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Juan Manuel Palerm *Editors*

# Cultivating Continuity of the European Landscape

New Challenges, Innovative  
Perspectives

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Agnoletti · Dobričić · Matteini ·  
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## Chapter 42

# Observing Landscape: General Reflections and Linkages with the UNISCAPE2020 Conference

Juanjo Galan and Juan Manuel Palerm

**Abstract** In this text, we intend to look again at the Earth, or rather we are obliged to understand globality (globalization), to look again at our planet, which is the same as always, although deeply modified and wounded. And that is why it appears diverse and different. The landscape of our environment, real and imaginary, requires this time of observation and with it, through its perception and understanding, project it again. Uniscape, as a network of European universities on the landscape and a framework for reflection of the landscape observatories in Europe, requires and proposes new instruments for its management and offers, in this context and publication, a space for debate.

**Keywords** Landscape · Research · Observatories · Perception · Diagnosis · Monitoring · Transversality · Multidisciplinarity

The dynamic, ubiquitous and participatory qualities of landscape are at the core of the European Landscape Convention and have triggered many of the reflections that have emerged around the Convention since the year 2000. On the 20th anniversary of the ELC, the Cultivation of the Continuity of the European Landscape was proposed as the central motto of the UNISCAPE2020 Conference in order to emphasize the evolving and collective quality of landscape and evoke, at the same time, new conceptual possibilities for the landscape concept. Cultivation requires intentionality, interpretation of external and internal signs and a conscious understanding of time, processes and cycles. Cultivation implies care, attachment, commitment and attentive observation.

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In this chapter, we would like to reflect on the observation of landscape as a way to interact with it and as a necessary tool to facilitate its cultivation (understood in this text as an umbrella concept comprising protection, management and planning). The etymology of the Latin verb “observare” reveals that it was a synonym of “watch over, note, heed, look to, attend to, guard, regard and comply with”. Nowadays, the act of observing has kept many of these meanings, can be conducted in multiple ways and can serve different purposes, both in practice and education. Thus, a phenomenological approach to the observation of landscape would emphasize its experiential qualities, both as a lens to study the landscape and as a way to understand how specific individuals or groups experience particular landscapes (Nogue 1993). Conversely, the observation of landscape can be aimed at the study or description of physical landscape, quite often from a positivist perspective in which knowledge is derived from the rational and logical interpretation of sensory experience. Differently again, a cultural approach would place more emphasis on the observation of the socio-cultural processes underlying the evolution of landscape and the ways in which those processes frame the interaction between individuals, communities and the environment. Obviously, all these types of observations are interconnected through the multifaceted character of landscape and its historical evolution, but their specific weight can vary depending on the purpose or intention of the study.

From a planning or design perspective, the observation of landscape provides essential information for the definition of policies, strategies, actions and projects aimed at its protection, management or planning. On the other hand, the monitoring of landscape has gained increasing relevance as a continuous, diachronic and systematic way of observing landscape in order to provide solid evidence of its evolution (Kienast 2019). In this regard, by stating the need to identify, characterize and assess landscapes with the participation of the interested parties, the ELC highlights the importance of promoting rigorous and co-participated landscape observation. Similarly, by explicitly affirming the importance of “monitoring landscape changes and the effectiveness of (landscape) operations”, Recommendation CM/Rec(2008)3 of the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers defines a clear purpose for monitoring processes and introduces Landscape Observatories/Institutes/Centres as potential key actors for this endeavour and for the exchange of landscape information (ELC 2000; CM/REC 2008).

However, the observation of landscape by researchers and scholars exceeds utilitarian or goal-oriented approaches and often dives into the theoretical, intellectual, pedagogical and artistic investigation of landscape phenomena in which both the observer (subject) and the observed (landscape) can establish different types of dialogue and can influence each other in multiple ways. In this wider context, both holistic and specialized studies coexist and retrofit each other, enriching at the same time the possibilities of the landscape concept to foster reflections on the interactions between humans and the environment (Antrop and Van Eetvelde 2017). Moreover, in this interdisciplinary context, the many “dimensions of place” can facilitate the development of a “socio-ecological”, “place conscious education” (Gruenewald 2003: 619) and subsequently foster multiple ways of looking at the landscape.

All these different ways of observing landscape and all these different purposes for conducting a systematic observation of it can be found in contemporary landscape research and were represented at the UNISCAPE2020 Conference. The importance of the “eye” of the observer, the experience of landscape by people with different sensibilities or the multiple relationships that observers can establish with a particular site are amongst the phenomenological aspects that have been investigated and attested by the Fondazione Benetton (Fondazione Benetton 2024). In the same line of thought, Andersen (2024) argues that the experience of physical landscape together with personal backgrounds and socially constructed understandings define a lens to critically observe landscape and to collectively envision its future evolution (Andersen 2024).

On the other hand, the act of observing has been used as a vehicle to create different types of landscape observatories committed to the systematic observation of landscape as a means to support the implementation of the European Landscape Convention at a national, regional or local level. Some landscape observatories have been able to integrate multifaceted observation of landscape and to effectively link their activity with spatial planning, landscape governance or community building. The Landscape Observatory of Catalonia stands out as one of these observatories and its structure, composition and activities demonstrate how the contents of the European Landscape Convention, together with a clear legal and political framework, can define an effective road map for landscape protection, management and planning (Sala 2024). Similarly, the Landscape Observatory of Finland is an example of a national observatory co-participated by governmental, civil, economic and academic organizations whose activity was initiated with a collective diagnosis of the implementation of the ELC in that Nordic country and the subsequent definition of strategic actions and projects (Galan 2024).

Landscape Observatories can also emerge from bottom-up processes. In these cases, the characteristics of their constituent members and the conditions of the physical and social context in which they operate can strongly influence their activity. For instance, a critical modification of landscape can mobilize different types of actors and awaken social interest in observing and monitoring the transformation of landscape. Thus, the formation of the Landscape Observatory of Alqueva was triggered by the construction of the Alqueva Dam in Portugal, and this observatory is now a clear example of a multisectoral platform supporting the development of policies and strategies for landscape and territorial planning at a regional scale (Freire et al. 2024). Similarly, the Landscape Observatory of Charneca appeared in central Portugal to support the continuity of a unique type of agricultural landscape. Due to the complex and multimodal composition of the Charneca observatory, a study was conducted to specifically “observe” its internal functioning as a social network. The results of this study were quite revealing and provided key information to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the network and to improve its future performance and social impact (Saraiva et al. 2024).

According to the spirit of the ELC, the identification of landscapes, their characterization and assessment, the formulation of landscape quality objectives and the



definition of landscape policies or actions should count on the active participation of the interested parties.

Consequently, it has been argued that landscape observatories should be shaped following the shapes of civil society and that their work should be based on a deep understanding of individuals' expectations and issues and of the citizens' actions that give places meaning (Lorenzeto 2024).

Moreover, the multiple meanings of the act of observing have fostered the creation of different types of landscape observatories and have prompted their connection to other organizations or their involvement in different kinds of studies. Thus, the observation and monitoring of landscape have been often related to the protection and management of exceptional sites. In these cases, landscape observatories can become co-participated stewards of the landscape and their activity can be linked to that of associations, foundations or museums (Żońnierczuk 2024). Similarly, the observation of landscape and the activity of landscape observatories can focus on specific types of landscape elements, landscape processes or landscape types. In this regard, Larsson (2024) suggests that Landscape Observatories can play a key role in the coordination of large-scale infrastructures by providing place-centred logic and by offering a regional perspective (Larsson 2024). Alternatively, Dam, 2021 proposes incorporating new narratives and topics into the activity of regional landscape observatories by working on the study and management of drystone walls as vernacular manifestations of the rich and site-based material culture of European landscapes (Dam 2024). This proposal highly resonates with the thematic study on terraced landscapes conducted by the Landscape Observatory of the Autonomous Province of Trento. This extensive and detailed work proves how knowledge of a landscape can consistently inform its protection, management and planning, and which culminated in the publication of a special Atlas (Tecilla and Cosner 2024).

If there is no landscape without an observer, this short text has tried to show how the multiple meanings of observation can foster different ways of studying the interactions between landscape and people. Furthermore, these different approaches have generated new possibilities for the observation of landscape by linking it with its protection, management and planning and by making multifaceted, rich observation of landscape an opportunity for dialogue and collaboration between people with different types of perceptions.

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