

## Presentation of the Conference on Therapeutic Landscapes

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Back in the limelight once again, and of widespread interest in contemporary society, landscape studies are developing thanks to a large number of contributions from the scientific world, they attract knowledge, ideas and research, and attribute a wide variety of new values, interpretations and approaches to the landscape.

The convergence of landscape studies and research from different disciplinary fields has generated important results and *landscape quality* proposals for implementation in the urban tissue and in extra-urban, agricultural and natural areas, in parks and specialised green areas, giving collective and individual benefits to towns and their inhabitants.

Interest in the landscape dates back to ancient times and though it has been ignored for long periods, during which major anthropic transformations of the natural environment and standardisation of models of life with associated social hardship took place, it has now returned to play a key role in the structural readjustment and recovery of marginalised or degraded areas, and improvement of local diversity and specificity.

The current notion of “landscape” involves a need for additional knowledge and research, in different areas of learning, concerning the complexity and quantity of past and present urban and territorial transformations and the rampant alterations of the environment: it is a question of combining the multiple contributions of botanists and agronomists, the numerous project applications of architects and landscape architects, the studies of biologists and sociologists, the promising

ecological research projects and the new concept of aesthetic quality connected with the values, the diversity and the identity of the landscape.

The changing needs of society require typologies and models of urban and extra-urban landscapes that can assure ease of contact with nature for sport and leisure activities, associations, the recovery of physical well-being, etc.

Increasing importance is being given to the study of the effects generated by the urban climate on the vegetable system, the capacity of plants to resist pollution, building reverberation and urban heat islands.

While the nineteenth century had laid the foundations for solving the urban problems created by industrialisation, urbanism and demographic growth with the “public park” (a “piece of countryside” in the urban tissue) and tree-lined avenues and squares, the current congestion and pollution of the urban environment, the atrocious quality of life in the metropolises, the absence of green areas for recreation and the improvement of the urban climate must now be addressed in a more complete and “integrated” way, using very different scientific knowledge and ecological applications.

By now, many people are aware of the inseparable relationship between the quality of life of communities with the conditions of the areas in which they live, work and spend their free time.

This awareness is borned out by the large audience at the *Therapeutic landscapes* convention and the rich, diversified and interesting presentations which inform the

general public about the ignored or even undervalued relationships between the *urban landscape, landscaped areas and the various problems of our society*; new methods of observing and analysing the world around us by making a “*landscape approach*” emerge, together with the study of innovative possibilities of designing, with different ends, “therapeutic”, for example, in the broadest sense of the term, the meeting places between man, open spaces and landscapes.

The above confirms, if confirmation were still needed, the multidisciplinary and transversal nature of landscape studies, the variety and complexity of its problems and, when addressing them, the need for an increasingly greater contribution from a wide variety of scientific and technical disciplines in order to study the vast number of existing natural, semi-natural, historical and cultural situations, both specific and multiple, in order to identify their characteristics and understand their future dynamics.

The numerous speeches made by the speakers at the Convention break new ground as regards these issues and the ways of addressing through the presentation of research projects, models and experiences which also attribute particular “therapeutic resources” to the landscape.

While everyone knows that the “landscape resource” has different features and forms from area to area due to the interrelation of extremely variable territorial situations - geomorphologic, altimetric, hydraulic, vegetational, climatic, expositive - which generate different forms and methods of use, the issue of *therapeutic landscapes* highlights special ancient and recent values and attributes new potential to the landscape resource as regards both the social well-being of the population and relieving the particular hardships of people today and contributing to their psychological and physical improvement.

To address the everyday difficulties that obstruct the improvement of the quality of life in our cities, a position is being taken that goes beyond the need for urban parks, green areas and tree-lined avenues and squares. Starting from a more complex concept: analysis is made of the laws governing the balance of the urban ecosystem, the functions of oxygenation and temperature decrease performed by vegetation; the lesser-known and more specific therapeutic virtues recognised and attributed to particular landscapes for their effectiveness in dealing with specific health problems or certain physical handicaps.

In the infinitely different images and views that allow us to identify the values, fragilities, phenomena and characteristics of the landscape, witnesses to human culture and civilisation, landscapes have always stimulated the interest and attention of scholars and artists of all ages: many landscapes have been “immortalised” in the great figurative tradition (from the

mosaic representations of ancient Rome to the paintings of Giotto, the frescoes of Lorenzetti, Paolo Uccello, Beato Angelico, Leonardo, Lorenese, Salvator Rosa...), described in countless poetic and literary works, and artistically reinterpreted in some squares and many historical parks and gardens.

In the various landscapes of different regions and areas, geographically near or far from each other, analysed and described by geographers and naturalists, we can identify the ways of interpreting environmental elements, modifying natural contexts and understanding their main characteristics and values. We can record the changes that took place over the centuries in the various relationships between man and the environment and in the ways the territory was used and abused.

Numerous painters, geographers, naturalists, humanists and simple amateurs travelling around Europe, especially Italy, between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries, wrote letters and journals describing many landscapes, natural areas, farmland and settlements, each according to their own culture and interests, showing a greater or lesser inclination towards observing and interpreting natural and urban contexts or a particular awareness or desire to describe the naturalistic, landscape or more strictly artistic aspects of the places they visited.

Together with the descriptions of the objective and measurable physical space which affects human behaviour, these writings - always embodying special admiration not only for the beauty of nature but also for the value of the cultural and historical assets - betray the ideal reasons for the journey, the numerous subjective and variable perceptions of the area through which the various elements take on different meanings and values; the interactive relationship between the individual and the environment, that has always affected the way people behave, can be seen to emerge.

Much has been written about the influence exercised on man by the natural environment ever since ancient times: Hippocrates, for example, in his treatise “Upon air, water and situation” underlining the impact of the environment on man, affirms the existence of a close and determining connection between climate, disease and health. Numerous philosophers between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (such as the French Bodin, de Bos, Montesquieu) had argued on the impact of the climate on human history.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, this “environmental determinism”, associated with Enlightenment naturalism, converged into a “doctrine” called “environmentalism” - dominating scientific thought since the beginning of the twentieth century - which underlined the relationship between man and the environment and highlighted the efforts (and the capacity) of man to adapt to environmental change.

Analysis of the course of events can reveal when the

problem of recovering the *quality of the urban landscape* and plant life in towns substantially emerged for the first time as an anthropic need. This need abandoned the aesthetics of Romanticism and set out to insert “rural” images by means of the presence of “nature in the city”. This concept drives its roots into the events which took place at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries and, according to some Enlightenment health theories and principles, can be seen in new settlement models which, given the discomfort connected with the transformations of the urban organism, the uprooting of rural society from the countryside and the widespread physical and social ailments of the population, affirmed the need for a radical reform of the health and sanitation conditions of towns for the very sake of human survival.

The contribution of the nineteenth century Utopians and the naturalistic projects inserted in some English towns laid the foundations for change in the relationship between *man and nature*, and *urban and non-urban*, in the quest for a more harmonious relationship with the natural environment and an improvement of the sanitary conditions and appearance of towns by means of the realisation of new tree-lined open spaces where the population could enjoy the sun and clean air and areas for recreation and walking after work.

The first urban park and tree-lined avenue projects were associated with images of nature that satisfied the population’s need for physical fitness and for new aesthetic qualities. In London’s St James’ Park in 1828 and Regent’s Park in 1838, crown estates were converted into new “*natural urban landscapes*” to provide citizens with open areas and tree-lined paths and allow them to enjoy nature and clean air even in the city. They were designed according to the theories of the eighteenth-century landscaped garden. They introduced a constituent process that generated a new code of expression featuring not just aesthetic but also health, social and cultural contents.

As early as the second half of the eighteenth century, the Wood brothers in Bath set to work to propose a new city concept that could maintain and add value to a close relationship with the natural landscape surrounding the spa town.

During their evolution, urban parks and public gardens diversified, specialised, spread out all over the city and fragmented in order to satisfy different needs and play different roles in the urban tissue, though always connected with social, recreational, aesthetic and sanitary objectives; given their growing complexity, the contribution of several disciplinary sectors was required. In the New Towns experience, they became “*a widespread urban landscape*”; in many European cities they were an opportunity for “*urban renewal programmes*”, such as the recovery of quarries and the redevelopment of rubbish dumps and degraded areas

in the outer suburbs; in other cases, they tended to integrate, theoretically speaking at least, with the natural landscape, aspiring to become “*country parks*” with native plants, farmland scenes and varied environmental structures. They propose the idea of a landscape that can rebalance biological systems altered by intensive farming or the encroachment of urban areas into the countryside.

In the years following the Congress of Vienna, “restored” Europe was again invaded by hordes of travellers, such as had never been seen in previous decades. The journey around Europe - made easier by the first railways across the continent, the iron bridges crossing wide rivers, the first tunnels making it possible to avoid the arduous Alpine passes - began to interest an increasingly larger number of people. But “travelling” was no longer the exclusive privilege of intellectuals and rich aristocrats: the first tourist organisations addressed a new kind of customer through collective travel. Following the successes of the first collective journeys organised in his country, in 1841 the English businessman, Thomas Cook, established his famous travel company that marked the beginning of the prosperous tourism industry.

Trips organised for nineteenth century tourists had different motivations from the “tours” they had originated from. This kind of “tourist”, a typical product of the new industrial society, wanted to emulate the lifestyle of the old declining aristocracy and had taken the late Romantic landscape canons as its own. This led to a demand not just to admire the past but also to appreciate uncontaminated landscapes, drawing inspiration from the neo-hygienist doctrines of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that highlighted the importance of the relationship of man with spas and with natural landscapes as places of relaxation and treatment. Both the former and the latter led nineteenth century tourists to choose escapist “holidays” at pleasant seaside and lakeside resorts, to miniaturise the villas of the Renaissance and eighteenth-century nobility as holiday homes - built in various eclectic styles, surrounded by large or small gardens always full of many varieties of plants. During these years, monumental “grand hotels”, surrounded by vast picturesque parks, were built as “holiday and health” facilities to accommodate travelling tourists.

In mid-nineteenth century guides, such as that by Paule Aubert la Favière, “*Guide pittoresque illustré de Cannes à Gènes*” of 1860, and Guida Treves of 1899, we read that rich and noble tourists visited Cannes, Mentone, Ospedaletti, San Remo, spending the long winter months there for the “*healthiness of the air and the therapeutic virtues of a holiday in these towns*”, and that “*San Remo est une des villes qui méritent le plus l’attention des malades*” (Aubert la Favière). Ospedaletti already indicated by its name that it was a place of cure, especially for respiratory ailments.

The information on hotels and tourist and treatment structures “*of holiday and treatment bathing resorts*” and “*hydrothermal spas*” was detailed and exhaustive, while the guides almost completely omitted descriptions of the areas and information about the natural environment and beauty of the landscape that made them so famous and fashionable.

In 1932, the Italian Touring Club published in its “*Practical guide to holiday and treatment centres in Italy*” a vast amount of precious and detailed tourist information “*about the particular bathing, climatic and hydrothermal qualities of the many treatment and holiday resorts*” scattered up and down the Peninsular. The descriptions are full of details about the accommodation and treatment facilities, while a very small amount of space is dedicated to the parks and gardens which, made available to the tourists, surrounded the hotel and spa facilities; there is almost no information about environmental features such as vegetation, the weather, exposure and the qualities of the waters that made these places so healthy and pleasant as to attract wealthy Italian and foreign tourists for long holidays; no reference is made at all to the beauty of the landscape that acted as a backdrop to these new settlements.

In around the mid-nineteenth century, meanwhile, natural areas for the public had become fully-fledged features of the urban environment with parks and tree-lined avenues for which generic health qualities were claimed, as well as recreational and aesthetic functions.

One century later, in 1967, to improve the quality of the urban life of citizens, legislation introduced “*town planning standards*” which established the minimum quantities to dedicate to “public parks and gardens”, in relationship to the number of inhabitants. The environmentalists, on the contrary, took a different direction: they intended to solve the problem of “urban nature”, widely ignored in the plans, starting from conceptually different assumptions, that is, from the interpretation of the city as an ecosystem, a living organism regulated by

laws assuring balance and functionality and identified green areas and trees, suitably distributed and articulated in the urban tissue, as fundamental elements.

Only recently has a new and widespread interest developed in the landscape as a whole, considered as a collective asset, a daily presence in the life of man on this planet and an important part of his existence. There is now a very widespread conviction that this combination of closely related natural elements and human interventions comprising the landscape is an important historical, cultural, economic and ecological resource of every country and forms the very foundations of the identity of peoples.

The expansion of the scope of interest developed, particularly following the long debate that led to the drawing up of the *European Landscape Convention* (ELC), adopted by the *Committee of Ministers* of the European Council on the basis of a project drafted by the *Congress of local authorities* and introduced into Italy on 1st September of this year. The ELC considers the landscape to be a collective asset which is worthy of being protected and enhanced in all cases and in all situations.

The main aim of the Convention is to steer administrators and populations towards a new awareness of landscapes, not only as regards protection, but also as concerns correct management and sustainable design, comparing reflections, proposals and experiences involving the relationships between landscapes and resident populations in order to work in the collective interest for an improved quality of life and for new individual and collective well-being.

Landscape culture today is involved in a broader and more analytical reflection on the *possible relations between open spaces and urban society*, partly by means of new ecological and symbolic horizons, in a fuller and more comprehensive concept of landscape - compared with the old urban planning “standards” of the mid twentieth century - aimed at improving people’s physical and mental health.

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