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Mission and role of the Landscape Observatories in Europe: an introduction

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1. European Landscape Convention objectives and Observatories' missions.

Nearly a decade after the first experiences of Landscape Observatories (LOs), this Seminar recalls the one of Careggi in 2013 trying to define their evolution, since the creation by the Council of Europe of the three networks provided for the implementation of the European Landscape Convention (ELC): UNISCAPE, RECEP-ENELC, CIVILSCAPE. The wide development of LOs in European countries testifies the relevance of their scope - the need for supporting with knowledge and social participation the scientific, political and cultural change promoted by the ELC – but also gives evidence to the ambiguities, the conceptual uncertainties and the coordination difficulties. So, the optimism reflected in the landscape rhetorics and the hopes or illusions that many communities entrust to the landscape concept, cannot obscure the need for a critical approach by the LOs. In the attempt of defining the role of LOs in the changing context of modern society, we must recall the main ELC objectives relevant to this regard:

- Expansion of landscape policies, in terms of protection and enhancement of the entire territory, beyond the constraints and safeguards traditionally applied to single landscape properties',
- Strengthening of landscape policies, in terms of knowledge and awareness of structural factors, public interests and values at stake, multi-sectorial strategies,
- Effective participation of the stakeholders, right holders and local communities, based on their expectations and perceptions, for the public regulation of landscape processes.

According to such objectives and to the further definitions of the Statute of RECEP-ENELC, the Careggi Seminar underlined a two-fold mission for the LOs:

- a) on the one hand, they constitute *instruments for the defense and the enhancement* of the local identities and cultures;
- b) on the other hand, they can be configured as *knots of networks* open to the world and linking diverse natural and cultural resources for the improvement of the territorial qualities.

2. Specific role of LOs

Such mission regards both the 3 networks created by Council of Europe to drive the implementation and monitoring of the landscape policies at the European level, and the numer-



ous Observatories formally set up with this title in various European countries on the basis of national, regional or local initiatives. The role of the 3 European networks is different from the role of the LOs, and it is different for each of them. Particularly, the role of Uniscape as it raises from the experiences, seems to be crucial for linking landscape' practices to scientific and project activities, unlike the role of Recep-Enelc which aims to promote the local powers activities, or the role of Civilscape mainly related to the diverse social interests. Surely, in different forms and with different scopes, the 3 European networks are called to perform the activities provided by the ELC, which include landscape observation as well as evaluation, monitoring, analyzing, management. But the 3 networks are not merely or mainly 3 Observatories, with the same meaning of the LOs specifically considered in the present document.

While the scope and the function of the three European networks have been defined with their founding acts in strict relation to the ELC, it is not the same for the Observatories, whose definition is much more diversified. In fact, to perform effectively their first mission, the LOs must make specific and unavoidable reference to the territorial realities on behalf of which they are created. The territorial rooting is the trade-mark of the LOs and their "raison d'être". As we can see in the experiences made, the reflections and the documents produced (such as the Canarie Manifesto 2011, or the numerous contributes presented to the Careggi Seminar or even to this Seminar), the concerned territories are extremely different in terms of size, natural and cultural characters, knowledge, plans and regulations. Such diversification has some relevant implications: the need for a trans-scale and trans-sectoral approach, the "interpretative" (not directly normative) prevailing character of the LO' functions, their role "open" and consciously partial towards the activities that other subjects and institutions are carrying out in the same territories (local administrations, universities, research centres and so on). In other terms, the LOs, to be well rooted in their territories, are called to play an interactive game, rather than to produce an objective and autonomous collection of statements or neutral data. This need has to be well considered when the LOs are concerned with the production of the atlas of maps.

3. Problems, evaluations and indicators

By consequence, as it raises from the contributes presented to the Seminar, each LO has to face risks and problems, worries, regulation needs and project inputs largely diversified. Of course, a sharp distinction may be made between the problems raising from the territorial realities (such as local or regional problems linked to the effects on landscape of global change) and problems or questions concerning theories, methods, laws technological devices to be used for planning and regulation of landscape dynamics. Despite the wide diversity of the problems that should be faced by the landscape policies and therefore by the LOs, their utility and their positive contribute to the "landscape project", always request analysis and evaluations based on adequate multi-disciplinary, scientific and

cultural competencies, able to guarantee the effective pursuit of the above recalled ELC objectives. To this end, it could be useful that the 3 ELC networks (possibly with the help of the Scientific Committee) build up a shared evaluation framework, containing models and sets of indicators of quality, to be flexibly applied to diverse territorial situations. As an example, one should expect from the Italian LOs the special attention for participation processes that has been lacking up to now, even in legal terms (see the Italian Code 2004 on cultural heritage and landscape). Moreover, we must underline the mediation role that LOs can play between experts' knowledge and local cultures, in a bi-directional interaction which, on the one hand gives voice to the involved populations as stated by the ELC, and on the other hand may translate scientific and technical information in effective regulations.

4. Tools and services

To perform the above activities, the LOs should have at their disposal some proper tools. It has been proposed that each LO, or a set of LOs, provides a centre for Landscape Observatory Documentation (LOD), in order to ensure the continuity of its activity, the sedimentation of outputs, and their accessibility and dissemination. The services entrusted to the LODs to be accessible by means of the suitable website, may concern particularly:

- mapping LOs and relative centres and institutions,
- linking people involved (scholars, public officials, citizens...),
- exchanging information among LOs,
- gathering maps, data bases and other documents concerning each LO,
- promoting events and shared initiatives.

The building of LODs is open to anyone willing to contribute, sending information and documentation and joining the working groups which are to be constituted for the above activities. But, in order to ensure the coherence of the implementation processes towards the general and specific objectives recalled in the above point I, we can also provide a "competence platform", formed by experts accredited by Uniscape, to be consulted for the comparison of proposals, evaluations and local projects, with an integrated and international vision.

5. Coordination networks

In order to play their role as knots of networks, the LOs need the *coordination* of initiatives, experiences and activities, clashing with the extreme diversification and dispersion of initiatives, which reflect, at least in part, the inherent meaning of landscape, the irreducible subjectivity of the landscape experience, and the indispensable role of local options and perceptions. As it was stated in the Seminar of Careggi, a first move in this direction



could consist of a concerted redefinition of the tools and tasks of each of the 3 European networks, and possibly the role of the Scientific Committee, to be reconsidered as a transverse instrument at the service of all three networks. In the context of this redefinition, an important goal could be the creation of a Network of European Landscape Observatories focused on the organization activities enlightened above. Such network, working with and for the Observatories, should offer a common ground of dialogue and cooperation for the 3 existing networks.

A second crucial move concerns the shift of conservation policies from the protection of single properties to the active conservation of the entire territory of each landscape, as a whole network of natural, economic, social and cultural relations. The LOs can play an important role in identifying and evaluating values and problems and indicating the objectives of quality to be pursued by landscape planning and management, against the tendency of the detachment of protection from the range of territorial policies impacting on the landscape. A detachment that can condemn the LOs to a merely “inventory” or cosmetic role. But if we want avoid this risk we must draw the attention to the need for an effective *alliance* between the policies of landscape conservation and the policies of nature conservation. In particular, the conservation of parks and natural protected areas, both inside and outside the city, both at the local and at the regional or even international level (see for instance the Rete Natura 2000, created by the European Union).

As a final remark, we can observe that the risks and processes of environmental degradation related to global changes and threatening the European landscapes, meet new imperatives of fairness and equity required for the world’s population, calling for new visions and new strategies of development. Against this dramatic scenarios of change, the active conservation of the landscape poses unavoidable instances of public regulation at all levels. The “*right to landscape*” implies that new citizenship rights should be guaranteed by public authorities, even by means of supra-local measures and strategies. At the same time, public regulation must strengthen the role of local communities in creating and managing their landscapes. In these directions, the task of the networks of LOs is of utmost importance.

Landscape Observatories in Europe: the Action Plan

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On the basis of the twenty seminar presentations - from Italy, Spain, Portugal, The Netherlands, Slovakia, Sweden, Lebanon, and Japan - we would like to make the point on the state of Landscape Observatories (LOs) in Europe, including some suggestions for the development of future initiatives and research programs.

General issues of discussion concern LOs definition, role and potentialities. The experiences and the projects mentioned during the Seminar show that LOs can be conceived in many different ways:

1. **data-container** of material (cartography, pictures and other types of iconographic representation, texts, and so on) and immaterial knowledge; in other words, a landscape atlas;
2. **monitoring instrument** for long term landscapes transformation;
3. **place** where experience-based knowledge meets experts-based knowledge; civil society meet experts, public officials, decision makers trying to build up a common language;
4. **mediator, catalyzer, incubator** of innovative initiatives, based more on people than on landscape types;
5. **way** to improve the landscape right in Europe and promote the people responsibility being landscape actors and not bystanders!

Existing observatories also are very different with regard to their legal nature: civil society associations, public entities, research bodies, or a consortium. This differences have an effect on the role of LOs and on their capacity of interaction with other actors. This also means interactions between the information built up by LOs, usually bottom-up and open source, and official, and validated, governmental databases. And, of course, interactions intended for decision making. In particular, the world of European Observatories looks to the Council of Europe, and its Information System, wishing for a possibility of interaction.

During the Seminar, we felt that the interaction among existing observatories, and the interaction with people interested in setting up new observatories, was a fundamental task, due to the peculiar moment of effervescence, creativity, and experimentation. All the “observatories



people” are interested in meeting each other, confronting and sharing methods, experiences, but also practical information: “how do you?”.

Knowing “who and where” is doing LOs is the first step. Thus, we decide to build up an **international information platform** for LOs networking at European level: the Landscape Observatories Documentation (LOD) website (<http://areeweb.polito.it/LOD/index.php>). The website is hosted by Politecnico di Torino, as a heritage of the Turin Seminar. It is a tool for mapping LOs, or, better, a tool offered to LOs for self-mapping and get into the network. A web survey is ongoing, and the result will be soon available. In the meantime, it may be interesting to notice that, thanks to reports from the net, LOs in America have been found out.

The Seminar had another relevant heritage: the **Charter of Torino**. The Charter of Torino for the Promotion and Dissemination of the Landscape Observatories in Europe promote the establishment of a European Coordination of Landscape Observatories, identified as a useful approach for the application in all Member States of the principles of the European Landscape Convention. The Charter has been presented by Uniscape at the 8th Council of Europe Conference on The European Landscape Convention, in Strasbourg, on 18-20 March 2015.

The Landscape Observatories research is just at the beginning!