

Towards an international landscape convention

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Biography

Chair of the IFLA working group to advise UNESCO and United Nations Agencies on the feasibility of an international landscape convention, Kathryn Moore has contributed to the Council of Europe's evaluation of the implementation of the European Landscape Convention. Past President of the Landscape Institute and 2008 Thomas Jefferson Visiting Chair at the University of Virginia, she has published extensively on design quality, theory, education and practice. Based at BIAD, Birmingham City University, her research has clear implications for architecture, urban design and other art and design disciplines and underpins her work developing strategic landscape visions for authorities in the UK.

Abstract

Explaining the provenance of the proposal for an international landscape convention and the process of engaging with UNESCO and the United Nations Agencies, this paper explains some of the key aspects of the debate. Why this proposal is so vital and of the moment. Why there is a need to have an international convention and the key conceptual innovations distinguishing it from other tools and mechanisms. Focusing on the idea of landscape, it explores the relevance of a dynamic concept that neither relies on a universal definition, nor on the delineation or listing of territories, but is a new way of thinking about landscape, responsive to different local, national and regional interpretations. The proposal is therefore not simply about landscape as bio diversity or ecology. It's not only concerned with the countryside or matters of heritage. It addresses the entire package, values and memories, the experience we have of place. A more democratic concept, it relates to remarkable *and* degraded landscapes, the special *and* the everyday, all territories from rural to urban; all areas, from the most treasured to the most nondescript and unloved, the places and spaces in desperate need of regeneration. A case study illustrates how this new concept might be applied

in practice to establish a productive dialogue to kick start local economies, engage local communities and provide a spatial landscape vision to guide city and institutional development strategies. Expanding concerns with landscapes that survive modern developments, the paper outlines a way to inform more sustainable cultural, social and economic futures.

BACKGROUND

IFLA, the international federation of landscape architects currently has 68 member associations across the world and 22 individual members, (where national associations have not yet been formed). As an organization, its membership is expanding, reflecting an increasing interest and concern for the landscape particularly in China, South and Central America and more recently in Eastern Europe – Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Estonia and Hungary became national members at the 2012 World Council.

Since 2005, then under the presidency of Martha Fajardo, IFLA has been promoting the idea of an international landscape convention. In 2010 in Suzhou, China, the World Council unanimously agreed to call upon the UNESCO Director General to review the feasibility of a new standard setting instrument, a “world landscape convention”. Since then many experts have worked together, across disciplinary and established institutional boundaries, to make a proposal for this convention. Whilst it did not gain support at the Executive Board of UNESCO in May 2011, the interest generated for the proposal was very encouraging, it demonstrated that an important international debate had been initiated. It marked the beginning of a longer dialogue.

At IFLA in Cape Town in September 2012, the World Council ratified the document “Towards an International Landscape Convention”. Later that month at the UNESCO conference “*The International Protection of Landscapes, a global assessment*”, promoting the UNESCO International Traditional Knowledge Institute (ITKI), held to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the World Heritage Convention, in Florence, partners were sought to help build a strategy for its development and implementation

The Florence conference had been eagerly anticipated as a mechanism to help capture the impressive groundswell of support for the ILC and act as a focus for its future development. In anticipation of that meeting, IFLA had worked with UN Habitat through the World Urban Forum 6, RECEP ENELC, ITKI participated in Rio+20 conference, set up a web page and a petition and promoted the idea of an ILC from the USA to Estonia, from Australia to Nigeria. Anticipating that the document would be endorsed as part of the declaration of the meeting, actually it went much further than that, with the conference agreeing the Florence Declaration on Landscape (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/943/>).

So, things have started to get serious. The picture is changing, rapidly and radically. What is now being proposed is not a convention from one organization, but from a partnership of a number of inter-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies including FAO, ICCROM, EUI, UNU, ICOMOS, ICQHS, ITKI, IPSI and EHP, together with national and non-governmental organisations, universities and local administrators. The 100 mayors of Florence, for example, already committed to supporting diversification and identity of the economy and culture based on the local landscape, offered to help in any way they can, and discussions October 2012 GIAHS meeting at the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome helped define a way ahead.

CONTEXT

It is clear that we are living through a moment of profound change in the way we value the material, social and cultural context of our lives. There is an extraordinary but fragile renaissance taking place as society, governments and investors begin to appreciate the true value and complexity of the landscape. In response to the disastrous environments created since the 1950's, cities across the world have strategies for long-term ecological balance, creativity and cultural identity. There is at last, a tangible recognition that the physical, cultural and social condition of our environment has a profound effect on the quality of life and is a key component of robust

economic growth. Communities and organizations across the world are becoming increasingly concerned with the health and sustainability of their landscapes.

This new focus on the landscape is reflected in the number and range of legislative initiatives being put in place across the world, including the European Landscape Convention (2000), signed now by 37 countries, the Latin American Landscape Initiative, with 12 countries ratifying and celebrating national landscape charters in Medellin, Colombia in October 2012. Landscape charters are anticipated from Indonesia, New Zealand, Canada, Nigeria and other nations in Africa over the next couple of years and many others are in the pipeline.

Running parallel to these legislative and policy initiatives there is evidence of a sea change in planning and development hierarchies with the landscape determined as the lead driver, an important economic and social concern that is now firmly on the mainstream political agenda. Evidence of this can be seen in the landscape vision proposed for HS2 (HS2LV), the new, highly contentious high-speed train line between London and Birmingham. The idea is to transform a linear, engineering project into an artistic and scientific national treasure by creating a myriad of local, regional and national landscape experiences. This is not just about trains going faster. Not about creating a singular engineering project. We've had enough of those – they quite literally litter our towns and cities. This is real opportunity to create an enduring legacy for the region and the UK as a whole. By placing the landscape at the core of HS2, it can be seen as a base layer against which decisions about all future development need to be made. This work is being led by BIAD, BCU with the support of the chamber of Commerce, Centro (responsible for transport in the region), politicians and CEO's of regional and local authorities. This is about rediscovering an immense valley system, largely unloved and unnoticed, a place people generally pass through rather than visit as a productive and resilient heart of the region. By adopting a holistic, inclusive approach to the planning and development of HS2, it is possible to engage communities in the project, promoting social cohesion and

economic development incorporating bio-diversity, culture, ecology spatial quality and identity. Since large parts of the area are blighted by 20th century infrastructure, it is about making things better, not worse - learning valuable lessons from past mistakes, and putting right over 200 years of industrial despoliation. Making people see the city in a way it has not been seen before, HS2LV is about re-establishing a symbiotic relationship between the city and its landscape.

Radically changing the identity of the region, projects like this demonstrate that it is no longer enough to simply consider the landscape or take it into account. It is not an afterthought, the bits left in between the buildings, developments, highways and town centres, or a vague blanket cover that will look after itself. Given its proper status, it is the context upon and within which these dynamic processes take place. With all of its cultural, social and physical potential, the landscape is seen as a base layer, against which decisions about all future development need to be made. Projects like this however, remain an exception rather than the rule.

In Florence, there were many definitions of landscape. What emerged is the clear view that landscape is not just about ecology, nature conservation or matters of heritage. It is not only the physical context, the constructed public realm, the national parks, coastlines, squares, promenades and streets. It also reflects our values and aspirations, the sense of pride we share in the places where we work and live, the experiences we have of a place, as citizens, employers, visitors, students and tourists. The material, cultural, social context of our lives, the landscape is about ideas, and the expression of these ideas shapes the quality of our experience.

WHY AN INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION

In IFLA it is believed that an international convention is necessary because it will encourage a much more holistic and strategic approach to the landscape – which is precisely what is being talked about with HS2LV. This is crucial in meeting the major global challenges created by industrialization, urbanization, energy, demographic shifts, as well as climate change, the depletion of

natural resources, deforestation, biodiversity, heritage, issues relating to the quality of life and other aspects of land use development. These challenges do not respect territorial boundaries. It is increasingly being recognized that there is now an urgency to provide strategic design leadership at a regional, national and international level. As one of the members of the expert seminar set up to draft the initial UNESCO proposal observed, every week people are dying because of bad decision making in relationship to development and change. We need a new approach. An international convention will influence government bodies. Providing excellent leadership and expertise, leveraging the support of other agencies, it will help those seeking to champion the landscape to articulate arguments convincingly and persuasively and help communities deal with the many threats to their everyday landscape. It will challenge preconceptions and reward good practice, empower and provide support for communities and organizations across the world, concerned with the health, development and sustainability of their landscapes.

INADEQUACY OF CURRENT APPROACHES

Currently, we disaggregate the landscape into numerous constituent parts, breaking it down into components such as visual, cultural, ecological or heritage, landscapes that are blue, green or grey – this division and subdivision contributes to the woeful underestimation of its spatial and cultural significance. The problem's the same worldwide; the landscape is compartmentalized, with lots of departments having responsibility for little bits of it. It is found in spatial and social planning, agriculture, economics, transport, engineering, culture and environment. Sometimes it even features in education and health policy. There can scarcely be a more compelling example of divide and rule.

There are many reasons why this happens. The landscape is not a solid object, like a building or a road. It's unspecific, difficult to measure. It's around us all the time, commonplace and everyday and so we tend to take it for granted. It impacts on all of us; it seems to belong to all of us, but actually, to no one. It has no single champion, no obvious constituency. This is why we need an international landscape convention. Even when the landscape is a

prime concern, the way it is handled is fractured and diffuse. There are a number of treaties and policies dealing with particular aspects of it, such as agriculture, archaeology, wildlife and natural habitats, ecology and culture to name but a few. There are national surveys and evaluations that deal with landscape character, visual assessment, nature conservation heritage and protection. Clearly it is easier to split the landscape up rather than deal with it as a complex entity. It makes it almost inevitable that detail is substituted for spatial design and technology for ideas.

There is also a need to overcome the dichotomy that has traditionally severed nature from culture. This damaging duality, nothing more than a philosophical construct, is one of the foremost reasons why the landscape continues to be associated with technology rather than ideas. Instead of seeing nature as something separate from culture, from ourselves, we must recognize that in the way we live our lives, with every intervention we make, we are expressing (consciously or not) an attitude toward the physical world.

A PARADIGM SHIFT

The choice is not whether we work with art or ecology, with nature or culture, but how considerately, imaginatively and responsibly we go about our business, because for every one of our actions, there is a reaction in the physical world. We impact on it every minute of every day of our lives. Where we decide to build new cities or expand old ones, place streets, squares, parks and gardens, what we protect and what we conserve. How we do this, why we do this, reflects the value we place on the quality of our environment. Working with natural processes, given the global challenges we face, is an ecological imperative. We have no choice in the matter. But it is the whole thing, the ideas and values we hold and their expression in physical form, be it green, gray, or blue, that defines us. This is what frames the experience we all have of the places we live in, and it is this experience that is a properly relevant definition of nature. After all, natural systems don't stop where the buildings start.

Our proposal builds on this emerging holistic approach to landscape, moves away from a paradigm dominated by ecological or technological details and the processes of participation into the realm of ideas (see (Moore, 2010)). Ideas become talking points; they provide explanations that empower the clients, the community, and the various professions. They can be cohesive; they bind all manner of things, argument, opinion and values. There can be no better way to capture the hearts and minds of everyone involved than a great idea. Recognising the importance of working with and expressing ideas at a strategic, policy and detailed level is why the HS2 landscape vision has attracted so much attention and support from within the region.

This new way of thinking about landscape builds on the definition offered by the simple, clear and conceptually innovative European Landscape Convention (2000). Integrating at every point nature and culture, the ILC proposal deals with issues of expertise *and* public aspirations, with conservation *and* design, protection *and* the creation of new landscapes. This paradigm shift changes the nature of a discourse, not by discovering a new language as such, but by looking at the problems and challenges holistically, by fusing, overlaying and cutting across concepts that have up till now, been compartmentalised and segregated. This is why the initial UNESCO expert seminar held to develop the proposal included lawyers, landscape architects, architects, geographers, planners, engineers, biologists, anthropologists, ecologists and developers. Cutting across institutional and disciplinary boundaries, it is a holistic, integrated approach. It has a number of benefits.

Seeing the landscape as an environmental, economic and social resource is a more dynamic and democratic concept. It is not an elitist, scientific, or intellectual concern and it's certainly not here purely for those who can afford it. It links governance, finance, health and education. Concerned with remarkable and degraded landscapes, the special and the everyday, all territories from rural to urban, all areas, from the most treasured to the most nondescript and unloved as well as the places and spaces in desperate need of regeneration, it is not simply about landscape as bio diversity or ecology.

It's not only concerned with the countryside or matters of heritage. It addresses the entire package.

Understanding the landscape not only as a physical entity but also a way of life, reflecting the values we hold, as a powerful, evocative concept, is key to erasing the red lines and boundaries that demarcate specific, special areas. Dispensing with the need to have political, economic and social arguments relating to the advantages and disadvantages of being inside or outside the boundary, it also opens up debate, allowing many other ways to define the social, cultural and physical context of our lives, ways we have yet begun to imagine. There are no set rules, methodologies or procedures.

Recognising that different cultures have different ideas about the landscape and these ideas can be so varied that there is little or no point in trying to find a universal definition, focusing instead on the relationship between people and their physical environment makes this definition comprehensive, flexible and overarching this allows national, regional and local interpretation and application, as appropriate in China as it is in Alaska, in Turkey as well as Sweden.

Dealing with the relationship populations have with the landscape, sets this proposal apart from other charters and categorisations of a more scientific, or specifically delineated territorial nature and from those concerned with protection, or sanctuary of more exclusively natural environments. Whilst many of these documents may refer to the cultural, recreational, aesthetic and social aspects of landscape, these are seen as elements that play a supporting role, as part of complex range of topics affecting a defined area. To deal with the experience people have of the landscape, shaped by ideas, materiality and culture is an entirely different approach.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

To have any real chance of providing a lasting blueprint for the landscape, this powerful, integrated vision needs to be wholeheartedly absorbed into all of the decision making institutions and organisations responsible for policy, strategic

or regional planning at a national and international level, as well as in education. But it won't be easy. Concepts carefully knitted together, can be painstakingly even innocently unpicked by those not familiar with the ideas or ambition of the document. If we want to move beyond the institutional and disciplinary silos we have to change views, change minds, change the way we talk about the world, expanding our concepts and ideas, developing a better descriptive vocabulary to help us and others see things from a different perspective. The role of language, advocacy, patience and determination in all of this is vital and demanding. It requires strong leadership.

So the task of developing this shift in approach should not be underestimated, but to achieve the full potential of the ILC proposal, we need to develop a constructive dialogue to deal with the bigger picture, connect culture and economy and allow protection and innovation to coexist. We have to avoid making habitual distinctions between quality and quantity, facts and values, and ditch narrowly scientific and wildly subjective approaches to nature, thus articulating the landscape as an expression of our beliefs and values. Then we will stand a better chance of leaving a good legacy for future generations.

References:

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