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## **“Institutional” vs “everyday” landscape as conflicting concepts in opinions and practices. Reflections and perspectives from a case study in Northeastern Italy**

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### **Abstract**

This paper originates from a contribution to the Conference “*Crisi dei paesaggi, paesaggi della crisi. Quali vie d’uscita?*” [Crisis of landscapes, landscapes of crisis. Which ways out?] held in Cagliari (Italy) in December, 2014. It focuses on the distance that exists today among the different approaches used to address the issue of landscape and the different ideas connected to the landscape concept. Starting from a model that schematises this distance in its different facets, the paper focuses on two of them, the “spatial” and the “social” dimensions, and outlines two landscape concepts, provocatively in opposition. On the one hand it identifies the “institutional landscape”, explicitly recognised but of limited spatial extension and ruled by an elite; on the other hand the “everyday landscape”, of which there is often little awareness, that encompasses the whole territory and is managed by the whole community. The European Landscape Convention, which refers explicitly to the landscape as “an essential component of people’s surroundings!” does not definitely solve this antithesis and bridge the gap between the two approaches. The results of research activity in a case study in North-eastern Italy confirmed the co-existence of these two opposite concepts in the relationships local people build with their place of life. Perceived landscape values and opinions of laypeople can be referred to the problematic practices and approaches that have intensely changed the landscape in that area and used to interpret them. An increase of awareness of different sets of values existing in a landscape seems the most appropriate strategy to overcome the opposition between the two landscape ideas and the questions of landscape change, through a wide process of “landscape literacy”, focused to the acquisition of a way to “look at” the landscape and to act responsibly on it.

**Keywords:** European Landscape Convention, “Everyday” Landscape, “Institutional” Landscape, Landscape Literacy, Venetian *città diffusa*

## 1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the distance that exists today among the different approaches used to address the issue of landscape and the different ideas connected to the landscape concept. Starting from a model that schematises this distance in its different facets, the paper focuses on two of them, the “spatial” and the “social” dimensions, and outlines two landscape concepts, provocatively in opposition: the “institutional landscape” and the “everyday landscape”.

The results of research activity in a case study, carried on with two surveys of the values that people attribute to the place where they live and the idea of the landscape that emerges, confirmed the co-existence of these two opposite concepts. At the same time, these results on landscape values and opinions can be referred to practices and approaches that have changed and continue to change the landscape in the area and used to interpret them.

In addition, if we consider the landscape as a tool rather than an object – a tool able to integrate and intermediate (Luginbühl, 2004; GuisePELLI et al., 2013; Derioz, 2008) –, it can potentially be used to address the conflicts and the misunderstandings deriving from the distances between ideas, approaches and practices. In particular, it seems to be a relevant educational tool, in order to raise people’s awareness on meanings and values through a process of landscape literacy.

This paper, that originates from a contribution to the Conference “*Crisi dei paesaggi, paesaggi della crisi: quali vie d’uscita?*” [Crisis of landscapes, landscapes of crisis: which ways out?] held in Cagliari (Italy) in December, 2014, is an attempt to address the troubled questions deriving from gaps and conflicts among approaches and ideas on landscape and the critical aspects of landscape changes, and to connect each other.

The considerations here reported combine reflections deriving from scientific literature and debate and field research, but also from some consulting activities held in public administrations and participation to the events related to the implementation of the European Landscape Convention and field research.

## 2. Landscape is tension: a multidimensional model

In order to “address holistically the complexity of the landscape” (Gambino, 2000, p. 12), we propose first some remarks on its “multi-dimensional structure”, connected with the plurality and diversity of cultural and disciplinary approaches to the landscape, along with specific characteristics inherent in this geographical concept (e.g. the idea of the landscape as both reality and imaginary). We aim to highlight, albeit in a schematic and partly challenging way, the various dimensions of landscape complex structure. This seems particularly necessary in order to clarify some basic misunderstandings that affect the current debate on landscape, in the transversal and mutual relations between the academic world, the institutional one and civil society. These misunderstandings give rise to critical consequences in contemporary landscapes and management practices.

The different dimensions that compose the structure of landscape and that emerge from analyses of the literature, official documents and narratives and discourses can be metaphorically compared to the different wavelengths of light emitted by a prism and broken down into its respective components. Each of these dimensions can be described as a tension between opposites: in fact, landscape itself has been described as tension (Wilie, 2007).

Here, we consider a model (Figure 1) built on six dimensions (structure, depth, width, change, actors and exploitation), similar to six different wavelengths of light out of the prism. These dimensions are described by six couples of opposite conditions that is by six tensions between opposite ends (Castiglioni, 2007). When analyzing a text or a discourse on landscape by searching for approaches and attitudes that explicitly or implicitly drive the discourse itself we could be able to situate it in the model on a specific level between the two opposite conditions for each of these dimensions. In other words, this model may help in recognizing which idea about landscape underlies each of the discourses, texts, narratives on landscape, and therefore to understand the explicit or implicit evaluation criteria that

depend on each different idea of landscape and the projects and practices that follow.

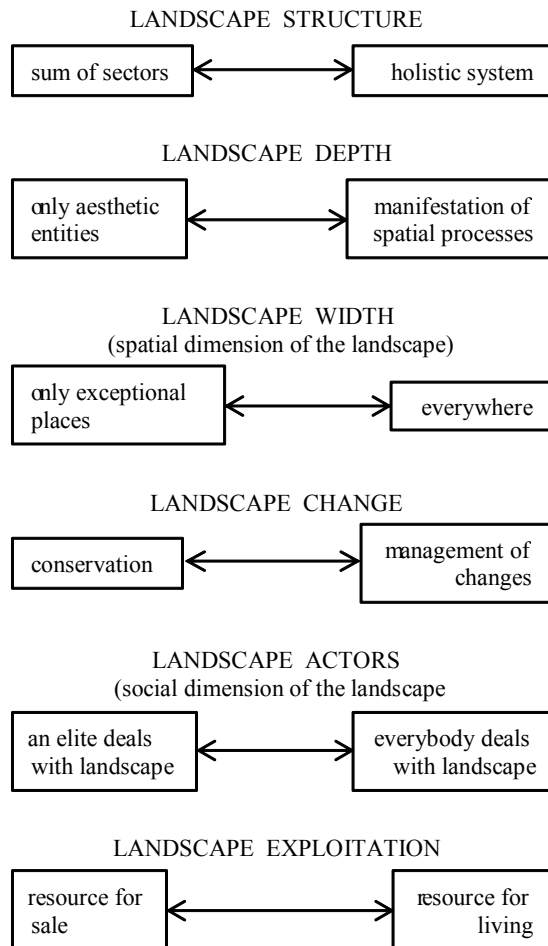


Figure 1. A multidimensional model for landscape. Source: Castiglioni, 2007, modified.

We give a simple example, considering just the dimension called “landscape depth”: looking at a mountain pasture, a scientific paper, an official document or an informal discourse can consider the landscape as an aesthetical entity, paying attention only to its visual appearance and to the maintenance of the grass. On the other hand, they can consider the driving forces and processes or the social, economic and political factors involved, such as the presence of agricultural firms, financial support for agricultural activities or general agricultural policies connected with grass-cutting activities. The consequences of the different point of view adopted are then relevant respectively at the

level of scientific debate, policies and norms, public opinion.

If people use the same term “landscape” but mean different substances, that is if they refer to different concepts, they will then provide different actions and implicitly imagine different futures. Such miscommunication can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts, with norms, plans and projects not underpinned by a common agreement on their objectives. In addition, landscape management practices (at all scales) may not be intrinsically coherent. To address this problem, an effort of stating landscape meanings explicitly is needed.

### 3. Institutional landscapes and everyday landscapes

We focus now on two specific dimensions of landscape concept among the six presented in Figure 1: the *spatial dimension*, which refers to the width of the area conceived as landscape, and the *social dimension*, which refers to the actors involved. In the Italian case, where an old tradition of landscape top-down policies ruled by expert visions takes into consideration almost exclusively those areas that are considered exceptional, these two dimensions seem to need a wider clarification, as the oppositions that lie in them they often origin deep misunderstandings.

The spatial dimension (represented by the horizontal line in Figure 2) concerns the portion of space that we consider suitable when talking about landscape: does it refer to the entire area, as claimed, for example, in art. 2 of the European Landscape Convention, irrespective of the quality of the landscape? Alternatively, is it limited to certain parts, that is, those that are exceptional, those of “outstanding beauty”, with high value from environmental, historical and aesthetic points of view? The model proposed in par. 2 presents this dimension in tension between the two opposite poles of the landscape “everywhere” and the landscape “only in exceptional places”.

Similarly, considering the social dimension (represented by the vertical line in Figure 2), the question is: Should landscape be considered only in the way experts deal with it, through the

criteria they apply and the lenses of top-down norms, or should it be considered as the product of practices of a community, where everybody interacts with it, attributes value and constantly modify the place where he/she lives? In other words: Whose landscape is this? Does it “belong” only to the (often outsider) people that have an educated knowledge on it, or to the (mainly insider) laypeople that know it as far as they live there?

Taking into account these two dimensions, two concepts of landscape can be outlined, provocatively in opposition. On the one side, the “institutional landscape” is explicitly identified but limited in its areal extension and ruled by an elite. On the other hand, the “everyday landscape” refers to the entire space and is managed by the whole community, even if a low level of awareness generally informs such management. These two concepts, despite the distance between them, coexist as driving forces of land-management practices and material transformations of the local landscapes.

The concept of “institutional landscape” originates from a diffuse cultural approach, at least in the Italian case, that considers landscape mainly through aesthetical, ecological or historical criteria. This approach defines the “landscape exceptionalities” (the so called “*beni paesaggistici*” in Italian legal frame), that are generally recognised as heritage, formally identified and safeguarded by institutions (Quaglia, 2015) through planning processes. Transformations of these landscape exceptionalities have to be authorised through special administrative procedures.

Thus, the two terms “landscape” and “safeguard” are closely connected, with one implying the other. According to the logic of the “institutional landscape”, the best possible outcome is that the landscape remains as it is, does not change and retains its features. In such a landscape, the course of history seems to be stopped. The changing dimension is denied, like a framed painting or a souvenir postcard of places to visit.

The “institutional landscape” assumes its value according to aesthetic canons or on the basis of an evaluation of ecological nature, as determined by expert knowledge. The criteria

and templates for these attributions of value are produced on the basis of “aesthetic and symbolic references belonging to a common culture, shared by national or supranational societies”, developed using iconographic productions in their different types to form a kind of a “heritage culture, forged over a long time” (Luginbühl, 2012, p. 142). In reality, these criteria are not always explicitly stated: they are taken for granted. Similarly, distinguishing between the “*paysage remarqué*” (very similar to the institutional landscape) and “*paysage ordinaire*” (very similar to the everyday landscape), Lelli and Paradis-Maindive (2000, p. 28) underlined the fact that the aesthetic criteria used for defining the first kind of landscape are simply “more or less shared by the actors”.

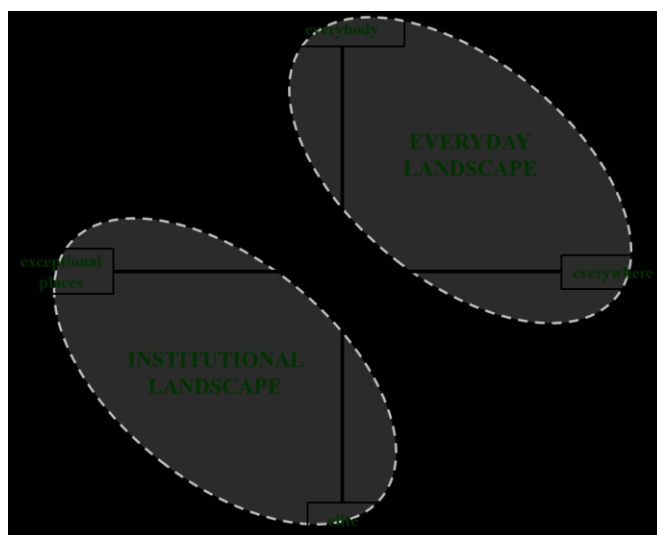


Figure 2. “Everyday landscape” and “institutional landscape”, originating from the intersection between social and spatial dimension of landscape concept.

This logic removes the ordinary citizen from playing an active role towards landscapes, as far as it is the sole responsibility of institutions or experts. They are not required to take care of the landscapes, just to respect norms directed to safeguard. If the reference concept is the “institutional landscape”, laypeople do not feel engaged with the real landscapes, apart from feeling a generic responsibility towards their environmental or cultural heritage (that can be stronger just for some people that belong to some NGO’s related to landscape conservation).

They delegate it to the experts and to the administrative power. The level of personal involvement is generally very low. It is often a “pre-packaged” landscape “that tends to crystallize some sample-images”, that is simplified and recognizable, but that bring “to the detriment of the creation of a sense of personal attachment” (Papotti, 2013, p. 382).

The opposite concept of “everyday landscape” does not refer to codes established in advance but concerns the experiences that inhabitants have of the landscape in their daily lives in every place. This concept is similar to what Berque calls the “proto-landscape” (1995, p. 39), considered as the “pure visual relation that necessarily exists between human beings and their surroundings” (Turco, 2012, p. 35). Conversely, Cosgrove, questioning the concept, states that “for the insider, there is a definite separation of the self from the scene, the subject from object” and then “to apply the term landscape to their surrounding conditions seems inappropriate to those who occupy and work in a place as insiders” (Cosgrove, 1990, p. 38). From a different point of view, Besse, in a recent essay, highlighted the idea that it is thanks to “distancing” that “the landscape exists in front of a spectator that is *external* to the world that appears in front of his eyes” (2012, p. 51). Besse also referred to what Jackson called the “vernacular landscape”: “landscape [is defined] not as something that is opposite to the human being, as an object to look at, or to be transformed, but rather as an aspect of his very being” (ivi, p. 55).

Actually, the position of people as insiders, as part of the landscape itself, is problematic, as it does not allow, or rather makes it difficult, the awareness and the explicitation of the values assigned in everyday places, by all people. Despite this general low level of awareness (to the point that we can conceive the everyday landscape as “unconscious landscape”; see Castiglioni, 2015), people do give sense and assign values to their surroundings. The most important criteria they employ are different from those used in the case of “institutional landscape” and concern mainly functionality, sense of belonging, affective bonds and social relations. The criteria that are applied depend on

local community practices. In this way, the relationship with the landscape is “a form of “practical knowledge”, a sort of tacit, inarticulate understanding by participants in a given cultural system’ (Duncan, 1992).

This “everyday landscape” concept has practical consequences for spatial transformations of the landscape. The role of customs (Olwig, 2005, 2007) in the practices that the inhabitants undertake is implied, not only of norms; they potentially lead to significant changes. In fact, everyday landscapes arise from the “inventiveness and creativity of the daily producers of landscape” (Luginbühl, 1989, p. 238). This “ordinary” landscape is constantly evolving and “changes, more or less spread or punctual, imposed or agreed upon, are superimposed in a more or less anarchic way along time and space” (Lelli and Paradis-Maindive, 2000, p. 29). We are talking about self-regulated transformations, “tied to the actions carried out in the landscape within the bonds of freedom or creativity beyond the control of the rules, [...] to the goals that each individual or each social group sets himself and [...] to the economic structure and the cultural context of a territory” (Castiglioni et al., 2010, p. 100).

#### 4. The question of the European Landscape Convention

The European Landscape Convention refers to the landscape as “an essential component of people’s surroundings” (Preamble), but it does not resolve completely the antithesis between the concepts of “institutional” and “everyday” landscape.

The second one is explicitly considered in art. 2 of the Convention. The issues of the values assigned by people, the importance of their well-being and aspirations, and the “public’s wish to enjoy high quality landscapes and to play an active part in the development of landscapes” (Preamble) are at the bedrock of the European Landscape Convention and of the process that has been called the “democratisation” of the landscape (Priour, 2006, p. 17) that originates from it.

However, the logic of the “institutional landscape” is partially present, too, even if not explicitly, in the text of the European Landscape Convention. It emerges in a few lines of the preamble and in some other passages in the text. The terms “landscape quality” or “degraded landscapes” do not refer explicitly to criteria by which to establish “quality” and “degradation”. Therefore, they remain open to a shared generic evaluation, according to the global criteria identified above.

This implicit compresence of opposite concepts does not help in identifying clearly the directions of landscape policies.

On the other hand, the Convention seems to include in itself the direction and the recommendations for bridging the gap between the two opposite concepts. Actually, it refers to the whole areas and to the whole population, but, at the same time, it requires “to assess the landscapes [...], taking into account the particular values assigned to them by the interested parties and the population concerned” (art. 6, c). It means that landscapes should be looked at through the filters of a wide spectrum of values, including the aesthetical, ecological and historical values on the one side (the ones of the “institutional landscape”), and the functional, the affective, and the social values on the other (the ones of the “everyday landscape”). In other words, the Convention proposes a sort of overlapping of the two concepts, or – perhaps better – it considers the possibility to include in a wider concept of “everyday landscape” also exceptionalities, evaluations coming from experts’ knowledge, and the relevant criteria used in it.

The route proposed by the European Landscape Convention to bridge the gap between “institutional” and “everyday landscapes” is expressed clearly in the first requested specific measure (art. 6, a): awareness raising. This measure is intended to disseminate this broad idea of landscape, in which pluralities of values and the question of transformation have to be considered.

## 5. People’s opinion and practices in a case study in the Venetian plain

The Venetian plain in Northeastern Italy in recent decades has undergone significant social and spatial changes: what was once a rural area has been transformed by large-scale residential and industrial developments spread in all its width, to the extent that it is called *città diffusa* (diffused city). Any attempt at interpreting such changes has made difficult as the traditional categories of town and countryside seem to have lost their meaning and been replaced by something difficult to be defined. In this process, the reasons of development and improvement in economic results seem to have completely overborne any other reasons, including them of preserving historical features of the rural landscape, like Palladian villas. Different scholars criticize this landscape change, from diverse points of view, such as those of environmental problems (Belloni, 2005) and loss of heritage and soil consumption (Tempesta, 2015), or denouncing existential discomfort (Vallerani and Varotto, 2006).

However, what relationship is there between the local inhabitants and the Veneto landscape as it appears today? After such a rapid change, do we see a corresponding disorientation and loss of reference points associated with, reflected in the local population’s perceptions? Drawing on the issues raised by the European Landscape Convention, especially those related to ordinary landscapes and to the role of people perceptions, these questions have formed the basis of our research.

We conducted two surveys, the first in 2004, the second ten years later in 2013-2014. We focus here on the results obtained in Vigorovea, a small village 15 km southeast of Padua in the municipality of Sant’Angelo di Piove di Sacco, that is one of the analysed case studies.

In the past, Vigorovea was a small settlement along a straight road named “Piovese”. The village started expanding in the 1960s. In the period 1995-2005, it underwent very rapid development, with new residential areas constructed on the northeast side of the main road. These have become a kind of “New Vigorovea”. In the last ten years, the urbani-



sation process has slowed down and rather stopped. Thus, Vigorovea represents an example of the landscape of the *città diffusa*, lacking any element of “outstanding beauty” or other valuable character.

The first survey involved – among other analyses of the spatial context – fifteen semi-structured in depth interviews with local people encountered on the main streets of the village. The second one included – in addition to twelve interviews – also questionnaires distributed to the parents of children attending the local primary school (almost one hundred of questionnaires collected; see Castiglioni and Ferrario, 2007 for more information on methodology and results of the first survey, Castiglioni et al., 2015 for the second one).

Selecting, among wider questions, the ones mostly related to the aims of the present paper, this field research helped in understanding on the one hand the different meanings and values people assign to their surroundings and how they interact with them, and – on the other hand – to what extent laypeople consider the notion of landscape pertinent when referring to where they live.

One of the main results of the first survey was the large distance that existed between people’s general idea of “landscape” (that can be surely reported to that of “institutional landscape”) and their ideas about the place where they lived. In the place where they lived, the people did not recognise anything that they called landscape. One male interviewee stated “As far as I know, here, there is no landscape”, indicating probably that, if aesthetical exceptionalities are not present in Vigorovea, here, there is no landscape. However, those surveyed did not feel disorientation or discomfort due to the fast change and formal disorder of their neighbourhood. On the contrary, they had a strong place attachment. Moreover, they sometimes used expressions like usefulness when describing the nicest places in their surroundings. It suggests that they more used to assign functional values to their place of life than aesthetical ones.

In the second survey, the interviews confirmed that Vigorovea was viewed as a “normal” and “peaceful” place. In the

interviewees’ opinion, the values and meanings given to neighbourhood were linked to the activities that the inhabitants performed there rather than to the visual quality of the places. “Experiential” and “social” dimensions play a role when identifying the nicest or most important places, regardless of their aesthetic quality. In general, people seem to be more inclined to use social criteria than aesthetic ones when building relations with their surroundings. As an example, the inhabitants of Vigorovea said that one of the nicest places was the area behind the church because this was a meeting place for the community. Indeed, the so-called *baraccon* is located there. The *baraccon* is a sort of large temporary shack, which was recently built, without any aesthetic considerations. It hosts many activities other than religious ones, in which people of all ages are actively involved (Figure 3). The same social criteria were applied to the new square (Mother Teresa from Calcutta square), which was negatively evaluated because “nothing interesting happens there” (Castiglioni et al., 2015).



Figure 3. The so called “*baraccon*” behind the church of Vigorovea.

Photo: V. Ferrario, 2013.

In the second survey, the results concerning the meaning given to the term “landscape” differed partially with respect to the first survey. If the data obtained in the interviews confirmed that people had difficulty recognising “a landscape” in the place in which they lived, like ten years before, the data from the questionnaires open to different understandings.

Twenty percent of the interviewees completely disagreed with the statement: “In Vigorovea, there is no landscape”, and 36% mostly disagreed with it. Furthermore, 37% completely disagreed with the statement: “In Vigorovea, it makes no sense to speak about landscape”. These different results do not clarify this topic. Rather, they call into question both the opinion (is it as widespread as it appeared?) and the methodology used in the survey.

The diversity in ideas and approaches of what constitutes landscape was further confirmed by the answers to another question in the questionnaire, in which the participants were asked to state whether nine photographs of different places in Vigorovea did or did not represent a “landscape”. In general, those interviewed considered that the photographs of open rural/natural areas were “landscapes”, whereas majority of those interviewed (60%) thought that the *baracon* and other pieces of surroundings lacking valuable features were not. To some extent, these answers contradicting the previous ones, confirm the ambiguities of the issue of landscape ideas and the difficulties in dealing with them.

The results of the surveys provided evidence for the distance between the two different approaches to landscape concept presented in the first part of this paper. On the one hand, people do not recognise as “landscape” what is assessed through the lenses of social, functional and affective criteria, even if they build strong relationship with it. The concept of “everyday landscape”, though identified in the academic reflection and proposed as a base of the European Landscape Convention, is not recognised as an explicit reference frame by laypeople. On the other hand, the word “landscape” suggests only something to be seen through aesthetical, environmental or heritage lenses – the “institutional landscape” –, which is not present in places like Vigorovea.

A low level of awareness emerges of the different values people assign to places, according to the different criteria. This fact may be interpreted also as one of the causes of the disordered forms of this ordinary landscape, due to a parallel low level of awareness of the very criteria they apply when transforming their

material landscape. To a certain degree, the inhabitants act following mainly functional needs (or affective and social ones), without paying attention to other aspects, like aesthetic, environmental or historical ones. In this way, the ambiguities and distances in the realm of meanings and ideas is moved to the “ambiguities” of the material landscape.

## 6. Conclusions: awareness raising and “landscape literacy” as strategies for a shared landscape

The distances emerging in landscape concepts and opinions both at general and local level, and the open questions on the strong change in the landscape of *città diffusa* and its problematic forms, call for actions aiming to raise people awareness, as the first specific measures of the European Landscape Convention definitely require. The Convention proposes – in accordance with its overall philosophy – to raise awareness on “the value of landscapes, their role and changes to them” (art. 6, a), and to promote “school and university courses which, in the relevant subject areas, address the values attaching to landscapes and the issues raised by their protection, management and planning” (art. 6, b). Landscape values and landscape change notably constitute the cornerstone of this process.

Therefore, the acquisition of awareness is not an automatic step made possible by the occasional initiative, but rather a long-term process, an educational path to be promoted in formal and informal settings, which includes a number of fronts for action, all aimed at maturing capacity “read the landscape” and to share the readings. Right here we are rooted reasoning on “landscape literacy” (Spirn, 2005) as a process aimed not just to the knowledge of landscape characters. It focuses more widely to the acquisition of a way to “look” at the landscape in its dynamic and complex nature and to act responsibly on it, integrating the issue of the values attributed by the people to the landscape itself. In this perspective, everyone can learn to recognize the parts that make up the landscape itself and the values (necessarily plural) which are included in its dynamism.



In the frame of our considerations reported in the previous paragraphs, the general aim is to move from the two distant concepts of “everyday” and “institutional landscape” to a deeper awareness of landscape and of the values, which are included in. This should happen in all places, both those exceptional – where the values set by the experts must become the common and shared heritage – and those of daily life, where the value dimensions related to practices have to find ways for explicitness and dignity. Highlighting the unexpressed value placed on the everyday landscape seems to represent a way to close the distance between the two approaches. In particular, it is possible to implement experiences – like the ones of the Landscape Observatories (Castiglioni and Varotto, 2013) – to increase the sense of “appropriation” and “ownership” towards the place where people live, “thanks to that sharing of glances, which brings different people on a same space” (Lelli and Paradis-Maindive, 2000, p. 32). In this sense, it is possible to use the landscape as an “intermediary” (Joliveau et al., 2008) and as a tool to pose questions and challenges, even if conflicting. The opportunity to meet, share glances and express different values offers a more democratic approach to spatial questions.

An increase of awareness targeted at a broader involvement of the population seems the most appropriate strategy to overcome the opposition between the two landscape ideas and most of all to build, through a real process of democratization, “not so much and not only more beautiful landscapes, but especially more just territories” (Ferrario, 2011, p. 170).

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