

Article

Landscape in Spatial Planning: Some Evidence on Methodological Issues and Political Challenges

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Landscape in Spatial Planning: Some Evidence on Methodological Issues and Political Challenges

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Abstract: In recent decades, the landscape has given a new impulse to the renewal of spatial planning. This process has nevertheless raised several methodological issues about how to deal with sensitive non-functional aspects in spatial planning tools and procedures, as well as new challenges for policy design. Placemaking, landscape urbanism, and landscape planning do not differ just in scale but in their very idea of public/collective interest and the action that is required to reach them. Reflecting on some evidence from the recent Italian experience of landscape plans and policies, based on direct involvement in practice and academic debate, the author will highlight several main issues at stake today in this field. The conclusions will argue some potentially promising innovation perspectives, on both processes and contents regarding landscape-based spatial planning and policies, as well as some critical conditions of an institutional context.

Keywords: landscape planning; spatial planning; landscape policies; landscape urbanism



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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the landscape has given a new impulse to the renewal of spatial planning, refreshing its scope and driving its frame and contents away from a purely functional approach. It might sound somewhat trifling today, with a war at the borders of Europe and dramatic climate change scenarios facing us, to focus on landscape planning. However, looking more closely at landscape policies and planning can provide us with much useful knowledge concerning political agendas and their implementation, as well as the recent change in spatial planning rationale and methods.

The search for a place's quality has grown with modernity's conditions, including expanding crises and homologation brought by globalization dynamics. A renewed focus on genius loci [1], the resurgence of place against abstract space [2], and the rediscovery of collective maps as an action fostering the sense of place [3] are just some examples of how, at the turn of the millennium in different disciplines the modernist discourse appeared no longer adequate but obsolete. Although some urban designers, spatial planners, and social scientists kept working on a place's identity even in recent years, the shift is overall relevant and further undermines the rational-functionalist approach to planning, which has already been questioned by many policy analysts.

The place-making literature, dedicated to planners, urban designers, municipalities, and developers in North America [4] or to experts working for central or local governments in the UK [5], tackles the issue of the aesthetic quality and identity of places. This covers not just single buildings or built settlements [6], acknowledging the limits of optimizing just functional performance. At the same time, at least in the Western world, the focus of spatial planning has shifted from urban expansion to retrofit, infill, and renewal, seeking to identify what Jane Jacobs named "organized complexity" [7]. The imitation of the traditional urban form for new or retrofitted settlements grows increasingly criticized as a make-up urbanism practice concealing different technologies, social aspects (gathered communities vs. social mix), and land development procedures, not least because of a number of speculative projects labeled under new urbanism or analogous tendencies.

The so-called landscape urbanism emerged at the turn of the millennium in North America both as an idea that the landscape could and should be the foundation for the urbanism of the twenty-first century, and as “a rubric to describe the design strategies resulting in the wake of traditional urban forms” [8] (p. 58). Footed in the conviction that, in the current contemporary urban condition of the Western world, suburban areas have and will continue to dominate the urban realm, landscape urbanism advocates indeterminacy and an urban design and planning approach that is capable of accepting process, succession, and change [9].

In Europe, a new momentum for the role of landscape both in institutional policies and in the public debate comes from the approval of the European Landscape Convention by the Council of Europe [10]. For the first time, an official document recognized the quality of landscape as an essential component of everyday people’s surroundings and as a foundation of their identity. Due to its origins in 1994 as the Charter of the Mediterranean Landscape, or Seville Charter [11], the Convention was among the first official documents to overcome the distinction between natural and cultural landscapes, which UNESCO will reconsider as far as Heritage is concerned just some years later. A huge advance has been made toward integrating issues and policies, at least in terms of principles. Subscribing to the convention, each national State commits itself to establish and implement specific policies that are aimed at landscape protection, management, and planning, while defining procedures for the participation of the public in the making of these policies. A specific remark calls for the landscape to be integrated into regional and town planning policies, as well as in any other policies with a possible direct or indirect impact on the landscape.

This new soft regulation input crosses the state-of-the-art regional policies programming, which is becoming more and more influenced by EU structural funds and their spending strategies, where spatial planning is often disregarded as too long-term oriented and uselessly comprehensive, pursuing the impossible goal of rationalizing politics [12].

The landscape acquires, for the first time, therefore, a relevant role both in academic debate and at the institutional policies level, although the overall frame appears contradictory.

On one hand, there is an academic debate about landscape urbanism calling for “indeterminacy”, and, on the other hand, a big change is taking place from a world of functional zoning towards a world of places explored and governed in terms of their morphology, culture, and identity. Across these two dimensions, a dialectical tension exists between an urban design approach for which the good design represents the solution to any conflict, and a planning perspective for which collective interest cannot be the product of the free and indeterminate play of diverse individual interests, but requires proper planning processes and regulations.

Within these contradictions (and in addition many others too long and specific to be mentioned), in a number of European countries, the landscape convention has given impulse to a new momentum for territorial planning and design that flourishes when meeting a progressive and open political perspective that is interested in mobilizing widespread social actors in the landscape of daily life. This includes, for instance, Catalonia [13], a number of territories in France [14], some planning practices in the Netherlands [15], and Italy.

In this article, the author will focus more specifically on the recent Italian experience of landscape planning and policies, whose evidence is nevertheless a good point of observation for several issues facing spatial planning and the issues of landscape change in contemporary public institutions. This institutional context, and a number of relevant practices in the landscape planning field, will be discussed in relation to three research questions:

- Under which conditions has landscape planning succeeded in refreshing the scope of spatial planning?
- How can the dialectic tension between indeterminacy and regulation be usefully declined in a multilevel governance context like the one into which landscape planning is practiced?
- Which are the main critical issues landscape-planning processes have so far highlighted, and what are the prospects for overcoming them?

2. Materials and Methods

As John Forester recently recalled, still “too much of our academic theorizing seems to have little to do with practice at all, and too many of our practice studies seem not to advance any theoretical understanding either” [16]. Materials and methods used to prepare this paper are both academic theorizing and first-hand practice in landscape planning and public policy processes.

Planning is a specific field of public policies; of course, among the scholarly sources this article refers to when analyzing planning processes, policy sciences and particularly policy analysis play a relevant role. At the same time, the planning discipline has focused for many years, often in a critical way, on planning processes and their relation with planning contents. Authors such as John Friedmann, John Forester, and Patsy Healey are just some important references for looking at the planning process as a complex dynamic between different types of codified and contextual knowledge and institutional and grassroots actors, involving political and value conflict, negotiations, and pragmatic arrangements. Academic literature dealing with landscape planning from such a perspective is more limited, and rather specific to each context; therefore, this source has been used highly selectively, mostly with reference to the Italian context.

Besides scholarly literature, official reports and recent or ongoing research drafts on landscape policies and planning the author has been involved in the preparation of with different roles are among the sources used. In addition to this direct involvement or advisory responsibly in official reports or research projects, the author of this article in previous years has been taking part as a planner to a number of regional landscape planning processes in Italy.

This first-hand experience is therefore among the materials used, referring both to Donald Schön’s well-known “reflection” in and on action as a way “to go beyond mere technical rationality” [17], and to Patsy Healey’s many warnings on and examples of researching planning practice based on her own direct experience. These are just two citations of two of the most influential scholars for methods in returning the evidence deriving from practice.

3. Discussion: Methodological Issues and Political Challenges in the Recent Italian Experience of Landscape Planning

3.1. A Fertile Season

3.1.1. Landscape Plans for the Whole Territory, Co-Planned by State and Regions and Participated in by People

The National Heritage and Landscape Code (D.lgs.42/2004) has foreseen a new typology of landscape plans and planning processes. For the first time, these plans are required to know, safeguard, plan, and manage the entire territory, and not only its most valuable Heritage (i.e., special protection) areas, “in reason of the different values expressed by the diverse contexts constituting it” (National Heritage and Landscape Code, article 135). The planning process that was envisaged is a conjunct one, according to the methods and timing negotiated by each regional government and subscribing to a specific agreement with the Ministry of Heritage. This is not an easy task since at the National Ministry level the approval of the plan depends on public officers, and at the regional level it depends on the vote of an elected Assembly of political representatives; this is a problematic institutional and political relation, due to its asymmetry.

At the same time, the ratification in 2006 of the European Landscape Convention by the Italian State raises the issue of ensuring a proper participation process in landscape planning, which should take into account landscapes “as perceived by people” (article 1).

These provisions altogether configure landscape plans to be a relevant and highly political stake through the following pros and cons.

3.1.2. A Number of Important Conjunctures

The first conjuncture behind the recent Italian experience in landscape planning has been the opportunity for and pride of regions to demonstrate their role in the context of the

growing re-centralization of a policies' political tendency. After the institution of "ordinary regions" in 1970 as elected bodies with legislative power, the constitutional reform which in 2000 introduced the direct election of mayors and regional government presidents, in addition to giving more power to municipalities, as a de facto process started a political debate regarding the excess of government levels and the need to decentralize the system. The Referendum lost by Renzi as Prime Minister in 2016 proposed, in fact, to bring back to Central State many competencies that had been so far shared with regions. Spatial planning and territorial governments (or governance) were among the competencies for which the autonomy so far allowed as regions were under discussion. A number of left-wing parties and more keen politicians remembered how in the 1970s and 1980s this policy field had been an important investment for legitimizing their good government capabilities, gaining intellectual appreciation, and being considered fit for the national government. It can be demonstrated that even in a field under the competence of the Central State (landscape protection), regions were more capable than the State and looked to them as a good strategy. Not by chance, in 2017 [18] Cultural Heritage, Environment, and Territorial Government were cited among the most relevant fields of legislative activity by Regional bodies.

A second important conjunctural aspect for the advance of landscape planning was the appointment in 2013, during Monti's government, of a competent and strong-willed person—Ilaria Borletti Buitoni—as undersecretary of State in charge of the landscape. As the former President of FAI (National Trust for the Environment), she had both competence and passion for landscape action and policies, qualities unfortunately not so often found in political roles. Her action to push landscape plans as well as landscape policies was remarkable until early 2018 when she left this role to the new Lega and Five Star Movement government as a result of the general elections.

A third and last remarkable event was the nomination in a number of regional governments (Puglia, Tuscany, Friuli Venetia Giulia), of new persons (in this case, all women) with the specific responsibility of dealing with critical situations in the field of spatial policies and plans. For all planners, by education as well as academic or professional roles, their common interest in policy outcomes rather than personal political gain provided a relevant contribution in finalizing landscape planning.

3.1.3. Five Plans Approved

Thanks to these favorable conjunctures, between 2015 and 2019, five landscape plans were approved. In 2015 these included both Puglia and Tuscany; in 2017, Piedmont; in 2018, Friuli Venetia Giulia; in 2019, the landscape plan of Lazio was approved by the Regional Council, but with such modifications that the Ministry did not accept it, and the Lazio Region had to revise it again in 2021 to obtain the co-planning stamp by the State.

The time passed between adoption and approval (Table 1), which in some cases was quite long, illustrates clearly the difficulties in overcoming the political and bureaucratic traps that paved the way towards the approval of the plans.

Table 1. Landscape plans in Italy, following the 2004 Code. Dates of approval and adoption.

Landscape Plans Approved (Partial of Full Co-Planning, according to the Heritage and Landscape National Code)		
	Approval	Adoption
Regione Puglia	2015 (Reg. Junta decision)	2010
Regione Toscana	2015 (Reg. Council decision)	(2009) 2014
Regione Piemonte	2017 (Reg. Council decision)	(2009) 2015
Regione FVG	2018 (Reg. President decree)	2017
Regione Lazio	2019 (Reg. Council decision)	2007

Nevertheless, these regional governments, ruled at the time by center-left coalitions, all invested in tasks relevant to human, financial, and political resources.

3.1.4. Landscape Planning Processes as Paths for Discovering and Combining New Knowledge and Experimenting with Its Use

The new plans that were approved all mobilized relevant knowledge about the territories and their landscapes. A common aspect was the effort to combine in proper ways the traditional forms of knowledge used in territorial planning based on structural aspects with new, perceptive content. In a number of cases (Piedmont, Puglia, Tuscany), a real research path was undertaken with renowned scholars, young researchers, newly established temporary planning offices, experimental representations, and so on.

Even the more traditional forms of knowledge used in planning were questioned, innovated, and recombined, and the same was conducted for cultural heritage databases, natural protection areas, morphological analysis (see Figures 1–3), and many other aspects. An example that clearly illustrated the general effort exerted on this regard is the one for the landscape plan of Tuscany [19].

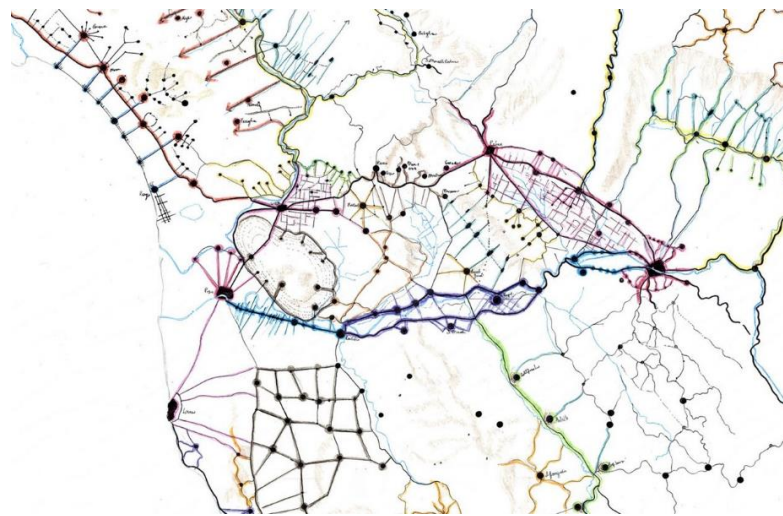


Figure 1. Landscape Plan of Tuscany, settlements' morphology in and around the lower Arno valley.



Figure 2. Landscape Plan of Tuscany, landscape characteristics map (a detail for the upper Val d'Elsa).

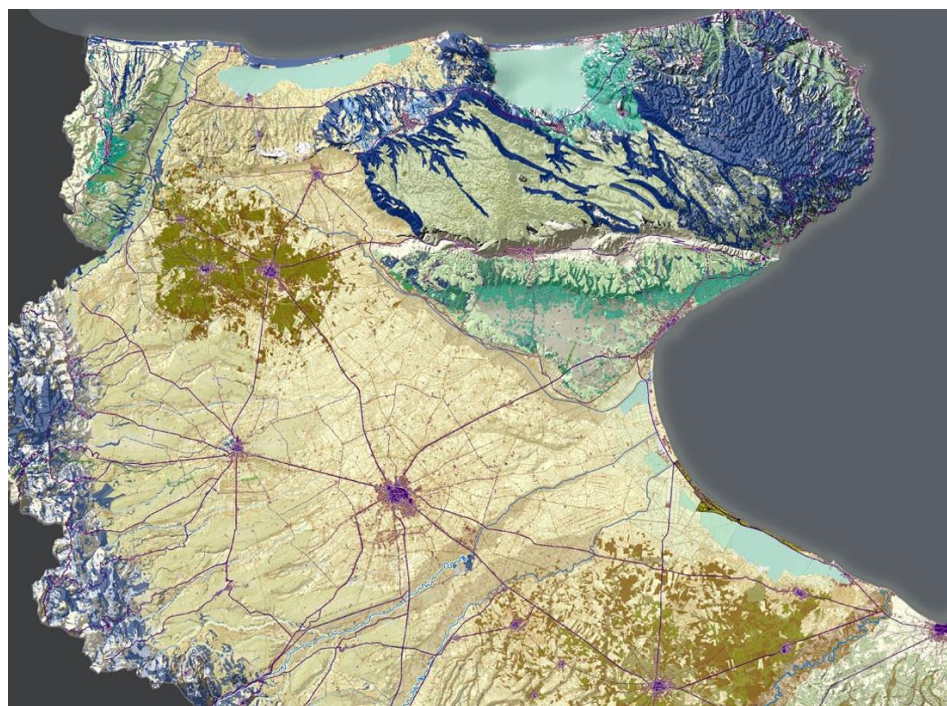


Figure 3. Landscape plan of Puglia, landscape morphology of the region.

Two aspects emerge as rather interesting and innovative: the questioning of nature and culture as two separate issues, since quality landscape emerges always as a sensitive combination of both, and the development of a morphological inquiry and representation in which structural landscape characteristics at different scales can be understood.

At the same time, the awareness that the perception of landscape is always the result of a conceptually constructed vision and that codified knowledge is not enough, since everyday knowledge is also important, tends to define a long-time process rather than the optimal content of a landscape plan.

The use of this type of knowledge in the regulatory contents of the plan is by itself an experiment and so has been dealt with in drafting the plan.

3.1.5. The National Landscape Observatory and Its Work

In 2016, the National Observatory for the Quality of Landscape finally became operational. Required by the 2004 Code and instituted in 2013, it is formally a unique opportunity to make different stakeholders (the Ministry of Culture Undersecretary for Landscape and competent officials, other ministry and region representatives, environmental associations, experts, etc.) interact with each other in an informed way upon specific landscape issues and stakes. An important result has been the collective building of common frames, shared by most members, about how to tackle specific questions and dynamics, distinguishing between negotiable and non-negotiable aspects, and fixing the limits of acceptable compromises.

At the end of 2017, this body produced the first (and, so far, unique) report on the state of landscape policies in Italy [20], with the aim of raising awareness about the importance of knowing and sharing knowledge on our landscapes, but also about how different public policies and NGO actions can deal with it. When browsing the report, it is quite interesting to consider how the landscape is marginally dealt with in national statistics, and also in many sectorial public policies directly affecting it; at the same time, one can see how it is reduced and simplified even in policies intentionally dealing with the landscape. Therefore, this work could have really been an excellent starting point for reformulating procedures and targets.

A few months later, at the beginning of 2018, the Observatory promoted the National Landscape Charter [21], a sort of manifesto about what landscape represents and could represent for Italy (Figure 4). Considered with great interest by experts, universities, NGOs, and

public officials directly in charge of landscape procedures, this contrasts its perception by those who, unfortunately, have the resources to change policies. When considered retrospectively, it appears similar to a “swan song” closing an important and fruitful season.



Figure 4. The first (and currently last) National Report on the State of Landscape Policies in Italy (2017) and the National Landscape Charter (2018).

3.1.6. The Fading of Attention to Landscape as A Policy Issue and Domain

In the following years, only the Lazio Region would approve its landscape plan, 12 years after adoption and with a controversy by the Ministry of Culture lasting several months.

In late 2019, after an interlude with a Five Star Minister of Culture taking no action at all about landscape, the former Minister Franceschini came back to this role. Major environmental and landscape association representatives and experts who were formerly part of the Observatory asked the Minister to reactivate the Observatory and its action in the field of landscape policies.

The new members of the National Observatory for the Quality of Landscape were nominated in July 2020, but nothing took place until the first (and so far, last) convening by the new undersecretary for Landscape (Bergonzoni, losing candidate of Lega in the last Emilia Romagna regional elections) in September 2021. The Lega party is a stronger promoter of the so-called “differentiated autonomy” of regions in Italy, and after the possibility to retain fiscal resources that are produced within the regional territory, competences over landscape protection (that often in conflict with locally much desired new real estate developments) represented a central stake.

To be frank, this intentional lack of attention to the landscape is not just a behavioral attitude of Lega politicians but has, both in the present and the past, many accomplices. It is difficult to say how aware, malicious, or ignorant these accomplices are. A few elements to reflect upon are outlined below.

3.2. *Shadows behind the Facade, and Sometimes over It*

3.2.1. The Use of Landscape Plans as a Political Weapon

All the Landscape Plans so far approved in Italy, at some point, have been used in local politics against their promoters. Politicians from the opposition, but also from inside the majority, accused the regulating contents of them, according to the Heritage and Landscape National Code, of imposing unnecessary burdens upon any development activity. This has happened in Puglia, Tuscany, Piedmont, and Friuli Venezia Giulia. In Sardinia, whose landscape plan regarded not the entire region, just the coastal zone, it was approved shortly before the new code entry came into force, which cost President Soru his office. This occurred despite a center-left

majority, the brilliant figure of this politician having originated from a businessperson career, and a solid plan process led by an experienced consultant [22].

Stakeholders representing private interests and their political allies generally campaign against the plan; this is not because it introduces new burdens, but because it clarifies which are the existing ones, reducing interpretative ambiguities about their zoning and force. The contraction of the negotiating space brought about by the plan worries many operators and has been used so far to guide the interpretation of the rules in their favor.

Elected assemblies have to face, from this point of view, the pitfalls of having some groups lobbying for single enterprises or corporate stakeholders and weak antidotes to this kind of action, as the case of Landscape Plan of Tuscany approval process demonstrates [23]. We recently learned about the so-called Qatar corruption scandal rocking the EU Parliament, and it is much easier to first nurture and then represent local stakeholder's concerns at the regional level. The solution, of course, is not to reduce the powers of elected assemblies but to establish a more serious and effective independent evaluation of their decision process and outcomes.

3.2.2. Implementation Troubles

Plans, similar to other policies, also change dramatically in relation to their effective implementation. This issue, brought to academic attention by the famous contribution of Pressmann and Wildawsky fifty years ago [24], is still much debated [25]. What we know so far about the implementation of the so-far mentioned landscape plans is the great difficulty in keeping together the strategic and regulative contents of the plans, and the tendency to crush them on the regulative contents alone. This comes both from the difficulties of various institutional levels (state, region, municipalities) in integrating the various public actions organized by sector and from the lack of political investment on the topic. Ongoing research promoted in 2021 by the Fondazione Scuola Attività Culturali on landscape planning and protection highlights significant implementation issues for all approved landscape plans.

As implementation proceeds, the plan's initial contents become partly unrecognizable due to the different interpretations that follow one another, including the delayed implementation times for some contents, the lack of implementation for others, and so on.

Of course, such implementation problems are common to many other policies. Specific to landscape plans is the tendency to limit their implementation to bureaucratic aspects that do not take into account the fact that regulative content alone will inevitably turn into content that distributes some kind of resource. Therefore, land-use plans, which in principle regulate development, in fact, distribute building rights. Under this aspect, landscape plans would better distribute financial or other resources in order to promote consideration of the landscape's aspects in public works and private transformation rather than becoming tools that distribute possibilities to avoid landscape conservation rules. Their strategic goal should be the ability to accompany the necessary transformations of the landscape towards virtuous outcomes, but in order to be successful, purely bureaucratic implementation is not enough.

3.2.3. The Lack of Institutional Continuity

This is a general aspect that deserves a specific mention in relation to landscape policies. Institutional continuity is something fundamental, so that when a government changes, the institution honors the commitments formally undertaken. This point is often recalled when large public or private projects are at stake, but unluckily governments and multilevel governance arrangements seldom honor commitments regarding proactive landscape policies.

The National Observatory for the Quality of Landscape, required by the National Code of Cultural Heritage and Landscape as a unique institutional arrangement for the governance of landscape issues at the Central State level has, in the last two legislatures, never worked. The same report on the state of landscape policies, expected every two years, after the first edition in 2017 had no new edition at all. The National Code, in addition to the National Observatory, requires regional landscape observations; sometimes they exist,

but in most cases, they are not operational and do not produce any specific monitoring of landscape transformation, their effective governance, and related outcomes.

How can landscape plans become a serious investment, both in their approval and implementation processes, if landscape policies are considered just a matter for a few civil servants, and the Republic does not guarantee an effective institutional continuity even considering the few provisions existing on this policy domain?

Everything changes, alas, if we consider the use of the landscape in tourism marketing policies. In this policy field, we can find financial and other resources, media attention, and political investments. Are politicians insensitive and mean, or it is the overall landscape policy that is not working?

3.3. A Reversed Perspective from a Bottom-Up Experimental Research Opportunity

3.3.1. Landscape Strategies as a Medium for Activating Local Landscape Producers: A Pilot Research Trial in Piedmont

It has already been mentioned that all approved landscape plans, included the Piedmont one, have raised strong political dispute and are facing severe implementation problems.

At the end of 2018, an important Italian banking foundation, *Compania di San Paolo*, accepted supporting a pilot research trial on some specific area of Piedmont, promoted together with regional administration and local offices of the Heritage Ministry, aimed at experimenting at the local level an accompaniment of the strategic contents of the Landscape Plan. The idea behind the proposal was that while plans' regulatory contents have their own institutional chain, the implementation of strategies is often left to chance or to the goodwill of actors and, therefore, is not the object of specific attention.

The territory considered in the first phase was the Ivrea area [26]. Here, among the diverse outputs and outcomes, the competition between individual municipalities emerged, with great evidence, the opportunity to experiment with unprecedented networks of different actors so far not in contact with each other. In these latter points, the landscape could effectively play an important role as a strategic element in order to foster collective action that could be useful both for landscape and local development, holding together for-profit and non-profit activities.

The second phase, relating to the upper Bormida valley (Figure 5), was recently completed. A territory close to the Unesco WH Langhe, Roero, Monferrato, which exploitation dynamics, for centuries, were characterized by a complex self-subsistence economy [27] and a transit trade ruled by imperial fiefdoms [28], up to modernity characterized by the pollution of the ACNA and immigration towards the industrial poles in the North West of Italy [29]. Today, it is considered the most authentic part of the Langhe (Figure 6), and is beginning to show dynamics of international investment interest with some difficulty by local producers to develop effective networks for sustainable local development (Figure 7).

From the research conducted, a strong desire emerged from the youngest to stay and live in the valley, managing to carry out activities that would allow them to live and maintain the authentic context without transformations such as those evident elsewhere. At the same time, a strong enough consciousness emerged that without proper governance, the animal spirits of capitalism would produce less desirable outcomes, such as the exploitation of this landscape by external raiders or local renters (Figure 8).

In this case, the landscape represents both a relevant stake and a tool for guiding collective governance. In fact, the current and potential producers of a living landscape coherent with the context are the actors to be supported with appropriate actions. Public action, both regulatory and financial, is, in fact, able to support or hinder local economies and their forms of integration, especially in poorly populated territories.

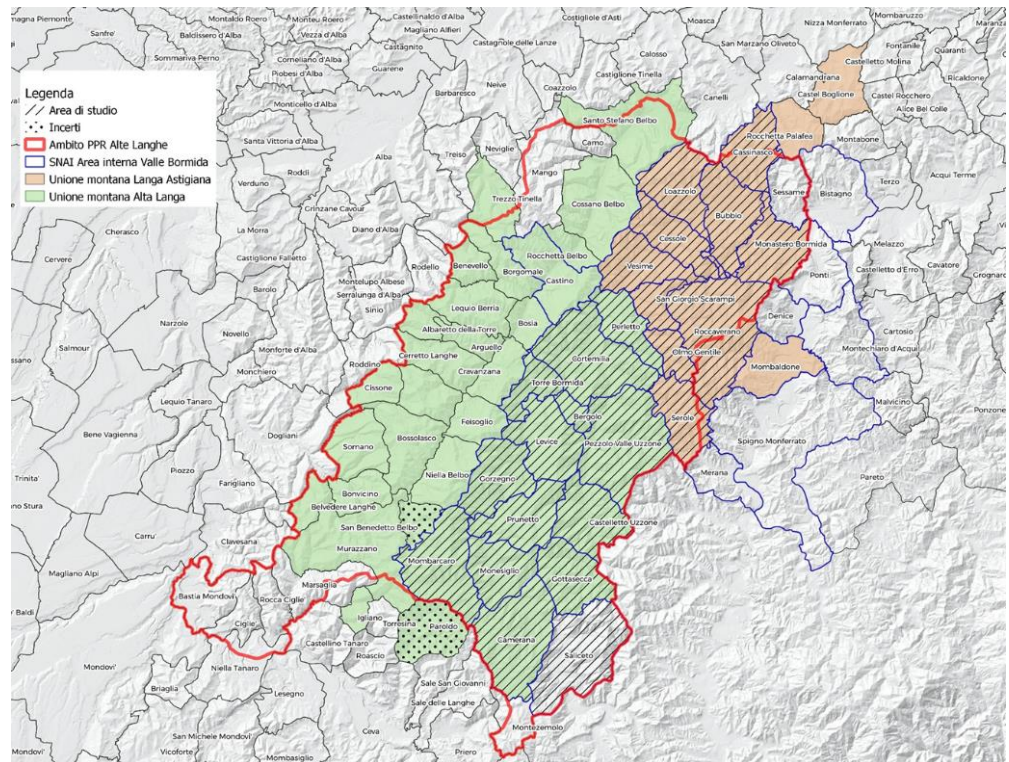


Figure 5. Upper Val Bormida Valley is part of the Alta Langa municipalities union (in green color); part of this area (the one with blue stripes) has been the object of a specific strategy for marginal areas. The red line identifies the specific area designed by the Regional Landscape Plan. The pilot research area here described corresponds to the blue striped area inside the red line. Legend: Area di studio: Study area; Incerti: Uncertain; Ambito PPR Alte Langhe: PPR Alte Langhe area; SNAI Area interna Valle Bormida: SNAI internal area of the Bormida Valley; Unione montana Langa Astigiana: Langa Astigiana mountain union; Unione montana Alta Langa: Alte Langa Mountain Union.

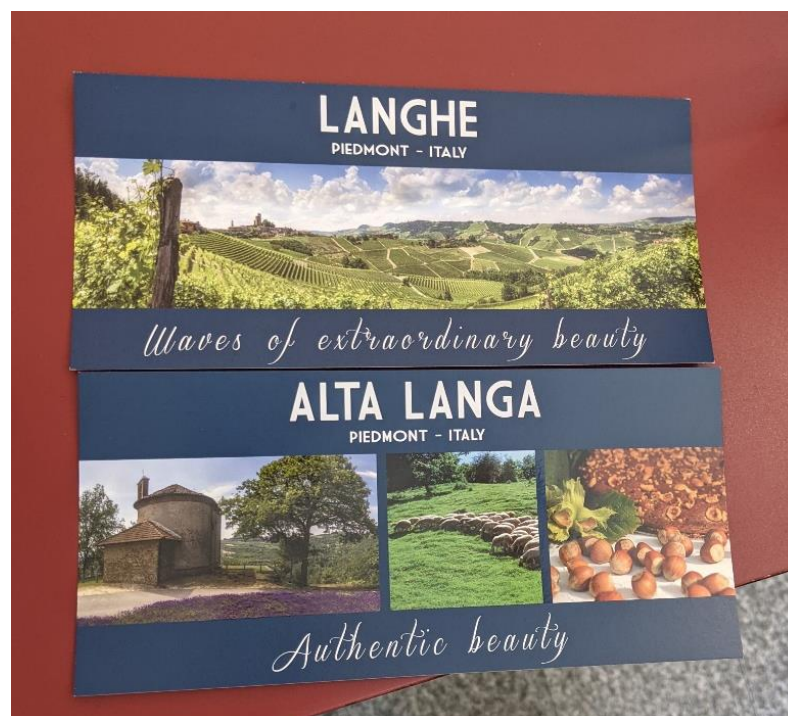


Figure 6. The Alta Langa is today presented in marketing advertisement as an “Authentic Beauty”.



Figure 7. A traditional landscape of upper Bormida Valley.



Figure 8. A new touristic development by foreign people renting to foreign tourists, non-respectful of traditional building types nor interacting with local economies.

3.3.2. First Outcomes: The Landscape as a Medium to Promote Local Actors' Proactive Interaction

This research on the upper Bormida Valley has highlighted, for landscape planning, an important perspective in promoting local actors' proactive interaction towards new paths of place-based sustainable local development.

The precondition for the opening of this perspective is a better knowledge, deepened over time and focused on place, of what landscape is in its specificity, and a sharing of this knowledge with the various local and non-local actors relevant to its government. We have called the experiment carried out in this respect "biography of a landscape" [30].

The specific actions we have focused on here, as capable to overthrow the idea that the landscape plan imposes only constraints, are primarily the simplification of procedures for the restoration of long-lasting landscapes transformed by abandonment or recent tampering, which are often more costly and time-consuming than new building developments. Secondly, support for the completion and integration of local production chains is essential for the maintenance and improvement of the landscape. The scale of the productive activities must remain small to respect the landscape, but in this case, networking policies are needed for marketing and commerce.

The feeling that landscape is an important collective asset is now shared by many people; in this and similar contexts landscape can therefore become an opportunity for developing new networks and strengthening existing ones. What often remains lacking is the policy capacity to work on it, specifying the potential outcomes and experimenting effective operational ways to reach them.

4. Conclusions

4.1. Some Methodological Reflections

4.1.1. Landscape Planning in the Dialectic Tension between Indeterminacy and Regulation

The rational comprehensive idea of planning has been, for a number of years, heavily criticized in favor of proactive action, and of a planning approach that is capable of accepting process, succession, and change. Not just landscape urbanism has asked for such a different approach, but an influential institutional voice:

We must move towards a non-confrontational and participatory planning approach which avoids the 'us against them' ethos where a client is engaged in battle with a planning authority. A positive and proactive planning system must be based on partnership between the local authority and the project stakeholders, with the full involvement of the local community wherever possible. [5] (p. 128)

Traditional land-use planning has found a kind of steady-state for which just local plans have truly prescriptive contents, and these are compensated for by the fact of distributing building rights, or monetary compensation. Positive evidence from proactive planning experiences either refers to some micro-contexts that have been virtuously cultivated for years [31], or shows a lack of effective participation processes that are open to the local community in favor of an overrepresentation of stakeholders gaining from the proposed projects [32]. Urban renewal or regeneration planning has demonstrated that even at the micro-scale, and usually with a fair degree of openness to new proposals, promoters refuse the effective participation of local people, afraid of costs, time, and conflict. Even when foreseen in the plans, participation is too often interpreted in a hasty and ineffective manner.

It is correct and desirable to address the question of how far a plan should prefigure the future, or rather a good process to design it, but probably the most effective solution is a combination of rules on the expected outcomes and processes for supporting these outcomes.

In a multilevel governance context like the one in which landscape planning is practiced the dialectic tension between indeterminacy and regulation can be usefully declined if any level takes its own responsibility in regulating a number of aspects, leaving the others open to others' actors experience and perspectives. At the same time, collective responsibility by the diverse governance actors should be necessary, while too often power is delegated without any systematic evaluation of its outcomes.

Due to national regulations for landscape protection, landscape plans are generally required to have regulatory content. The author has recalled how much this has fueled political controversy and, lastly, how we cannot think about plans without this context. At the same time, regulations must be limited to substantial aspects, and space must be left for innovation. However, at the same time, innovation must be sensitive to people, especially those already living in a place. Can we expect planners or designers, paid by property developers, to be sensitive enough? The governance institutes should help them to resist undue pressures and work at their best.

Here, again some public planning regulations might help. Nevertheless, the real issue is to integrate public expenditure policies and planning normative contents, keeping regulations and incentives coherent and verifying their effective impact on places, ready to scale them down or adapt them based on local evidence. This is not exactly what usually happens, with plans left on their own. At the same time, there is evidence of the potentiality of landscape as a medium to foster sustainable local development paths, by promoting networks of actors sensitive to scenarios that a higher quality landscape can offer.

4.1.2. Innovations in Knowledge

The way landscape planning has recently succeeded in refreshing spatial planning and its scope starts from the different forms and combinations of knowledge considered, and therefore the new perspectives for scenario building and action rationale.

In all landscape planning experiences so far mentioned, the investment in new forms of knowledge has been relevant, and this marks a strong difference with current land-use planning. A common aspect was the effort to combine in proper ways the traditional forms of knowledge used in territorial planning based on structural aspects—in landscape planning reinterpreted through morphological inquiry and representation—with perceptive contents.

The goal of combining these diverse forms of knowledge raises the issue of knowledge co-produced with the inhabitants of a place, i.e., or at least knowledge produced in interaction with the specific landscape and its inhabitants/producers. A prerequisite for co-production is access to institutional documents by citizens as a right, without the need for specific qualifications or reason; notwithstanding many declarations, this principle still finds poor application.

Of course, co-producing effective knowledge requires concerns for current landscape status and stakes, but also ongoing and future dynamics, where public or collective action could change the course of events and make different scenarios possible. Knowledge co-production—as well as considering quite different types of knowledge—sets the basis for a more shared and open approach to scenario building and action planning, focused on combining the diverse action rationales in a collectively useful perspective.

Attention toward landscape is often interpreted as a claim to the common good. From this point of view, landscape planning brings a new attention to the importance of better knowing three kinds of dynamics. First, there is the maintenance of common landscape, i.e., landscape owned, used, and/or produced by the community. Second to note is the production of landscape by public works or, more generally, by public action. This should give the example of desirable outcomes, and too often, it does not live up to expectations. These first two dynamics culturally largely determine the third, landscape produced by private individuals. From this perspective, the opposition between indeterminacy and regulation loses significance, for the benefit of a real collective action, by the public and the community. Unluckily, public bodies seldom give a good example as far as attention and care for landscape aspects are concerned.

4.2. Remarks about EU Policies and Landscape

4.2.1. The Europeanization of National and Regional Policies

The growing influence of the European Union on both national and regional/local policies in recent years has led to talk of the Europeanization of policies. This influence, which manifests itself in various forms, has, over time, modified formal and substantial aspects of many policy arenas, influencing not only the results but also the symbolic cognitive dimension of the policies [33].

4.2.2. The Landscape as an Illegitimate Child in the European Union

In this Europeanization process, if not totally absent, the landscape is a kind of illegitimate child. In fact, if the European Landscape Convention is one of the most cited documents in this regard, it is worth remembering how it was promoted by the Council

of Europe and was formally ignored by the European Union. The only reference is in the description of the Horizon 2020 research projects' call, and no further.

In relation to the recent European Green Deal, the principle of do no significant harm (DNSH) sounds similar to an abstract entity with no relation to a place's quality or landscape. In the absence of any official document naming the landscape, a purpose-created network of NGOs and other private associations has issued a policy briefing offering guidance to EU institutions and member states "on why and how to leverage holistic landscape restoration to substantially, effectively, and efficiently deliver the European Green Deal (EGD)" [34].

In Italy, EGD investments are currently and will be for the short-to-medium term the most relevant public investment source. These investments not only ignore any impact on landscape, but in order to speed their expenditure the State has simplified the few ordinary procedures meant to verify the effect of financed works on landscape. Landscape plans, strategies, and local actions are therefore playing and will play in the near future a less than secondary role in directing the transformations.

4.3. The Urgent Need to Change Policy Perspectives

The evidence brought by landscape planning over the last few years has really given new impulses and perspectives to spatial planning in Italy, but also in other important European countries. These planning processes have produced relevant knowledge about concerned territories and their landscapes, with a common effort to merge traditional forms of knowledge based on structural aspects with perceptive contents, helping to distance planning from functionalist tendencies. The new attention to morphological representation in which structural landscape characteristics at different scales can be understood, and could be taken as a frame for the governance of transformations, is also a relevant aspect for dealing with the future sustainability of territories.

The questioning of nature and culture as two separate issues is also an important result of the new attention to landscape as long-term heritage specific to each place, where these two aspects are always strongly interrelated. At the same time, landscape planning processes have mobilized people's attention and contribution since the landscape is largely felt as a common interest stake, and could become an interesting element for new local development scenarios, particularly for rural areas.

The capacity to produce effective policies and plans has been so far, in the Italian experience at least, much dependent on the sensibility and strong personal investment of people appointed to key roles, while the different levels of government have shown a substantial lack of institutional continuity, as far as landscape policies and plan implementation are concerned.

On the other hand, the effort made in Italy to produce a first (and so far, sadly, the last) report on the state of landscape policies has given the opportunity to consider how the landscape is marginally dealt with in many sectorial public policies directly affecting planning effectiveness. At the same time, we are aware of how much even policies intentionally dealing with landscape reduce and simplify this concept.

The point is not trivial since, especially at the local level, the quality of landscapes depends on the current and potential producers of a living landscape coherent with the context. If producers interact with appropriate public actions, private economies can contribute to creating fair and beautiful landscapes; if public action, both regulatory and financial, does not consider landscape as a stake, its effects can be disruptive, and no landscape plan can help.

Concerning the main critical issues landscape-planning processes have so far highlighted, the prospects for overcoming them include the need to guarantee institutional continuity to institutional planning processes, ensuring positive feedbacks to grassroots associations and other actors contributing altogether to the landscape process and investing into it with their private choices. Public institutions, from this point of view, shall give the example as responsible and reliable actors.

The tendency, in politics, to transform regulatory policies into distributive policies, also raises urgently the issue of making landscape plans work, by integrating their addresses with the way public financial support to landscape transformation is allocated.

From this point of view, the total absence of landscape consideration in European policies is really a big deficit; even in the recent Green Deal, financing opportunities can contribute further to destroying our landscapes in the name of abstract environmental sustainability.

Therefore, there is really an urgent need to reformulate the procedures and targets of public policies in relation to landscape, learning as much as possible from the landscape planning practices that have been put in place so far in a number of European regions.

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