

Chapter 43

The Landscape Observatory of Catalonia. A Journey of Fifteen Years



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In December 2000, the Parliament of the autonomous region of Catalonia (Spain) signed the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe 2000), promoted by the Council of Europe and adopted on 20 October 2000. Without the institutional (and moral) impact of this Convention, many of Europe's subsequent political, legislative, academic and professional initiatives on landscape would have been unthinkable, and Catalonia is no exception.

Five years later, in 2005, Parliament passed the Landscape Protection, Management and Planning Act 8/2005 (Generalitat de Catalunya 2006) as the basis for landscape policy in Catalonia. With the passing of this Act, landscape ceased to have an exclusively aesthetic connotation and became an active element in regional planning and management and a driving force in development. A few months before the Act was drawn up, the Landscape Observatory of Catalonia was set up (and eventually recognized in the Act) as the Generalitat of Catalonia's assessment body and as a way to create public awareness on landscape matters. The observatory has been operating since 1 March 2005.

The book "Quinze anys" (Observatori del Paisatge de Catalunya 2020) was published to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the Landscape Observatory. It contains fifteen concepts and reflections that resonate and connect with the entity's objectives, tasks and *raison d'être*, and the raw material with which it works: the landscapes of

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Catalonia and their values. The fifteen concepts are: journey, place, laboratory, knowledge, action, mirror, dialogue, community, bridges, atmospheres, values, emotions, gazes, colours and edges.

43.1 Fifteen Concepts and Reflections for Fifteen Years

Since the Landscape Observatory started this amazing **journey** fifteen years ago, it has been joined by many travelling companions from Catalonia, Spain and around the world (institutions, organizations and networks, from local to international levels). With their help, it has generated an enormous body of knowledge about landscape that has reached institutions and society in general and guided public policy. After fifteen years, level zero has been covered; in other words, the Observatory has laid the foundations that are indispensable to take a leap forward and go even further afield.

The Observatory is the **place** where theoretical reflection and practical application come together to serve landscape policy, and it has been located from the beginning in the city of Olot. It is a shared, open, receptive meeting point, midway between civil society and government and academic and professional sectors, in all areas related to landscape culture. The Observatory is completely open to new and emerging approaches, to what is happening today, and not just what happened yesterday, and has come down to us through that extraordinary palimpsest of our landscape.

The Observatory is constantly evolving and redefining itself; by applying the principles of pluralism and diversity, it has become a **laboratory**, an incubator for innovative projects. It is open to creative, imaginative initiatives, and it explores and creates new tools and instruments that often go beyond the limitations that inevitably constrain government activity (Nogué and Sala 2018).

One of the main functions of the Landscape Observatory is **knowledge** generation. Knowledge is fundamental for taking decisions both locally and nationally regarding landscape; knowledge that, by definition, must be holistic and cross-cutting. The Observatory generates, shares and transfers knowledge and methodologies to all parts of society, inviting participation from all its stakeholders. And it does so in the conviction that expert knowledge requires the interchange of many and diverse inputs, from the knowledge of specialists to the perceptions and opinions of civil society. To this end, landscape catalogues have become the main instruments for generating knowledge about landscape in Catalonia and for introducing landscape quality objectives into urban and regional planning as well as into sectorial policies, such as agriculture, heritage, tourism and energy, with the cooperation and participation of all stakeholders. The catalogues mark a turning point in landscape knowledge and management (Sala 2010) due to both their ability to document and guide public policies and their potential to educate and raise public awareness (Sala 2010; 2012).

Knowledge must always precede **action**. The Observatory is a space for reflection and action on landscape issues; its purpose is not merely to provide support for public policies but also to educate, imbuing society as a whole with knowledge and

increased awareness. In addition to landscape charters and plans, projects, guidelines, documents, symposia, seminars, courses and publications, the landscape catalogues continue to be one of the tools we use to directly impact society by fostering more specific planning, management and protection measures. Despite the fact that Catalan Landscape Policy has been in existence for fifteen years, landscape is only beginning to penetrate public and political debate, so the task ahead of raising awareness is immense.

We could also say that the Observatory acts as a **mirror** of landscape. Through its action, the Observatory reflects landscape's true state of health, detects emerging dynamics and provides input for future agendas.

The next three concepts (dialogue, community and bridges) are absolutely crucial. The daily **dialogue** that contemporary societies have with their everyday landscapes demands continuous interdisciplinary methodology exchange and spaces for sharing ideas, cooperation and consensus between government and civil society and between the public and private spheres, leading to new forms of participative democracy in territorial management. Such experiences as the UNESCO Candidature of Priorat or the Cross-border Plan of La Cerdanya (Observatori del Paisatge de Catalunya 2013) show that the Landscape Observatory can promote new forms of participatory democracy in all aspects of territorial governance and management. Closely related to this issue, landscape is generating increasing local interest as local stakeholders perceive landscape as a catalyst for development and a way to increase self-esteem, identity and quality of life. The current COVID-19 crisis is reinforcing this situation.

There is no landscape without **community**. We live in a community and it is with this community that we share our perceptions and experiences of landscape. This is why landscape provides such an excellent tool for addressing the complexity of territorial management and for promoting community organization by constantly eliciting new forms of engagement and governance. Collectively, we cannot be indifferent to those landscape values that may help us transition towards a new model of society inspired by cohesion, solidarity, diversity, cooperation, the common good, integration, peaceful coexistence, tradition, innovation or beauty.

Dialogue and community are inseparable. Integrated visions of landscape have the capacity to build (political, cultural, economic...) **bridges** between broad sectors of society and find a middle ground and areas of consensus between often opposing visions. The aim is to promote landscape quality that has positive effects on people's well-being, generates economic opportunities and invigorates territories both socially and culturally.

Another function of the Observatory is the creation of **atmospheres**, spaces for sharing diverse, contrasting experiences and sociability that, in turn, generate new atmospheres... in an infinitely repeating cycle. Building landscapes implies creating synergies, complicities and interdependencies from a sense of proximity and everyday experience.

One of our main efforts during these 15 years has been the identification of landscape **values**. That is right; landscapes treasure an extraordinary diversity of values: natural, aesthetic, historic, social, symbolic and productive. These values are acknowledged both by the scientific community and by the general public. And

some of them are increasingly recognized as crucial in addressing the challenges and uncertainties of today's world, such as climate change, health crises or forced migrations.

The concept of *values* is closely linked to another: **emotion**. Landscape can generate individual **emotions** and, at the same time, be a depositary of scientifically recognized and socially shared values. Landscape is full of meaning; it summons memories and awakens emotions that have a direct impact on our well-being and health. This is why the methodologies and work of the Observatory have always considered the emotional and affective dimension resulting from the relationship between people and their landscape to be inseparable from the physical and material dimensions.

Values and *emotions* lead us directly to the idea of **gazes**. The landscape is the result of the confluence between different gazes, perceptions, interpretations and sensibilities. Every one of these gazes is needed to understand a landscape's logic and idiosyncrasy and to ensure its adequate management, as the European Landscape Convention establishes.

And of the final two reflections related to the last fifteen years, the first is **colours** because blending a few primary colours in different proportions gives an extraordinary range of complementary colours. The Observatory is a primary **colour**, a space in which extremely diverse sensibilities converge, interacting to generate new projects and new relational frameworks. The 134 landscape units identified by the Landscape Observatory (which are understood as areas that share the same landscape character) define the first map of Catalonia's landscapes (Observatori del Paisatge de Catalunya & ICGC 2019) and provide a metaphorical expression of this chromatic diversity. Beyond being the basic territorial units for the application of specific landscape policies, or even new political-administrative entities rethinking landscape governance, they are spaces for life, meeting points, repositories of collective memories.

The last idea is **edge**. The Observatory is at the interface between science and management. Similarly, landscapes are thresholds between different territorial situations and—sometimes—mental attitudes. To act on these fringes, we need to find transitional spaces, the edges between their time and space scales, and understand their social and symbolic references.

43.2 Looking Ahead

Now, fifteen years after the approval of the Catalan Landscape Act, is a good time to take stock. The landscape policies of Catalonia were drawn up and took their first steps in a context of an economic boom which drove great, although not entirely well accepted, dynamism that substantially impoverished the landscape in many parts of the territory. Now that the 134 landscapes of Catalonia have been identified and defined, that the main instruments of the Landscape Act have been rolled-out and that the Landscape Observatory is a consolidated body supporting public administrations

and raising public awareness; now that new bridges have been built between the landscape and land planning policies; and now that the importance of the landscape and the work of the Observatory has gradually been internalized by the administrations, organizations and economic and social agents of Catalonia, it is time to make a leap forward in landscape policy to make it more transversal, pragmatic and designed for action in order to reinforce public–private partnerships and cooperation and ensure that we are better oriented towards our current challenges and today’s areas of great landscape debate.

Some of these challenges and areas are landscape contribution to well-being, equality, health, social cohesion and quality of life; the growing role of landscape as an indicator of, and now as a response to, climate change in a situation of global climate emergency; major dialectics: Local–global, rural–urban, authenticity *versus* artificialization or transformation *versus* destruction; the question of identities in a globalized and hyper-mobile context; the creation of new benchmark landscapes; ordinary landscapes and their *patrimonialization*; the relationship between landscape and new tourism; the common good; city limits; participatory democracy; virtual landscapes.

Finally, these challenges show us that landscape policies must be cross-cutting, interdepartmental and participatory, which is never very easy to achieve. At a time of global challenges and social uncertainty, there is an increasing need for in-depth discussion on the role of landscape in contemporary societies.

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