

REFRAMING CULTURAL LANDSCAPE: GEOPHILOSOPHY, SPATIAL EXPERIENCE AND DESIGN PRACTICES

A GEOPHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF CULTURAL LANDSCAPE AS A DYNAMIC FIELD WHERE MEMORY, SPATIAL EXPERIENCE, AND DESIGN PRACTICES CONVERGE.

by Michele Fasolo

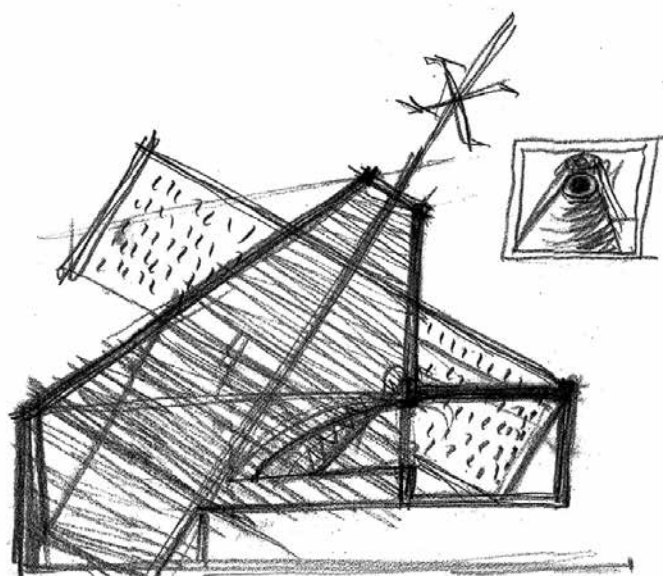


Fig. 1 - Sambuceto. Credits: Photo by Enrico Cano.

Landscape is often interpreted as a visible outcome of environmental and historical processes. This article proposes a different perspective, understanding cultural landscape as a relational field where memory, perception, and spatial practices continuously shape the experience and transformation of inhabited territories.

WHAT CULTURAL LANDSCAPE IS (AND IS NOT)

As a critical node in the interdisciplinary discourse linking aesthetics, anthropology, philosophy, and design practices, the concept of cultural landscape can indeed function effectively as an operational category, provided we overcome the terminological ambiguities still surrounding it.

It is crucial, firstly, to clarify what cultural landscape is not by highlighting its most frequent reductive characterizations within contemporary theoretical frameworks.

A cultural landscape is not merely the product of interactions between territorial configurations and human settlements—such a view drastically limits its complexity and scope.

Nor can the cultural landscape be adequately represented through an "objective topography." Any attempt to reduce it to a purely cartographic representation, a neutral, universally readable map, fundamentally compromises its relational, processual, and situated essence. An objective topography implies an external, abstract viewpoint,

whereas cultural landscapes emerge through embodied experiences, plural perspectives, and everyday practices, rendering them open, layered fields of meaning, historically contextualized. They are woven with memories, conflicts, affections, and imaginaries, comprehensible only through an interpretive approach capable of grasping their lived and performative dimensions. Furthermore, the cultural landscape cannot be conceived solely within an aesthetic spatial framework. Rather, it must be understood and articulated as

a complex relational form, a dispositif that integrates memory and practice, symbol and matter, historical continuities, and even tumultuous transformations currently underway. It constitutes a living matrix of collective and affective memories, an "architecture of shared time," a common space marked and qualified by historically layered experiences. In this sense, the cultural landscape is not a static object but a processual field, an unfolding event occurring over time within the relationship between inhabitants and their environment. Its dynamics are interpersonal; its meaning emerges through shared consciousness, perception, and experience.

DECONSTRUCTING TERRITORIAL IDENTITY

This conceptualization decisively and beneficially distances itself from outdated approaches still entrenched in identitarian or economic paradigms, as exemplified by the widespread interpretation of terroir, despite recent conceptual advances, as a place of productive belonging—an assumed natural, thus fixed, connection between territory and a vaguely defined identity. By contrast, the cultural landscape emerges as a lived environment animated by multiple intentionalities, aligning closely with Husserl's notion of *Lebenswelt*.^[1]

LANDSCAPE AS SYMBOLIC, POLITICAL, AND PERFORMATIVE SPACE

Every place constitutes a network, an interwoven fabric of meanings, central to which is Heidegger's concept of dwelling. Here, landscape becomes a dynamic field rather than a passive backdrop, a space of

revelation where human beings and the world co-emerge.^[2] Every spatial configuration simultaneously constitutes meaning and a regime of visibility. Denis Cosgrove's examination of the Veneto landscape illustrates how landscapes function as visual ideologies, technologies of gaze, instruments selectively representing according to historically specific dispositifs.^[3] Far from neutral, landscape embodies an ideological field wherein the power to name, order, and represent is exercised—a symbolic dispositif reflecting political, aesthetic, and epistemic tensions.

From this vantage, landscape also functions as a critical, performative space capable of subverting and rewriting prevailing norms and configurations. This aligns with Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia: an "other-space" that, through its distinctive configurations, continually represents, challenges, and redefines power structures and symbolic frameworks within society.^[4]

LANDSCAPE AND PROJECT: AN ECOPOLITICAL ETHIC OF DWELLING

The political implications

of this theoretical perspective become particularly evident in the work of Luisa Bonesio and Alberto Magnaghi. Although their intellectual trajectories differ, their approaches complement each other remarkably well, as both redefine landscape as an intensive locus and collective project. Bonesio, a geophilosopher, emphasizes the embodied dimension of dwelling. Her conceptualization of landscape rejects both narrow localism and functionalist abstraction. For Bonesio, landscape is neither seen nor contemplated as a picture but traversed, lived, inhabited,



Fig. 2 - Sambuceto. Credits: Photo by Enrico Cano.

and experienced through the density of embodied relations with the world—the shared event of dwelling.[5] Conversely, Magnaghi, an architect and urban planner, advocates for its radical political reactivation: landscape is neither simply a resource to preserve nor to embalm, but rather a crucial stake in the restoration of territorial sovereignty.[6] Thus, landscape becomes a space where resistance emerges, grows, and asserts itself against the blind neoliberal extraction of surplus value. This resistance constitutes the ethical foundation of intergenerational stewardship, framing inheritance not as mere asset distribution but as a solidaristic moral commitment across generations. Within this field of resistance, an integrated ecological vision is indispensable. Indeed, the ecological crisis transcends strictly environmental issues, acquiring a biopolitical dimension that encompasses territo-

rial habitation, climate justice, and equitable resource distribution.[7] Addressing this crisis demands design capacities capable of interpreting and transforming these intricate connections.

Despite differing focal points, Bonesio and Magnaghi converge on the idea that landscape cannot be detached from the responsibility inherent in design. Such design is not to be understood as formal imposition but as a mode of attentive listening and regeneration.

TOWARD A RELATIONAL ECOLOGY OF LANDSCAPE

Contemporary anthropology moves similarly beyond the nature-culture dichotomy. Tim Ingold's concept of taskscape replaces landscape, introducing it as a field of actions and gestures—neither scenography, stage, nor container—where subjectivities and material contexts mutually produce each other.[8] Bruno Latour[9] and Arturo Escobar[10] further

develop this line of thought, advocating a relational ecology that incorporates the agency of non-humans and surpasses Cartesian ontology, which divides the world into thought and matter, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

This shift—from landscape as visual asset to be preserved toward a vital, participatory space—has been recognized officially in the European Landscape Convention (Florence, 2000), subsequently integrated into national legislation.[11]

BETWEEN RUIN AND REINVENTION: LANDSCAPE IN PASOLINI AND CALVINO

In Italy, this layered significance of landscape was approached distinctly by Pier Paolo Pasolini and Italo Calvino, who, despite divergent registers, captured the deeply political nature of landscape. Pasolini described the devastation of cultural landscape as a visible mark of human loss, community dissolution, and the

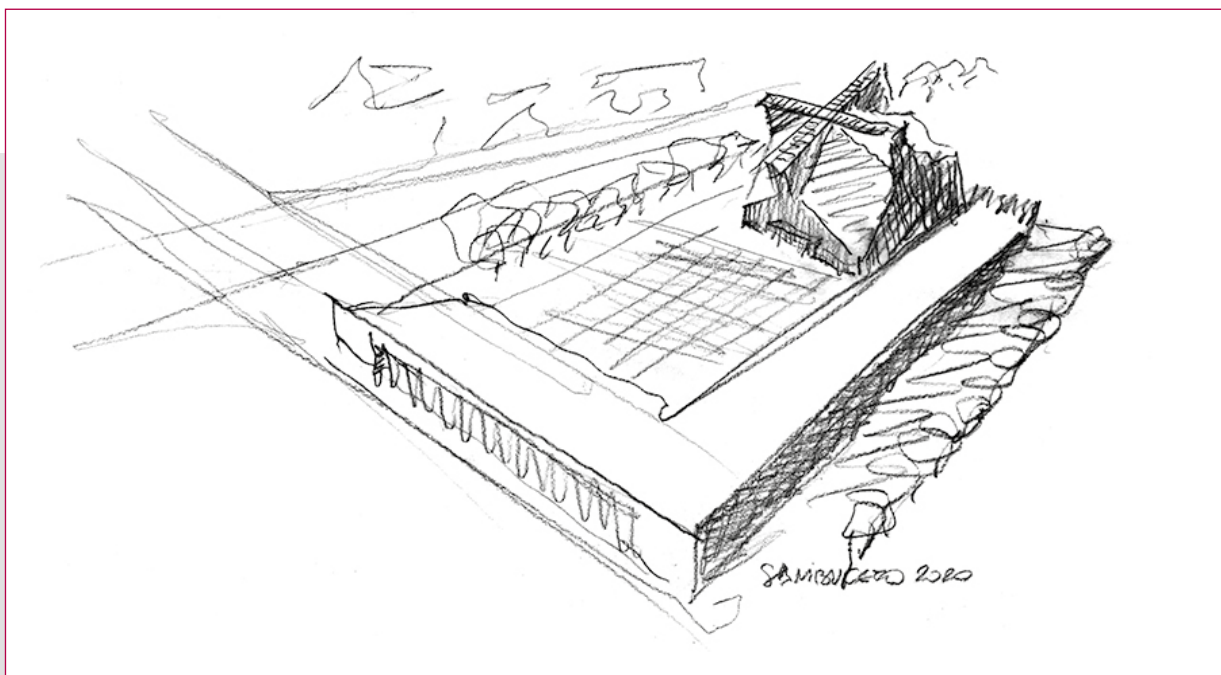


Fig. 3 - Sambuceto. Credits: Photo by Enrico Cano.

erosion of popular semiotics. [12] For Pasolini, the capitalist homogenization and secularization of places constitute an irreparable wound cancerously infecting Italy's cultural heart and soul. Calvino's reaction to this same injury—in *Invisible Cities*—is to reinvent landscape as symbolic space capable of generating meaning through desire and memory.

In both authors, space becomes, as the premise for any project, a dialectic interplay between destruction and imagination, loss and reinvention, ruin and hope, rendering it a profoundly critical locus.

HERMENEUTIC ARCHITECTURE, RELATIONAL LANDSCAPE, AND CRITICAL PRACTICE OF BUILDING

This tension between the material and symbolic, memory and design, finds operative resonance in the most thoughtful contemporary architectural practice. Luigi Franciosini,[13] a prominent figure in contemporary Italian architecture, provides an eloquent example. Rather than imposing on the site, the project interrogates it. Architecture thus becomes a hermeneutic act, interpreting materiality and geological, historical, and cultural layers within a specific context. It reveals the latent, ancestral potentials of place, positioning landscape as an interlocutor rather than a mere surface to shape.

Mario Botta's Church of San Rocco in Sambuceto paradigmatically represents cultural landscape conceived as a hermeneutic and relational space. Botta's architecture does not dominate but converses with the place, synthesizing memory and contemporaneity through a symbolic and performative

language that fosters communal experiences. Consequently, Botta's work embodies precisely the critical, ethical, and ecopolitical dimensions intrinsic to the reflection on cultural landscape proposed here.

CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL EXPERIENCES: RELATIONAL LANDSCAPE AS ETHICAL PRAXIS

Among contemporary architectural experiences that effectively embody the relational and non-imposing vision of cultural landscape, the works of Álvaro Siza and the French studio Lacaton & Vassal stand out distinctly. In Siza's oeuvre, architecture manifests as a precisely calibrated gesture, consciously devoid of hegemonic ambitions, weaving a silent yet deeply layered dialogue with historical and natural contexts. His interventions—from Matosinhos to Porto—function not as dominant presences but as poetic instruments attuned to latent tensions within their surroundings, capable of activating a stratigraphic interpretation of landscape.[14]

Similarly, Lacaton & Vassal propose a project ethos founded on respect for existing conditions and non-destructive transformation. Their urban regeneration projects, exemplified by initiatives in Bordeaux and Paris, reject the logic of *tabula rasa* in favor of incremental architecture focused on improving habitation and enhancing the social utility of space.[15] Here, design emerges as an open, dialogic process wherein attentive engagement with context supersedes formal imposition, thereby articulating an ecological and participatory landscape vision.

Both approaches signify a profound revision of the ontology

of building: landscape is no longer perceived as an aesthetic object to be reformulated but as a relational subject, a vibrant and plural interlocutor requiring care, attention, and spatial co-production. From this perspective, architecture becomes both political and epistemological praxis, continually renegotiating the meaning of inhabited places.[16]

DESIGN AS ATTENTIVENESS TO PLACE

Translating this vision into practical design methodologies necessitates a foundational approach predicated on attentive listening, stratigraphic reading of places, and the construction of relational devices. What memories does a place preserve? How might design activate new modes of inhabitation? What insights about our contemporary condition does the landscape reveal?

Consequently, the enlightened landscape architect is cultivated not solely through technical expertise but through the critical capacity to inhabit territories, discerning their hidden codes and transformative potentials.

ITALIAN EXPERIENCES IN LANDSCAPE REGENERATION

In Italy, design experiences fully embodying this philosophy, though rare, are highly significant. Notable examples include research by the collective Orizzontale, which revitalized marginal urban spaces in Rome using ephemeral and participatory installations; Antonio Presti's public art interventions in Librino, a suburban district of Catania, where mural surfaces become archives of collective memory; and ecological-agricultural repurposing projects

developed within Milan's Parco Agricolo Sud.

DWELLING AS CRITICAL PRAXIS

Redefining the cultural landscape concept requires transcending aestheticizing or functionalist interpretations toward a complex and dynamic understanding wherein landscape acts as an epistemic, critical, and generative dispositif. Thus envisioned, landscape ceases to be a finite form, becoming instead a dynamic field of relational forces encompassing collective memories, latent conflicts, social desires, and ecopolitical responsibilities. Dwelling within the landscape, therefore, calls for an ethical reframing of design—not as domination but as an attentive, co-productive act. Conceived thus, design practices revolve around generating mechanisms that catalyze symbolic and material regeneration processes. Architecture, public art, philosophy, and ecology converge into a transformative praxis, rendering landscape the locus where our shared futures are daily negotiated.

Only through conscious convergence between theory and praxis can we develop non-extractive, generative territorial projects capable of safeguarding the complexity of places and addressing contemporary ecological and political challenges. Ultimately, critically inhabiting the landscape constitutes poetic and design-based resistance against prevailing disembodied logics, restoring Earth's voice, temporal depth, and inhabitants' right to imagine alternative worlds.

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ABSTRACT

This article reconsiders the concept of cultural landscape through the intersection of geophilosophy and contemporary design practices. While traditional interpretations often describe landscape as a material outcome of interactions between environment and human settlement, this study proposes a relational and process-oriented framework in which landscape is understood as a dynamic cultural field shaped by perception, memory, and spatial practices.

Drawing on philosophical reflections on place, territoriality, and spatial experience, the article argues that cultural landscapes should be interpreted as historically layered configurations in which symbolic meanings, material forms, and collective practices interact across time. Within this perspective, landscape becomes not only an object of representation but also an epistemological and operational framework for understanding and shaping spatial transformations.

By bridging theoretical reflection and design-oriented approaches, the article demonstrates how geophilosophy can provide a conceptual foundation for interpreting landscape complexity, while design practices offer tools for engaging with its ongoing transformation. The study contributes to current debates in landscape studies and spatial humanities by framing cultural landscape as a living cultural process that links interpretation, memory, and territorial design.

PAROLE CHIAVE

HERITAGE INTERPRETATION; CULTURAL HERITAGE; CULTURAL LANDSCAPE; GEOPHILOSOPHY; LANDSCAPE THEORY; SPATIAL HUMANITIES; TERRITORIALITY; PLACE AND MEMORY; LANDSCAPE DESIGN

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