

## The European Landscape as a Task : Understanding the Past, Engaging in the Present, Living the Future?

Cultivating Continuity of the European Landscape: New Challenges, Innovative Perspectives

Pedroli, Bas

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# Chapter 57

## The European Landscape as a Task: Understanding the Past, Engaging in the Present, Living the Future?



Bas Pedroli

**Abstract** Landscape stories based on memories and dreams are essential means to realise how we identify with our landscapes and with what makes up the value of its past. However, the ever more dominating global market orientation of the agricultural sector (and of the many other policy sectors impacting landscape development) makes the European landscape undergo serious and at times radical changes. Landscape change is normal, but it can work out very detrimental if it has not been consciously envisaged. Engaging in today's landscape and in the functions it can have for society is a precondition for a living landscape. Such engagement will not come from policy. Engaging means getting involved, based on shared interests, using local as well as scientific knowledge and paying respect to the land managers of today and to the unique character of the landscape. If we manage, we can responsibly live the future of the European landscape.

### 57.1 Understanding the Past: About Memories and Dreams

Landscape is something most people do not think about, it is just there. Sometimes you remember its features, smells and atmosphere when you recall a nice holiday or a remarkable picnic shared with dear people in the countryside. Of course, we take loads of pictures of landscapes, but that is not landscape, it is just pictures. The landscape is in our memory, and is characterised by odours, sounds and colours and by warm or cold feelings rather than by pixels.

Still, when asking people for their favourite landscape they will immediately start thinking of beautiful landscapes: romantic mountain valleys, wide views or enchanting forests. And they will start sketching them in words and feelings. Landscapes are as stories (Box 57.1, from Pedroli (2020, pp. 42–43)).

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B. Pedroli (✉)

Land Use Planning Group, Wageningen University, Wageningen, The Netherlands  
e-mail: [bas.pedroli@wur.nl](mailto:bas.pedroli@wur.nl)

JustLandscape, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Consciously dreaming away in a landscape—be it on-site or in memory—you can experience a great deal of its essential features. One could call this way of observing the landscape with all of the senses, active wondering. It provides a dynamic picture, perhaps more real than the factual landscape (cfr. Jacobs (2006)).

### **Box 57.1: Home**

The silvery spots on the grey lake seem to glow. The landscape breathes silence. Clouds hang motionless around the intense green hills on the other side of the water. On a small peninsula a simple chapel. I walk there. Royal fern and fragrant gale along the banks. From the loosely stacked thick slates of the ancient wall around the churchyard, oak ferns and lilac foxgloves grow, patches of moss hang down. Many graves bear Irish crosses. There is a shrine against the wall. The inscription tells Saint Finbarr is buried here. He lived here as a hermit in the sixth century. He then moved downstream along the River Lee to the coast, where he founded Cork.

Later, I walk a coast path near Cork. The ocean swell creates raging surf and foaming swirls of seawater between the jagged rocks. In the hazy distance lie low islands under a grey sky. Every now and then a ray of sun lights up some rocks close by, covered with rust brown and light grey lichens where the sea water no longer reaches. The vegetation begins a little higher, on the edge of the open agricultural landscape. I suddenly realise that it is already June. Everywhere the pink flower heads of thrift swing back and forth. There are many yellow and white flowers and even the heather is already blooming here and there.

Terry says he has made maps of the environment with people from his village, just as far as they perceive a connection with it. Such ‘landscape circles’ help to actively experience the landscape again, and also to discover the ‘uninhabited’ places. Nature easily takes over from people here. But even in the midst of these primal natural forces, inhabitants have always created their place. It was not for nothing that they brought Finbarr back to the spot where he had seen God’s greatness reflected in the lake, and in the mountains his monastery. Landscape is where we can feel at home.

Landscapes evolve. When you return to a landscape, or start making study of it through maps and literature, it will change its appearance. Often this is a little disappointing, because in the meantime it had evolved in your memory as much more beautiful and complete than it could be out there, more like the great landscape paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Moreover, there are always reasons for decline in their perceived beauty, such as new roads and constructions, prolonged rainy weather, unexpected fences or high-rise buildings on the horizon. On the other hand, sometimes one can experience completely new exciting aspects of a landscape even after many visits. After deep digging in archives, the remnants of a forlorn water mill you always overlooked tells a new story, an unexploited trail

brings you to hidden meadows full of flowers you never imagined, or the discovery of a beaver dam leaves you astonished at the sophistication of land management by beavers.

The landscapes of Europe that give rise to such stories show a surprising diversity. The features of today's European landscape can perhaps be symbolised by its ensemble of walls, trees, cows and fields (Pinto-Correia and Vos 2004). Grazing livestock on permanent grassland represents a distinctive character of the historical European rural landscape (Luginbühl 2012, pp. 43–46). Clusters of farms were centrally situated in the landscape, surrounded by fields, meadows and woodland further away. As claimed in Pinto Correia et al. (2018, p. 11), Europe can well be characterised as the continent of cheese! Animal husbandry—generally using common land for grazing—not only guaranteed the provision of some milk and meat, but also enhanced the fertility of the fields through manuring. The mixed family farm was well-suited to manage this array of functions, which dominated European agriculture for many centuries. The remnants of the mixed family farm system are gradually vanishing today, giving way to rationalised farming systems, but they still contribute to the memory of the European landscape. And nonetheless, very good cheeses—and many other famous regional farming products—continue to be produced by dedicated farmers.

## 57.2 Engaging in the Present: Whose Landscape is This?

Since the European Landscape Convention was launched in 2000, it has been ratified by 40 of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe. In the present volume, the philosophy of the European Landscape Convention is discussed extensively. Reaching beyond the mere protection, management and planning of landscape from a national policy point of view—which as such formed a substantial policy innovation in 2000—landscape is now increasingly also approached as a vehicle itself for urban and spatial planning, rather than as an object to be protected, managed or planned (Nassauer 2012; van Rooij et al. 2021). After all, the European Landscape Convention emphasises that every citizen should have the opportunity to participate in decision processes relevant to landscape. This is, however, almost impossible given the indirect effects of almost all sectoral national and regional policies on landscape. Landscape-based visions can remedy that incongruence, focussing on the landscape as a comprehensive principle, to which all spatial processes are inherently related (van Rooij et al. 2021). One could claim that landscape should not be considered the inevitably remaining problem inherent to the interaction of different sectoral interests, but rather the solution in complex urban and spatial planning projects. Well-facilitated participative processes can mobilise the inhabitants and other stakeholders to take responsibility for co-creation instead of embarking on polarisation of interests. Land can be owned, not landscape (Pedroli 2019, p. 19)! Although land rights can pose a fundamental problem here, this implies that landscape is a common

good, where everyone with clear interests has the right to participate in developing visions for the future landscape and pathways to reach this future.

Engaging in the present means, on the other hand, that we assume responsibility to get acquainted with the landscape: without people, no landscape (Priore 2009). This can only be realised if we identify ourselves with the landscapes we live in, we work in, we recreate in or we visit on holiday. A vivid interest for landscape history, for the layers of geology, soil, vegetation and fauna, and for the present land use and the actors in the landscape should at least complement the more consumptive mood that is generally promoted by advertisements for cars and mountain bikes.

### 57.3 Living the Future?

This essay began with memories and dreams, with landscape stories. It is clear that these are essential elements to realise how we identify with our landscapes and with what makes up the value of their past. Yet, these elements apparently are not enough to guarantee a living landscape for the future. The ever more dominating global market orientation of the agricultural sector (and of the many other policy sectors impacting landscape development) makes the European landscape undergo serious and at times radical changes, because the current land use is different from the use that led to the landscape character as we can still perceive it in many places. Landscape change is normal, but it can turn out to be very detrimental if it has not been consciously envisaged. Engaging in today's landscape, and in the functions that it can have for society, is a precondition for a living landscape. Such engagement will not come from policy. This challenge is increasingly a task for urban people that now form the majority anyway in Europe, whether living in cities or in the countryside. Engaging means getting involved, based on shared interests, using local as well as scientific knowledge and paying respect to the land managers of today and for the unique character of the landscape. If we manage, we can responsibly live the future of the European landscape.

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