

Landscape and Memory

Ken Taylor

'Any landscape is a condition of the spirit' Henri Frédéric Amiel

Abstract

One of our deepest needs is for a sense of identity and belonging and a common denominator in this is human attachment to landscape and how we find identity in landscape and place. Landscape therefore is not simply what we see, but a way of seeing: we see it with our eye but interpret it with our mind and ascribe values to landscape for intangible – spiritual – reasons. Landscape can therefore be seen as a cultural construct in which our sense of place and memories inhere. Critical to this has been the increasing attention given to the study of cultural landscapes, even to the extent of recognition in 1992 of World Heritage Categories of outstanding cultural landscapes. The paper explores some of the associated ideas of landscape and memory and how landscape permeates much of our thinking of who we are.

Landscape is ...

Landscape is a ubiquitous word in English and its global variations. But what is 'landscape'?, and what are its connections with human memory? On the first question I want to quote from two of the mid-twentieth pioneering teachers of landscape study, J B Jackson and W G Hoskins. Jackson in his reflections on what landscape is in *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* quotes what he calls 'the old fashioned but surprisingly persistent definition of *landscape*: "A portion of the earth's surface that can be comprehended at a glance."'¹ He saw landscape as 'A rich and beautiful book [that] is always open before us. We have but to learn to read it.'² Hoskins asserted the significance of landscape in *The Making of the English Landscape* with proposal that 'The ... landscape itself, to those who know how to read it aright is the richest historical record we possess.'³

What Hoskins and Jackson were contending was the modern foundation for landscape study. This is where landscape is not looked on as simply a pretty picture or as a static text: rather it was the expression of landscape as cultural process.⁴ This is the essence of what Mitchell in 1994 sees as part of a 'process by which ... identities are formed'.⁵ The connections, therefore, between landscape and identity and hence memory, thought, and comprehension are fundamental to understanding of landscape and human sense of place. In this vein of seeing and comprehending is Milton's comment on a piece of landscape in 1632 (**SLIDE 2 Mt Ainslie**):

*Streit mine eye has caught new pleasures
Whilst the Lantskip round it measures.*⁶

But memory of landscape is not always associated with pleasure. It can be associated sometimes with loss, with pain, with social fracture and sense of belonging gone, although

the memory remains, albeit poignantly (**SLIDE3 Holocaust**). Margaret Drabble in *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature* referring to Virginia Woolf's sense of loss of a loved place vividly expresses this emotional sense of landscape lost:

*The past lives on in art and memory, but it is not static: it shifts and changes as the present throws its shadow backwards. The landscape also changes, but far more slowly; it is a living link between what we were and what we have become. This is one of the reasons why we feel such a profound and apparently disproportionate anguish when a loved landscape is altered out of recognition; we lose not only a place, but ourselves, a continuity between the shifting phases of our life.*⁷

Attractive, important, and ambiguous term

Thirty years ago Donald Meinig proposed that 'Landscape is an attractive, important, and ambiguous term [that] encompasses an ensemble of ordinary features which constitute an extraordinarily rich exhibit of the course and character of any society' and that 'Landscape is defined by our vision and interpreted by our minds.'⁸ In other words, to understand ourselves we need to look searchingly at our landscapes for they are a clue to culture⁹, and our ordinary everyday landscapes at that, not just the national icons.

Images of landscape are evident in a remarkable range of our creations: literature, poetry, paintings, ceramics, tapestries and weaving, myths, gardens, cultural activities, films, television documentaries, travel material, maps, advertising (**SLIDE 4: Dot Painting etc**). We laud our virtues and achievements through iconic landscape imagery, often forgetting that equally the ordinary everyday landscape reflects deeply who we are and is a storehouse of private and collective memories. In this vein Jane Austen, in the novel *Emma*, has her see a 'sweet view, sweet to the eye and the mind. English verdure, English culture, English comfort, seen under a bright sun, without being oppressive.' (**SLIDE 5 Rousham**). Here is reminder of the derivation of the word 'landscape' with its origin in Anglo-German language dating back to 500AD in Europe. The word – *landscaef* – and the notion it implied were taken to Britain by Anglo-Saxon settlers.¹⁰ It meant a clearing in the forest with animals, huts, fields, fences. It was essentially a peasant landscape carved out of the original forest or *weald*, ie out of the wilderness.

So 'landscape' from its beginnings has meant a man-made artefact with associated cultural process values. In the seventeenth century in Europe, particularly England, the landscape idea became associated with landscape paintings, particularly the Dutch realistic *lantskip* school and the imaginary history paintings of artists such as Claude Lorrain with figures set in idealised pastoral scenes. Landscape and scenery became synonymous and associated with the idea of people in a humanised landscape (**SLIDE 6 Claude Lorrain**).

We see and make landscapes as a result of our shared system of beliefs and ideologies. In this way landscape is a cultural construct, a mirror of our memories and myths encoded with meanings which can be read and interpreted. Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory* contends that:

*Before it can ever be the repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock.*¹¹

In contrast in the nineteenth century 'landscape' became imbued with nationalistically religious and then scientific associations in Europe and North America linked to the concept of wilderness or wild nature: something apart from people as with the Transcendentalist movement in North America. The ultimate wilderness experience was one of solitude: people and their trappings spoiled landscape in this image. We saw the zenith of this ideology in the 1980s and 1990s where nature and culture were regarded by some natural heritage lobbyists in the western tradition as antithetical. At the extreme, people were not part of nature and landscape was not seen as a cultural construct. It acquired objective scientific meaning. It was part of the movement where conservation causes, such as wilderness, [are] symbolic of hopes for new human-environment relationships predicated on revaluing nature.¹² Yet in this proposition, wilderness like all ideas of landscape, is a cultural construct, a product of the mind framed by ideologies and experience. 'Landscape is memory, there is no unmediated perception of nature.'¹³ Even in so-called wilderness areas such as Yosemite or examples in Australia there is ample evidence of human occupation and manipulation of the landscape particularly by fire (**SLIDE 7 Yosemite, Lycett etc**). In this sense, then, all landscape is cultural landscape.

The rise of cultural landscapes

The 1990s saw a remarkable flowering of interest in, and understanding of, cultural landscapes: what David Jacques nicely calls 'the rise of cultural landscapes'.¹⁴ As a result of the rise – with associated emergence of a different value system inherent in cultural landscapes – there came a challenge to the 1960s and 1970s concept of heritage focussing on great monuments and archaeological locations, famous architectural ensembles, or historic sites with connections to the rich and famous (**SLIDE 8 Venice**). Widening interest in public history and understanding that 'the ... landscape itself, to those who know how to read it aright is the greatest historical record we possess'¹⁵ informed the emergence of the cultural landscape movement. It also informed the notion that places or landscapes reflecting everyday ways of life, the ideologies that compel people to create places, and the sequence or rhythm of life over time are significant. They tell the story of people, events and places through time, offering a sense of continuity, a sense of the stream of time. They also offer a cultural context setting for cultural heritage.

Critical to the 1990s movement were the 1960s and 1970s scholarly writings of cultural geographers like David Lowenthal, Peirce Lewis, Donald Meining,¹⁶ J.B. Jackson¹⁷ with his inimitable essays on the everyday American scene, Dennis Cosgrove¹⁸ in Britain, or Dennis Jeans¹⁹ in Australia. They built on the late nineteenth century German tradition of Otto Schlütter's 'Kulturlandschaft' with landscape morphology seen as a cultural outcome and Franz Boas who championed the idea that different cultures adjusted to similar environments and taught the historicist mode of conceptualising environment.²⁰ Boas argued that it was important to understand cultural traits of societies – their behaviours, beliefs, and symbols – and the necessity of examining them in their local context. He also understood that as people migrate from one place to another, and as the cultural context changes over time, the elements of a culture, and their meanings, will

change, which led him to emphasise the importance of local histories for an analysis of cultures.²¹ His teachings and ideas in social anthropology and geography remain central to present-day interest in the cultural landscape idea where ‘landscape is a clue to culture’.²²

Cultural geographers also followed the tenets of the American geographer Carl Sauer who, in the 1920s, continued this discourse with the view that ‘the cultural landscape is fashioned out of a natural landscape by a culture group’.²³ An underlining message was – and still is – to use one’s eyes and intellect out there, to read the landscape as a document of human history with its fascinating sense of time and layers replete with human values which inform the genius of the place.

Equally important to the new sense of history and heritage values in the cultural landscape idea is the concept that we could be involved in place making. Visitors to cultural landscapes can be given a sense of participation through presentation of appropriate interpretative material. So in the 1990s the cultural landscape idea gathered momentum. It permeated cultural heritage management and planning thinking and practice, leading in 1992 to UNESCO recognising three categories of cultural landscapes of outstanding universal value for world heritage listing. It was predicated on the understanding that ‘cultural landscapes are at the interface of culture and nature, tangible and intangible heritage, biological and cultural diversity – they represent a closely woven net of relationships, the essence of culture and people’s identity.’²⁴ Intimately connected with these landscapes are people’s stories and the things of which memories are made: the cultural richness that promote a sense of local distinctiveness **(SLIDE 9 Hoi An & Amphawa)**.

Intangible values and landscape

A common theme underpinning the idea of the ideology of landscape itself as the setting for everything we do is that of the landscape as the repository of intangible values and human meanings that nurture our very existence. This is why landscape and memory are inseparable because landscape is the nerve centre of our personal and collective memories. Notably in this regard are the words of Bambang Bintoro Soedjito, then Deputy Chair for Infrastructure with the Indonesian National Development Planning Agency, who suggested in 1999 that:

*For us, the most important expressions of culture at this time are not the monuments, relics and art from the past, nor the more refined expressions of cultural activity that have become popularised beyond Indonesia’s borders in recent years, but the grassroots and very locally specific village based culture that is at the heart of the sense of community. And that sense of community, perhaps more than that of the individual has been a strong shaping and supportive influence in times of trouble, through turbulence and now in strengthening a confident sense of identity as we combine heritage with a society opened to the opportunities of the world.*²⁵

Soedjito’s sentiment on expressions of everyday heritage links comfortably with current international notions of the significance of cultural landscapes and ideas of the ordinarily sacred. Pivotal to this is the realisation that it is the places, traditions, and activities of ordinary people that create a rich cultural tapestry of life, particularly

through our recognition of the values people attach to their everyday places and concomitant sense of place and identity. Identity is critical to a sense of place - *genius loci* - for people. Relph aptly summarises this in his proposal that ‘identity of place is comprised of three interrelated components, each irreducible to the other - physical features or appearance, observable activities and functions, and meaning or symbols.’²⁶ (see Figure 1) (SLIDE 10).

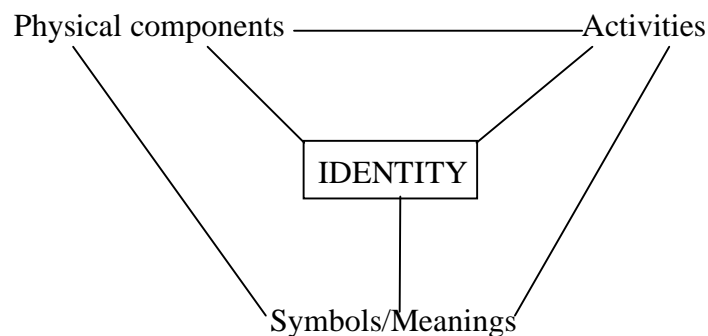


Figure 1 Place identity and its components (after Relph, 1976)

So we can see that both tangible physical identity and intangible identity related to the distinctiveness of our lived-in world and human experiences are inextricably interwoven with place meaning and significance for people and the symbols, images, and meanings associated with places/landscapes. Nowhere is this more relevant, in my view, than in the Asia-Pacific region where some of the world’s outstanding examples of living history and heritage exist in its cultural landscapes, traditions and representations that are part of the memory of the world.

Conclusion

It is apt to close with words from an international workshop – *The Right to Landscape: Contesting Landscape and Human Rights* – to be held in Cambridge, UK, 8-12 December, 2008, on the sixtieth anniversary of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (SLIDE 11 Bamiyan):

The workshop aims to expand on the concept of human rights in the context of landscape, an umbrella concept of an integrated entity of physical environments that is imbued with meaning.

Landscape and identity are inherent components of our culture, one informing the other ... access to, and freedom to enjoy the landscape as well as respect for spiritual and symbolic meanings people ascribe to their landscape, are some of the components that will support dignity and well-being of communities.

Endnotes

¹ Jackson J B, (1984), *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, p.8; Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

² Jackson J B, (1951) , *Landscape* 1 (Spring 1951): 5.

³ Hoskins, W G, (1955), *The Making of the English Landscape*, p.14; Hodder and Stoughton, London.

- ⁴ See Robertson I & Richards P, 'Introduction' in Robertson I & Richards P, eds., (2003), *Studying Cultural Landscapes*, Arnold, London.
- ⁵ Mitchell WJT, (1994) *'Landscape and Power'*, Chicago University Press, Chicago.
- ⁶ See third edition *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, p.104 under 'Landscape'; Clarendon Press, London.
- ⁷ Drabble M, (1979), *A Writer's Britain: Landscape in Literature*, p.270; Methuen, London.
- ⁸ 'Introduction' pp. 1-3 in Meinig D, ed. (1979) *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes. Geographical Essays*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- ⁹ Lewis P (1979), 'Axioms for Reading the Landscape', 11-32 in Meinig *ibid*.
- ¹⁰ For further discussion see (i) Jackson *op cit*, pp.3/4; (ii) Stilgoe J R, (1982), *Common Landscapes of America 1580-1834*, Yale University Press, New Haven.
- ¹¹ Schama S, (1995), *Landscape and Memory*, pp. 6/7; Harper Collins, London.
- ¹² Russell J, (1993), 'Challenging History: An Environmental Perspective', *Public History Review*, 2: 35-53.
- ¹³ Michael Ignatieff 'Walk on the Wild Side', *The Independent on Sunday*, 9 April 1995, 36-37 review of Simon Schama's book.
- ¹⁴ Jacques, D (1995), 'The Rise of Cultural Landscapes', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 1-2: 91-101.
- ¹⁵ Hoskins (1955), *op. cit*.
- ¹⁶ See for example (i) Lowenthal, D (1975) 'Past Time, Present Place. Landscape and Memory', *Geographical Review*, 65-1: 1-36; (ii) Lowenthal, D 'Age and Artifact. Dilemmas of Interpretation' in Meinig, ed. (1979) *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes. Geographical Essays*, Oxford University Press, New York; (iii) Lewis, P 'Axioms for Reading the Landscape' in Meinig, ed, pp.11-32.
- ¹⁷ For example Jackson JB (1984), *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, Yale University Press, New Haven. JB Jackson was a prolific and elegant writer on the American vernacular scene.
- ¹⁸ Cosgrove, D (1984), *op. cit*.
- ¹⁹ See (i) Jeans, D ed (1984), *Australian Historical Landscapes*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney; (ii) Jeans D and Spearritt, P (1980), *The Open Air Museum: the cultural landscape of New South Wales*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- ²⁰ Taylor, K (1998), 'From Physical Determinant to Cultural Construct: shifting discourses in reading landscape as history and ideology', *FIRM(ness) commodity De-light. Questioning the canon*; Proceedings of Fifteenth Annual Conference of The Society of Architectural Historians Australia and New Zealand, University of Melbourne, Sept 1998; 371-378.
- ²¹ Franz Boas, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Boas
- ²² Lewis (1979), *op. cit*.
- ²³ Sauer, C 'The Morphology of Landscape', 1925 p.25 in Carl Sauer (ed), *University of California Publications in Geography* (1919-1928); 2.2 (1929), pp.19-53.
- ²⁴ Rossler, M. (2006), 'World Heritage Cultural Landscapes' *Landscape Research*, 31:4; 333-353.
- ²⁵ Bambang Bintoro Soedjito speaking at World Bank Conference, *Culture Counts*, Florence 1999.
- ²⁶ Relph, (1976).