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Identification of places of value. The project «Luoghi di valore» (Outstanding places)¹

As its scientific and experimental work on the knowledge, design and management of landscape has evolved², the Benetton Foundation has increasingly felt the need to investigate the universal links between place and the human condition and to encourage awareness raising, education and participation amongst local people, communities and schools.

With this in mind, at the end of 2006 the Foundation devised a new initiative, a project called *Outstanding Places*, inspired by the principles of the European Landscape Convention.

Outstanding Places takes the form of a direct appeal to the general public in which they are asked, explicitly and very simply, to nominate and describe a place (or places) that they believe to be of outstanding value and to explain why; the invitation is therefore for everybody to identify and to appraise “their” landscapes and to express their aspirations for the environment in which they live, and in so doing to put into concrete practice the contents of the Convention.

The focus is therefore on the point of view of the individuals and communities that live and work in these places, with their different social and cultural backgrounds, their daily needs, their aspirations and their feelings.

People take part in this cultural project by responding to a public announcement and completing a form on which they name and describe their *outstanding place*. The announcement has been published annually, so far six times, and welcomes submissions from anyone and everyone in the Province of Treviso.

The latest announcement was designed especially to stimulate collective involvement and to explore participants’ ideas about the future of the places nominated.

Almost one thousand people have responded so far: individuals or groups, ordinary citizens, property owners, students, teachers, civil servants and many others. Their reasons for taking part are varied and many do not have the knowledge, the sensitivity or the taste of experts in the field, but their submissions are illuminated with the light of people who live in these places and who are part of them.

¹ This text is being published in the Uniscape v Careggi Seminar proceedings (*Landscape Observatories in Europe from the European Landscape Convention Recommendations to the local initiatives*, Firenze, 27th-28th June 2013).

² The *Outstanding Places* project was developed in the framework of the scientific work that the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche conducts in the field of landscape studies and research since 1987 (see www.fbsr.it).

When the project started, it was clear at an international level that the time was right for this experiment³. Over the last few years there have been many projects to do with exploring perceptions of people's immediate environments, their awareness of place, their alertness to the role they could play in the decision-making processes concerning territorial issues within a cultural framework that was the product of a slow evolution which finally found expression in the European Landscape Convention and in the consequent "revolution" in the idea of landscape.

Another observable factor was a growing desire on the part of ordinary people in some way to retake control of the places where they led their lives and of their personal or collective relationship with those places in light of a broader sense of their value.

Our concept does not include the acceptance or rejection of nominations nor the proclamation of winners; all the places nominated, observed and described from the personal viewpoint of those who live or work there constitute, in their extreme variety of form, size and character, an indispensable resource for any attempt to identify and understand the needs, the modes of expression, the tastes of the community and their proposals and projects.

Many of the participants documented their nominated places and the value that made them "outstanding" not only by completing the submission form but also with a variety of other materials, including photographs, written texts, drawings, audio-visual aids and maps, a real treasure chest of information.

³ The huge bibliography associated in one way or another with the project is currently being reorganized in preparation for a forthcoming publication (edited by Domenico Luciani and Simonetta Zanon) that will illustrate and discuss its aims, methods and results.

We nevertheless consider it useful to mention certain essential reference points, starting with the writings of:

- YVES LUGINBÜHL, especially the lectures *La demande sociale de paysage* (Conseil national du paysage, séance inaugurale du 28 mai 2001) and *Qualité du paysage - qualité de la vie. L'évolution de la demande sociale de paysage en Europe* (Florence, 19th October 2010 on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the signing of the European Landscape Convention), and in general his work on the subject of *landscape and social well-being*;

- JOAN NOGUÉ, especially *La construcción social del paisaje*, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid 2007, 343 pp., *El paisaje en la cultura contemporánea*, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid 2008, 301 pp., and *Altri paesaggi*, FrancoAngeli, Milan 2010, 328 pp.;

- SALVATORE SETTIS, especially *Paesaggio costituzione cemento. La battaglia per l'ambiente contro il degrado civile*, Einaudi, Turin 2010, 326 pp., where, on p. 296, in the chapter *Noi, i cittadini*, pp. 282-313, he mentions the *Outstanding Places (Luoghi di valore)* project and *Azione popolare. Cittadini per il bene comune*, Einaudi, Turin 2012, 228 pp.;

- GIOVANNA SONDA, especially his articles *Luoghi di valore nel Veneto. Che territorio stiamo raccontando?*, «Foedus», 24, II quarter, 2009, pp. 97-106, and *Narrare il paesaggio: un processo di costruzione di valori e significato*, «Rivista Geografica Italiana», 117, 2010, pp. 157-167, both of which are based on research she conducted in the framework of the project "Luoghi di valore";

- FRANCESCO VALLERANI, especially *Il grigio oltre le siepi. Geografie smarrite e racconti del disagio in Veneto* (ed. together with Mauro Varotto), Nuova Dimensione, Portogruaro 2005, 298 pp., and the just published *Italia desnuda. Percorsi di resistenza nell'Italia del cemento*, Unicopli, Milan 2013, 191 pp.;

- MAURO VAROTTO, especially *Geografie del declino civico? Il fenomeno dei comitati spontanei in Veneto*, «Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana», XIII, V, 1, January-March 2012, pp. 43-58, based on the report he presented at the Landscape Study Days entitled *Luoghi di valore. Valori del luogo* organized by the Foundation as part of the "Luoghi di valore" project;

- MASSIMO VENTURI FERRIOLO, especially *Percepire paesaggi. La potenza dello sguardo*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2009, 282 pp., where, under the heading *Luoghi di valore: un'altra postilla* on pp. 172-175, he gives a brief description of the *Outstanding Places* project and a suggestion of how the results might be interpreted.

Moreover, to gain a better understanding of the reasons underlying nominations and the nature of the links between people and places, we prepared a double questionnaire, which was sent to all the nominators (year after year) with questions relating to personal details, in order to become better acquainted with those who had responded to our appeal and to the place or places nominated.

The project was originally launched as a simple gathering of nominations but it has gradually been enhanced with other elements all aimed at increasing participation of people in this collective reflection and at raising citizens' awareness of these topics. We therefore organize a number of public meetings, around twenty to date, the latest just a month ago, with the nominators, those responsible for the places nominated and all the stakeholders; we work with local press to ensure frequent mentions in the local media and also in the specialist magazines; we have been to visit more than 60 of the "outstanding places", meeting there first of all the people who had nominated them and, when possible, also the owners, the administrators and all the other precious witnesses involved in the life of the place.

These visits to the places with the people involved show us that many citizens have very clear and cogent opinions and expectations about "their" places and that in many cases they are waiting for an opportunity to express them.

All the documentation produced (interviews, video footage, photographs and a variety of other materials) is very important for research into these topics.

The richness and interest of the material submitted along with the nominations and collected afterwards with the interviews led us to organize an annual exhibition, admission free, for about three months, on the premises of the Foundation. In the exhibitions all the material received with the submissions is set out together with the documentation of the meetings held in the "outstanding places", with photographs and short video clips of each interview.

The six exhibitions held so far have been visited by over 13,000 people.

To engage everyone actively we asked all visitors to express a preference for one of the places illustrated in the exhibition and to leave comment on their choice or on the project in general. Everyone is given a card or a form for this purpose on entering the exhibition, together with a leaflet commenting briefly on each of the submissions. Of course the visitors' comments and preferences are not solicited in order to grade the places or to acclaim winners; since they now number several thousand (all transcribed and ordered) they do nevertheless represent further useful material for the research project.

Finally we created a "digital box" which contains all the data, the information and the opinions assembled through the nominations, the interviews and the questionnaires, in other words a complete database with easy access to all the documentation.

A rapid overview of the nominations and a few comments about their content.

727 different places have been nominated in 749 submissions; the places are located in 92 of the 95 municipal areas within the Province of Treviso.

The list of participants shows that they belong to every social rank, live in every part of the Province (and even elsewhere in a few cases), and represent every cultural condition; so we can say that place is not something that exists “around” people and communities, it is not an optional context; on the contrary it is an essential component of our sphere of life, necessary to the human condition. To the point, in not uncommon cases, where the traumatic transformation of a place may cause a person to suffer as if the loss were of part of him- or herself.

The relationship of the nominator to the nominated place also varies considerably. Sometimes it is the owner, the designer or the person responsible for the site or it may be a civil servant, a scholarly expert or a group of schoolchildren; but perhaps the most significant element is the participation of citizens who have no role or direct responsibility for the places they nominate; people who, individually or together with others, nevertheless want to have their say, with an objective that often goes beyond simply knowing and sharing and extends, more or less explicitly, to participating in decisions as to their use, protection and modification.

Individual nominations often contain interesting and constructive suggestions and they are in any case important examples of “active citizenship”, but the nominations presented by more or less numerous groups of people⁴ frequently arise from a collectively experienced relationship with the place and from an existing joint commitment, a situation that introduces different perspectives as regards both appraisal and proposals for the future.

In most cases the nominators come from the municipal area where the place they have proposed is located and they are often already engaged in action to safeguard and promote appreciation of it.

Attachment to a place and commitment to its well-being inevitably start «in one’s backyard». “Nimby” (not in my back yard) is not a syndrome, nor is it a synonym of opposition and mindless hostility⁵; rather it is increasingly a point of departure for an enlightened and participatory attitude to the whole world, the world we can join Gilles Clément in calling our «planetary garden»⁶.

⁴ As regards the Landscape observatories (*osservatori del paesaggio*), published works are well covered in the recent study by FRANCESCO VISENTIN, *Gli Osservatori del paesaggio fra istituzionalizzazione e azione dal basso. Esperienze italiane a confronto*, in «Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana», 12, 2012, pp. 823-838.

⁵ Similarly, on the “Nimby” phenomenon, the recent study by MICHELE RACCONATO and TERRI MANNARINI *Non nel mio giardino. Prendere sul serio i movimenti Nimby*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2012, 170 pp., is the only one that needs to be listed here, given that the bibliographical references published on pp. 153-170 offer thorough coverage of other relevant publications.

⁶ The mention of the «planetary garden» pertains to the writings of Gilles Clément, especially *Le jardin planétaire* (ed., together with Claude Eveno), Éditions de l’Aube, La Tour d’Aigues 1997, 199 pp.; *Le jardin planétaire. Réconcilier l’homme et la nature*, catalogue of the exhibition of the same name mounted at the Parc de La Villette, Éditions Albin Michel, 1999, 127 pp. and *Il giardiniere planetario*, Rizzoli, Milan 2008, 95 pp.

The variety of means used to speak of the places and to explain why they are judged as outstanding also reinforces the idea of universality in the relationship between person and place, a relationship that appears to be independent of possession of tools to express it. Everyone loves, in their own way, to recount a personal relationship with a place that has a special meaning for them and we have the impression that participation in the project has become a way in which many nominators have been able to recreate a connection with the places that had dulled or blurred over the years, or it has provided an opportunity to bring the connection to the surface and with it the realization that it implied passion and commitment; in both cases it demonstrated how the “need for place” exists but needs stimulation and proper “cultivation”.

The variety of means used to respond is connected to an even greater, though less unexpected, variety of situations, stories, dimensions, functions and conditions of the places nominated: places in which nature is the principal feature, such as stretches of agricultural landscape, natural areas and man-made experiments, places with water; examples of built environment such as squares, roads, public and private buildings, suburban districts, schools, parks and gardens; large-scale environments and routes, eco-museums; country houses, hamlets and historical settlements; memorials and sepulchres, churches, convents and monasteries; archaeological sites of antiquity and modernity, including industrial areas; artistic places and places of social gathering. So it is not easy to answer the often-asked question «what “types” of places have been nominated?» and «why?»; indeed it may actually be impossible because “outstanding places”, as we mentioned earlier, shun typological sub-divisions and objective classifications and when we try in any case to define them we can never shake off the relationship the nominators had with these places, the ways they perceived and experienced them; that relationship itself becomes part of the connotation and “type” in a complex and unrepeatably fusion of formal attributes, functions, future prospects and subjective points of view.

The subjective judgement of the value of a place does not generally derive from its prestige or from the accumulated historical, artistic, cultural or natural importance attributed to it by critical tradition and acknowledged as a general perception; rather it is the product of the sedimentation of personal memories, of events experienced or recounted, of the evidence of change introduced by previous generations; it is due, in short, to a complicated array of factors, many of them personal, almost never easy to pin down, that culminate in a sense of being part of the long-term process that has made the place what it is.

Though we cannot go so far as to say that the more “traditional” values – those which in theory are more objective and easily shareable, almost “universal”, for instance those relating to historical or artistic, environmental, natural or didactic qualities – are ignored or underestimated by the nominators, it is nevertheless remarkable that they choose such unusual, even surprising, ways of interpreting them.

Thus, to cite a recurrent pattern amongst the submissions, we see that the sense of the sacred, the need for meditation and prayer is not (or not only) translated into nominations of the numerous examples of monumental religious architecture in the Province but rather they become the key to understanding the value of smaller things, tiny country churches, wayside altars, little signs of devotion scattered around the countryside.

Similarly, the attachment of special value to nature or landscape is not confined to parks and gardens or areas managed with the stated purpose of nature conservation; more especially it concerns places of botanical or agricultural experimentation, places in which the key words are ecology, biodiversity and recycling, so also sites whose exceptional “naturalness” is only apparent because it is the consequence of abandonment and decay, and fragments of the *third landscape*⁷.

The same parks and gardens are often nominated because of additional value and not only for their good design. People are frequently appreciative of a more “natural” concept of garden, one which is less conditioned by aesthetic criteria; in many cases too the prevailing value in the nomination of a park or a garden is its social utility.

And again, nominations tend to cite small historic towns and “minor”, little-known country houses rather than the heritage sites for which the Province of Treviso is famous throughout the world; small country graveyards and not the sepulchres and memorials designed by world-famous architects; there are places associated with work mainly if they recall the past and belong to cultures clearly perceived as more “man-centred” or when they comprise large, disused buildings that offer interesting prospects of re-use; places that are apparently devoid of “objective” qualities but able to attract groups and communities and to satisfy their need to meet and spend time together; places that assume importance at the moment it becomes clear that their fragility and weakness exposes them to the threat of decay or destruction.

So in the construction of the person-place connection a central role is played by all the factors associated with the sphere of personal experience and knowledge, of familiarity and other relations, whether personal or shared at the small community level; equally central, however, are the factors associated with “identity”, a recurrent term in nominations, and although it is perhaps too loosely used it must nevertheless be acknowledged that it plays an important role as a “warning light” indicating an ever-more-common sense of unease and disorientation consequent of the homogenization of places and the cancellation of variety and difference that has characterized the transformation of our Province in recent decades, devastating landscapes and feelings. Finally, and it is worth underlining the fact once again, many of the nominations can be seen as spontaneous and generous gestures made by a society that intends to play a part

⁷ Also the mention of the «third landscape» pertains to the writings of Gilles Clément, especially *Manifesto del terzo paesaggio*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 2005, 87 pp.

in the work of understanding and governing its places and whose attribution of value also expresses a willingness to contemplate planning, action and change. This enthusiasm for planning is a promise of commitment for future landscapes and this needs to be underpinned by carefully prepared cultural competence.

Education and training are therefore (or *should be*) “pre-conditions” if it is agreed that the people involved are the mainstay of any definition of landscape and that looking after places must take account of their recognized characteristics and of the values attributed to them, always with the participation of the local communities and always taking their aspirations and proposals into account.