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## Rural–urban conflicts and opportunities

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### Abstract

Two forces are apparent in the actual changes of the landscapes, polarization between intensification and extensification and the distinction between urban and rural becoming diffuse and fuzzy. Processes related to urbanization continue to extend and affect even the remotest small village. More and more people living in the countryside use values similar to the ones of the urbanites. Changing landscape structures induce new functionality, as well as conflicts with the current land use. In particular in the highly dynamic and complex suburban fringe, conflicting evaluations are debating every single piece of the strongly fragmented land. Problems involved with the multifunctional use of small spaces are manifold but also offer new opportunities.

The perception and valuing of the landscape is in a fast transition. Different societal groups are forcing to make their values ‘hard’ in rules and legislation. The most widely used and effective technique is to become the owner of the land. Protection and controlling access are intimately linked. The diversity and identity of the cultural landscapes are considered as common, collective-heritage values, characterizing Europe. In many countries of Europe only fragments remain of these typical traditional landscapes. The central question becomes what use to make of traditional cultural landscapes that are no longer functional? How to assess their intrinsic values in relation to their changing spatial context and changing valuation system? Creative, long-term and holistic visions of the future of our landscapes are needed.

**Keywords:** urban–rural relationship; urbanized landscapes; Europe

### Introduction

This essay presents some topics for discussion at the Frontis Workshop on New European landscapes in 2002. Conflicts at the interface between urban and rural are only one of the many aspects in the overall actual landscape changes. Much of the current landscape transformations are the result of changing relationship between an urban and rural way of life and their related forms of land organization. Most of the driving forces nowadays have also a globalizing component which increasingly influences local changes.

The growing pace and scale of landscape changes can be observed in all regions and in any landscape type (Klijn and Vos 2000). Certainly since the Dobriš Assessment on Europe’s environment (Stanners and Bourdeau 1995), landscapes were put internationally on the agenda, although more local warnings about the

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deterioration of the cultural landscapes were given earlier. Many researchers in Europe became aware of the growing challenge when trying to preserve any kind of traditional landscape value (Nohl 2001; Holdaway and Smart 2001; Austad 2000; Wascher 2000; Wascher and Jongman 2000; Green 2000; Pedroli 2000; Antrop 1997; Meeus, Wijermans and Vroom 1990).

This essay discusses first some important processes and characteristics of the transformation of landscapes which are caused by the changing urban–rural relationship. Second, a provisory classification of conflicts and opportunities of this relationship is presented for four different landscape domains.

## **Characteristics of the changing urban–rural relationship**

### **Polarization**

A general polarisation between intensification and extensification of the use of the land can be noticed. There is a continuing concentration of people and activities in rather small, highly intensive and densely crowded areas, while vast areas of land become disaffected or even abandoned. The degree of urbanization in many European countries, expressed as the percentage of the population living in urban places, exceeds 80% and seems to stabilize between 80% and 90% (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (HABITAT) 1996; 2001). Although the population growth is generally decreasing, cities and towns are still slightly growing, while the rural population is decreasing rapidly. An annual loss of 1.5% in rural population is expected in these more developed regions (Frey and Zimmer 2001). The concentration of the population implies also a concentration of activities and their necessary infrastructure. The centres of most of the historic cities and towns in Europe are completely embedded in vast urbanized areas. Many different forms can be distinguished of the spatial organization of these functional urban areas and different types of urban and ‘rurban’ landscapes can be recognized. Also, new urban centres for tourism and recreation develop amidst pure natural or rural environment, presenting extreme transitions in landscape type at short distances.

These changes are gradual but result in an irreversible transformation of the landscapes, both near the growing urban centres and in the countryside. Vast areas that are situated in the periphery regarding to the urban core areas, have an important and ongoing decrease of their population even beyond levels that are necessary for maintaining the cultural landscape. Consequently, an extensification of the land use is carried out and many traditional functions vanish. Characteristic is the forestation in small patches on former fields and meadows. The number of farms decreases, the ones left extend and compensate the lack of labour forces through extreme mechanization, which also contributes to profound changes of the land cover and the landscape. Finally, new functions are introduced aiming to revitalize the rural villages. Non-farming residents are attracted as well as tourism and recreation. Industrial development is mainly not soil-bound and its success largely depends upon the accessibility of the place.

Vos and Klijn (2000) recognize the following trends of the transformation of the European landscapes:

- the intensification and increase of scale of the agricultural production transforms wetlands and natural areas into agricultural land are likely to occur particularly in densely inhabited areas;
- the urban sprawl, the growth of infrastructures and functional urbanization;

- specific tourist and recreational forms of land use that still develop at an accelerating speed in coastal and mountainous regions;
- the extensification of land use and land abandonment that is likely to continue to affect remote rural areas with less favourable and declining social and economic conditions and poor accessibility.

Wood and Handley (2001) evaluate the occurring functions in different landscape domains, such as coastal areas, lowlands and uplands. Dysfunction occurs when the chosen land-use forms are not adapted to the physical land capabilities or to the geographical location and context. Loss of function may occur after a while and the land use gradually becomes disaffected. This evaluation is used in the selection of the appropriate strategy for landscape management, conservation, restoration or creation of new landscapes.

In this process of polarization most of the former traditional landscapes with their heritage values are vanishing (Fry et al. 2001; Austad 2000) or lose their identity (Pedroli 2000) both in the urbanized core areas and in the peripheral countryside.

### **Fuzziness**

The distinction between urban and rural becomes diffuse and fuzzy. This is most clear in the urban fringes of the large urban agglomerations. The urban fringe or suburban landscapes are characterized by a wide variety of land uses, creating a complex and diverse landscape consisting of a highly fragmented mosaic of different forms of land cover and a dense transport infrastructure (Antrop and Van Eetvelde 2000). Urbanized landscapes are highly dynamical and multifunctional. A multiplicity of new landscape functions can coexist in a more or less unrelated manner (Nohl 2001). ‘Park cities’ emerge as well as neo-rural functions (Gulinck 2001), which might offer new opportunities for employment (Errington 2001). Brandt and Tress (2000) summarized opportunities and problems related to multifunctional landscapes in research and in planning.

However, as the urbanization processes continue to extend they affect even the remotest small village (Brandt, Holmes and Skriver 2001; Van Eetvelde and Antrop 2001). More and more people living in the countryside have habits and use values similar to the ones of the urbanites. Around the 1970s the counter-urbanization led to a reversal of the migration and slowed down the population decline in the countryside (Antrop 2000a; Champion 2001). At a lower scale, new functions are introduced, which gradually change the traditional morphology of the settlement. The characteristic signs are the changes in the domestic space of the newcomers (Paquette and Domon 2001). The domestic space relates to the architectural renovation and the adjacent outdoor space. It reflects the interaction, vision and values of the residents with their neighbours and the surrounding landscape. In many cases a growing individualism and loss of communalism in rural villages can be noticed (Belayew 2002).

In addition, the already fuzzy transition between urban and rural is highly dynamic and borders are seldom stable (Frey and Zimmer 2001). Consequently, census data collected on the basis of administrative districts are rarely up-to-date and poorly represent the real situation in the landscape; thus uncertainty when dealing with these areas is increased even more.

### **Accessibility and mobility**

Urban centres are linked by multi-modal and dense communication networks. Good accessibility is the most prominent factor in successful economic development.

Regions with a dense pattern of cities such as in north-western Europe develop complex urban networks. The rural countryside is heavily fragmented by urban sprawl and road infrastructures. Networks and corridors act as urbanization zones (Hidding and Teunissen 2002). However, congestion causes increasing mobility problems and initiates a shift towards more areas in the periphery, which gradually become more attractive with respect to time-accessibility. Thus, an increasing number of edge cities and exurbs is emerging (Stern and Marsh 1997). In the countryside, accessibility determines revitalization of villages or decline and land abandonment. Fast access of remote areas is also the premise of potential urbanization.

Also, up-scaling and economic rationalization of agriculture, forestry and nature conservation leads to a decrease of accessibility in the countryside by non-motorized users (Højring 2002).

### **Where is the genius loci?**

Landscapes consist of places and places have a strong existential meaning. Landscapes contain the memory of the history of the land (Muir 2000). Lowenthal (1997) recognizes the following new meanings for rural landscapes:

- Landscape as ecological paradigm
- Landscape as the rightful realm of all
- Landscape as collective identity
- Landscape as art
- Landscape as heritage.

These all refer to the countryside as something stable, enduring and not superficial. Rural landscapes can be seen as '*lieux de mémoire*', the roots of collective memory (Lowenthal 1997). These ideas also form basic concepts developed in the later Dornach paper (The Dornach landscape document: get connected to your place! 2000) and the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe 2000). New landscape elements and structures, looking all alike, emerge and show no link with the specificity of the place. Gradually, the history and memory of the place are erased and the genius loci is lost (Antrop 2000b). When the break with the past is achieved, seldom a new distinct identity is realized. New landscapes are often experienced as alienated (Vos and Klijn 2000; Kolen and Lemaire 1999).

### **What about the scenery?**

As the visual boundaries of a landscape are not limited by legal property boundaries or a project area, scenic values refer to a much wider scale than the land qualities of an area under consideration (Preece 1991). Consequently, scenic qualities refer to a wider scale than the land qualities and contain multiple functions. Aesthetic values of landscape depend upon the scenic qualities as well as cognition, previous experiences and utilitarian assessment. Often a strong symbolic value is associated with historic monuments or spectacular sites (Coeterier 2002). Although active landscape design and landscaping have been common practices since the great schools of gardening, the scenic aspects are often considered only as an additional and fortunate value (Preece 1991). The visual quality of the landscape site can be a valuable criterion in the assessment of a residential site, in particular for urbanites moving into the countryside (Paquette and Domon 2001). New elements and forms of land use in multifunctional patterns can encroach upon the contextual values of existing landmarks and heritage values (Nohl 2001). However, landscape changes become accepted slowly and landscape perceptions are found to be stable (Palmer 1997). The *assessment* of visual and aesthetic qualities of the landscape can be

differentiated from the *valuation* of these qualities. Qualities encompass material utilities as well as spiritual and symbolic needs, such as the *genius loci*. A lot of research has been realized in this domain (see Daniel 2001 for a synopsis). The human consumer (the eye of the beholder) has an important role in decision-making related to the organization of the land and thus the shaping of the landscape. Thus, visual landscape assessment became an important aspect in environmental management and spatial planning and policy (Daniel 2001).

### **Imposing or incentives?**

The landscape is much broader and holistic than a piece of land and many actors with very different interests are involved in its maintenance. Consequently, landscape is much more difficult to take care of and to manage than land. Landscape protection as a legal instrument for preserving natural and cultural valuable sites or areas started in the 19th century when the devastating impacts of industrialization and the related urban growth became apparent. The solution was straightforward: sites and areas were listed and classified and restrictions for their use were imposed upon the owners (Van Hoorick 2000). The approach was repressive and became increasingly criticized. A top-down policy for protection and conservation of valuable landscapes proved to be difficult and inefficient. Actual changes in the environment are faster than the procedures for protection and planning. Also, monitoring and enforcement of the decisions taken are lacking. Gradually, new strategies for landscape conservation and management emerged. The European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe 2000) is a good example of this new approach. Raising a general awareness of the ecological and cultural values of the traditional landscape is promoted as an important task. Participatory planning and management and a broad spectrum of incentives, including financial ones, are proposed to be introduced in all policy sectors involved. Although international co-ordination is on the top of the list, no concrete initiatives are given yet.

### **Conflicts and opportunities**

Four domains on the polarized axis between city and countryside can be distinguished as a basis for the development of the future of urban and rural landscapes. These are:

1. the urban centre
2. the (sub)urban fringe
3. the rural countryside of the urban network
4. the 'deep', remote rural countryside.

In each of these domains driving forces of accessibility, urbanization and globalizing forces are active in different ways. Conflicts and opportunities change accordingly. The structural and functional properties for each of these four domains are summarized in Table 1 and the typical conflicts and opportunities in Table 2. These lists are certainly not exhaustive, but show already the conflicts and opportunities that exist in a very different way in the four landscape domains. This suggests that different strategies should be developed for each of them. Landscape research and planning should not be restricted to the un-built rural areas alone and landscape ecological principles should be applied as well in city planning.

Table 1. Structural and functional properties of the new urbanized landscapes

	Landscape structure	Functioning
Urban centre	Historic centres are revitalized with more open space, greenways, 'nature' and water. Increased landscape diversity and qualities.	Highly dynamic; increasing problems of mobility and accessibility. Focus upon administrative, commercial, financial, cultural and tourist functions.
Urban fringe	Poly-nuclei agglomeration and renewed segregation; 'Lobe-cities' and emergence of edge cities. Waterways are only small green corridors. Estate parks form green patches in the built-up area. Loss of ecological, historical and aesthetic landscape qualities. Often no distinct identity of the place.	Residential function is dominant. Outer fringe/interface with the rural: attraction of industrial, commercial and high-tech activities in well disclosed areas with easy and fast access at the outer fringe.
The rural countryside of the urban network	Highly fragmented and heterogeneous open space: 'rurban' landscapes, 'neo-ruralism'. Dense network of infrastructures and effects of 'urban shadow' allowing green veins ('green fingers') into the urban tissue.	Intensification and diversification of land use; increasingly multifunctional landscapes.
The 'deep' rural	Traditional village centres transform (expand, explode, differentiate etc.); emergence of exurbs. Zonal mosaics in a highly forested but patchy territory.	Functional urbanization with minimal services. Residential or tourist/recreational activities embedded in farms and agricultural and forested land. Extensification of land use; reforestation, up-scaling of agriculture.

Table 2. Conflicts and opportunities in the four domains of the new urbanized landscapes

	Conflicts	Opportunities
Urban centre	Environmental conditions, social disturbances (crime etc...), traffic congestion, lack of open spaces and green spaces.	Focus on more high-quality residential environments (waterfronts, old industrial sites, etc...) as existing spaces suitable for renovation.
Urban fringe	Increasing social segregation, generation breaks and degrading environmental and housing qualities; increasing traffic congestion.	Growing multifunction small-scale mix of activities with potential synergies. More fuzzy and complex edges between urban and rural seem to stimulate ecological and economic diversification of farming, forestry etc.
The rural countryside of the urban network	Growing dependency of the rural countryside upon urban needs; loss of identity and landscape qualities. Severe fragmentation and many barriers.	New forms of 'rurban' agriculture, park-forests and 'new nature' with intensive use by urbanites. New functional urban areas absorbing urbanization pressure. Still many qualities that can be preserved and integrated in the urban shadow zones.
The 'deep' rural	Minimal social subsistence conditions. Conflicts between newcomers ('urbanites') and locals. Homogenization of the landscape.	Vast open spaces with high natural and ecological potential still existing.

## Conclusions

The changing urban–rural interface has become a general key factor in all landscape dynamics. It is not restricted to the suburban fringe of the large cities, but acts through the open spaces in the urban networks and affects even remote villages in the deep rural countryside. It is part of the general trend of polarization in our modern landscapes. The transition starts as functional changes which gradually change landscape morphology and structure and finally also landscape values. These encompass utilitarian economic values, ecological, cultural and historical ones. Important symbolic and existential meanings are involved as well, which are often reflected in scenic values and landscape perceptions. A holistic and transdisciplinary approach to landscape research and planning is needed to handle the actual landscape transformations adequately.

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