hopes and aspirations, creating models, orienting collective action and improving, through the quality of the landscape, the quality of the territory, including that which is constructed without landscape designers. We must find images that can stimulate processes of visioning and democratic participation in planning the territory and landscape. A form of strategic landscape planning, where images of the landscape serve to make the public understand the possible scenarios of change, and the effects that decisions will have on their "living environment" (as the term is used by the European Landscape Convention) and, finally, on the environment in the broader sense. See, for example, the Greenpeace's project "Photoclima", concerning the climate change scenarios.

The landscape can thus be a powerful tool for participatory democracy, because it is the way people perceive their environment. Landscape has already been used in visioning experiments, including those that involve planning for entire regions prefiguring alternative landscape scenarios can make the stakes involved understandable to the public at large, creating new visions and guiding collective action.

"Metrobosco" [Metro-wood], a green vision for Milan metropolitan Area (Politechnic of Milan, from the site www.metrobosco.it)

Simulation of climate change scenarios: "Río Ebro as it flows through Saragossa"; "After few decades with no action taken on climate change." From: P. Almestre e M. Goméz, Photoclima (Greanpeace 2007)

The "prospective" identity, a new hypothesis for the landscape planning

This, however, calls for a change in perspective. In Europe, as in the United States, the relationship between the public and the landscape has long been investigated in terms of personal and collective memory and perception. "Landscape and memory" form a particularly effective duo. Thus, in the European Landscape Convention's call to approach landscape polices with attention to the public's values and aspirations, the

focus has until now been chiefly on the first of these two factors, giving emphasis and space to the search for local identity, with less of an eye to the "aspirations" and the methods for investigating them.

This conception, though entirely legitimate, is limited in the situations where the important thing is not so much to conserve existing qualities, as to solve knotty problems or promote the creation of new elements of value: in those that for convenience we can call "ordinary landscapes", the traces of history are reduced to shreds and tatters, and instead of a community rooted in the area, we have rather recent, mobile social groups. Without denying the possibility that a "sense of place" exists and can be passed on, it seems more likely that it arises as a result of ongoing changes rather than from the legacy of the past (Cassatella 2008).

If the widespread desire for landscape, in fact, is not simply desire for roots, but is a desire for beauty and meaning, the role of landscape in designing and creating new living environments is that of offering a new form of legend for a public that cannot identify itself in a common past, but can do so in a shared future, in a project scenario. Communities form and bond when faced with impending changes, often because of their opposition to them (e.g., when mobilizing against "threats" to their landscape), but also when they espouse common goals. Innovative landscape scenarios can be useful in redeeming "ordinary" areas if, rather than seeking an identity in the past, we concentrate more on the public's aspirations, aiming for a "prospective identification", in a radically new common future.

The choice of a place to live, no longer bound by the ties of land ownership, is freer than in the past, but precisely for this reason, its quality (environmental and in terms of perception, as well as functional) is an important factor. The added value of the landscape plan or project is the strategic dimension and the satisfaction of esthetic needs. Naturally, there are no universally valid images, only local answers to the questions and general aims we have discussed.

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