

33 SOME REMARKS ABOUT THE CHANGING POSITION OF LANDSCAPE ASSESSMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The past three decades have seen a growing interest in cultural heritage. During the same period, the field of cultural heritage has been enlarged in the Netherlands and in other European countries by the addition of a new aspect. It is no longer limited to individual archaeological and architectural relics: a more encompassing concept – that of cultural landscape – has become involved in the heritage assessment process. The European Landscape Convention of the Council of Europe is one of the major signs of the growing interest in the subject (Council of Europe, 2001). Individual monuments are gradually becoming part of a more encompassing and complex spatial framework.¹

Instead of preserving a rather limited number of individual monuments, more and more extensive regions of cultural importance are being designated. The question is in what way this development can be managed. Is it really possible to preserve these areas? I am not very optimistic about this, because landscapes are mirrors of a flexible human society. The logical application of this principle is that by changing economic and social conditions a continuous modernization of our environment takes place. Not even individual monuments like a country house, castle, church or tumulus can resist this development. In order to survive, ancient buildings are given new functions; archaeological remains are constantly affected by the erosion caused by wind, water, vegetation and human activities (e.g., the construction of roads or dwellings, or visits by the growing group of devotees of antiquities). Thus, now perhaps more than in the past, a major problem of cultural heritage management is the continuous process of development and change.

A second problem we have to face is the complexity of landscapes. Most landscapes are an assembly of a variety of elements from different periods. In recent decades, knowledge of the often dynamic development of landscapes in prehistoric and historic times has undergone explosive growth. Formerly, much knowledge in the field of historical landscape research was embodied in rather simple settlement typologies, in which relatively little attention was paid to changeability and diversity in time and place. The conventional assessment methods based on such principles as soundness, rarity, coherence, distinctiveness, age, etc. are closely connected to this old-fashioned approach. Are these principles still adequate tools to achieve a fair result?

¹ Although the Dutch Ancient Monuments Act of 1961 introduced 'protected town- and village-scapes', its scope was mainly limited to built-up areas. In effect, rural or non-urban areas were not included in the implementation of this part of the law.

A third problem is the changing position in society of the official heritage managers. Assessment is no longer the exclusive hunting ground of experts in cultural history. The awareness of other groups in these matters is growing. For politicians, the opinions of the “ordinary” people (their voters) increasingly overrule the “scientifically based” visions of the official heritage managers.

THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: A COMPLEX AND CHANGING REALITY

The notion that a cultural landscape comprises very complicated mixtures of objects and structures from different periods and with different backgrounds is very important for the assessment discussion. In order to tackle this problem, it is perhaps useful to reduce the complex reality to three models of stratification, namely “wallpaper”, “palimpsest” and “Atlantis”. In the following, I briefly characterize these models and outline what, from a conventional assessment point of view, their advantages and disadvantages are.

“Wallpaper”

“Wallpaper” represents a process in which abrupt, total modernization changes the surface of the earth: a new era covers the original landscape with a totally new layer of information. The older layers are still present in the underground as archaeological evidence. It is clear that this kind of landscape can exist only in very special circumstances. This model is applicable in places where catastrophes – such as volcanic eruptions or sudden, permanent inundations – have radically changed the environmental situation. Also more gradual processes like the drifting of sand, the solifluction by loam or the overgrowing of the surface by peat can lead to a comparable situation. We are confronted by this model especially near volcanoes, near steep slopes and in submerged regions (Spek *et al.*, 1999.)

The stratification of old and new cultural landscapes of this type is rather rare. Only minor parts of Europe can be studied in this way. Although remnants of the past seem quite well protected by sediments, an important disadvantage for the assessment of this kind of landscapes is the rather underdeveloped state of prospecting methods (Groenewoudt, 1994; Leusen & Kamermans, 2005).

Almost every excavation in this type of landscape reveals important deviations from the initial expectations, regarding not only differences in the material excavated but also anomalies in the expected distribution and conservation of objects. Moreover, again and again totally unexpected new sites are discovered in already cleared areas. Sometimes nothing is found in designated places. Socially, this unpredictability is not acceptable. People do not know what they can expect. Nevertheless, they have to pay the costs of archaeological field research. These matters undermine public support.

“Palimpsest”

“Palimpsest” is the result of a process in which landscapes totally disappear. Their past is destroyed. Nothing of the older periods is left, even in the underground. This model

concerns landscapes whose topsoil has been severely eroded. They are affected by the activity of streaming water: the surface is literally washed away. Many Mediterranean landscapes – especially the mountains and the hills – have lost much of their historical information in this way.

Erosion leads to the deposition of material elsewhere, especially in basins and on slopes. But in these places objects lack their original spatial context. These are the rubbish dumps of prehistory and history. They are important only to treasure collectors and for dating the process of sedimentation. The secondary movement of material means that a lot of the stratigraphy of sediments is repeatedly disturbed, and all that is left is a chaotic mixture of objects in the subsoil and at the surface.

The palimpsest model is, of course, not only the outcome of physical influences: also direct human interventions can affect older landscapes. Modern building activities often go hand in hand with the scraping off of all precedent cultural layers. Many of the soil marks are destroyed, especially in cities, when underground car parks and cellars are built. Urban reconstruction also wipes out the still visible relics (Es *et al.*, 1982). Very intensive land consolidations in rural areas lead to the same result.

From this point of view, a palimpsest landscape is, by definition, worthless. Nevertheless, a brief comment on this way of thinking is useful. Conventional assessment is often focused on older (often medieval) landscapes or relics. In the Netherlands, post-industrial landscapes and landscape elements are seldom designated. Only recently have some relatively young landscapes (e.g., the designed landscapes of land consolidation or heath reclamation projects) been listed. The question, of course, is where we should stop adding landscapes to a list. This is also a difficult point as regards the perception of the citizens. Often “the man in the street” is interested in very recent objects in the landscape because of their memorial values.

“Atlantis”

“Atlantis” refers to the situation in which a lot of elements of different periods are still visible at the surface in their original spatial distribution. A good example is the remains of a Roman temple that lacks its original classical spatial entourage. Temples and other classical objects are often located in cultural landscapes that have been transformed into landscapes constructed by younger elements from different periods, such as medieval castles and palaces, mosques from the seventeenth century, farmsteads and ditches from the nineteenth century, or a petrol station from the twentieth century. These multilayered landscapes are quite common in Europe. They are often characterized by a great variety of different elements as a result of vast transformation processes that have occurred over time. This configuration can also be described as a result of various rates of persistence of historical objects and structures (Vervloet, 1986).

Because of its complexity, the application of assessment is not easy in the Atlantis model either. What could in fact be the leading philosophy in this case – the age of the

different relics, their variety, or the story these collections of material is telling us about the shaping and reshaping of a landscape?

A first step in understanding the structure of historical data in the landscape can be taken by combining the three models. Wallpaper represents “covered” landscapes, Palimpsest “vanished” landscapes and Atlantis the actual “top layer” containing elements of different ages. We are well aware of the practical difficulties of this combination, considering that in most landscapes all three models can be present side by side and piled on top of each other.

Most obvious in this framework is the identification of two types of coherence: temporal or chronological coherence, and spatial or chorological coherence. Chronological coherence means the embedding of the landscape in time: the central questions of this theme are “What?”, “When?” and “Why?”. The final goal is to construct a continuous story of the transformation processes in the past, leading to the landscape in which we are living today. Chorological coherence means the embedding of the landscape in space: here, the central questions are “What?”, “Where?” and “Why?”. The final goal is to understand the continued effect of the changing impact of “site” and “situation” on the human environment. What we understand is that landscapes are dynamic constructions that have been almost constantly modernized and adapted to new functions. In addition to wallpaper, both palimpsest and Atlantis underline this fact.

ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS AND CULTURAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT

Our major task is to tell the tale of constant change – the life story or biography of landscapes (Bloemers & Wijnen, 2001). By emphasizing the continuous process of adaptation and change of landscape elements and structures in both time and place, the construction and application of assessment systems has increasingly become a topic of discussion. A growing number of researchers and heritage managers feel a lot of uncertainty about the desirability of designating cultural heritage by such scientifically unclear criteria as soundness, rarity, coherence or distinctness. According to this line of thought, they feel even more restrained by the application of any “objective” quantitative method of designation (Dijkstra & Klijn, 1992).

On the other hand, designation by qualitative subjective tools (e.g., landscape biographies or story lines) and concepts (e.g., identity or perception) is difficult to apply in a statutorily laid down practice of heritage management. From this point of view, designation should remain a well and solidly built activity. To avoid being swayed by the issues of the day, citizens rightly ask for a clear policy based on calibrated points of departure.

Another point is the growing awareness that designation by official heritage managers is only a part of the truth. Citizens feel that their preferences are being ignored. In fact, official designation systems fail in their duty. For a long time, officials were primarily

or only interested in elements that express the activities of the upper crust – elements such as palaces, castles, fortresses, country estates, historical gardens, mansions, monasteries, convents and churches. In the past, most heritage managers also belonged to this group (Tillema, 1975). For a very long time heritage management was an activity for the elite by the elite: rural landscapes, industrial landscapes and middle-class urban landscapes were beyond their intellectual horizon. As a result of the swift financial, cultural and mental emancipation of the common man during the past 50 or so years, the field of heritage management has become more and more a meeting place for other groups of society, each focused on its own specific preferences such as windmills, farmhouses, public housing quarters, industrial zones or rural landscapes. In this framework, the position of scientifically based assessment systems is changing. Sooner or later choices will be the result of a more democratic battle between different pressure groups and stakeholders (Assche, 2004). In that battle, scientific information will perhaps no longer be of overriding importance. Although scientific knowledge can help facilitate decision-making processes, it will probably no longer be decisive.

TOWARDS A PROCESS OF PARTICIPATION

Instead of the detailed, rather strict assessment systems employed by heritage managers, a more open, informal procedure is conceivable, in which the wishes of other involved parties contribute to the decision-making. Heritage managers have to admit that the knowledge, prejudices and priorities of other groups can also have profitable effects on heritage matters.

Studies of the development of cultural landscapes have informed us about the complexity of our environment. It is hardly possible to capture reality in typologies as we did before. Complexity is mainly the result of an almost continuous process of change. Adaptation to new functions and dynamics is the keyword for the understanding and the preservation of our cultural heritage (Vervloet, Nijman & Somsen, 2005).

In this way, we will probably arrive one day at a turning point in cultural heritage management. After that moment, assessment systems based on prescriptive landscape values will play a subordinate role because for the most part they have no real meaning for the survival strategy of our cultural heritage. Basically, all objects and structures – and not only those registered by heritage managers – have a historical background.

The prehistorical/historical quality of our landscapes must be considered a vital condition of human welfare, just like the quality of nature or the quality of the environment. For our cultural landscape to survive, it is essential not to freeze objects or structures but to allow them to continue their development. Thus, heritage management should become an activity that looks for possibilities for new, appealing and long-lasting functions of basically all the components of the cultural landscape. In this framework, a close cooperation with spatial planning and landscape architecture is inevitable. Otherwise it is advisable to have a ready ear for suggestions from different parts of society (Poel, *et al.*, 2000). There is a promising future for “cultural planners”

and landscape architects regarding the construction of functional designs in which the story of the landscape remains visible in some way. From that point of view, several different designs can be acceptable.

Minor and, if necessary, major changes of shape and arrangement should be accepted in order to reach the ultimate goal of functionality. This option underlines the recognition of the continuous, dynamic development of society and landscape. By taking functionality as a point of departure, more different groups in society will be involved in heritage management as a matter of personal interest.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Cultural history is supported by three mutually correlated pillars, namely space, time and society.

- Every individual or group has an urgent need for spatial orientation. Limits are defined and realms of life are demarcated.
- Every individual or group has an urgent need for temporal orientation (What is my background? What are my roots?).
- Every individual or group is also a part of society. The keywords in this context are identity and security.

Important for the commitment of cultural heritage management is its position in society. In this, two directions can be distinguished, namely bottom-up and top-down.

- Bottom-up can be described as the social orientation and the commitment of the local players. They intervene in the official decision-making process and develop new initiatives. This is the perspective of the independent citizen who is interested in the future design of his or her environment and holds an individual viewpoint on the values of the cultural heritage in his or her garden, street, village and – perhaps – region.
- Top-down can be characterized by the social orientation of the government, which develops initiatives for the general benefit of society. This is the perspective of heritage managers who want to anticipate new trends.

We have to strive for an optimal collaboration between the two directions in order to successfully elaborate physical planning. There will be a future in which the parties concerned do not need to apply the formal rules of some ancient monuments act, but will be allowed to look for informal, more creative solutions.

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