

# Identity of territories and units of landscape

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**When it comes to landscape, identity is a frequent expectation. What shapes this expectation? Is it able to define territories as the *Atlas des paysages* (landscape atlases) try to do? Territories have long histories and their identity is not simply a product of their landscapes or activities. But identity is always an important component of the feeling of collective belonging and therefore of the social and community fabric.**

In the current context of industrialisation and globalisation which tends towards uniformity, the assertion of identity is even more pressing. It is a question faced by individuals, peoples and territories. Our analysis focuses on the last of these dimensions, but the identity of any territory and the identity of its inhabitants have a reciprocal influence. At first defined as that which is identical, identity became to mean that which is singular, since it is the same criterion that allows us to declare some objects identical and to distinguish all of them from others. Identity can be defined as all the traits that make individuals or countries what they are and not something else.

## Identity card

Everything we need to identify an individual is listed on what we call his *identity* card: a face, shown on the *identity* photo, a name, address, date of birth, height, distinguishing features.

And we can transpose the elements detailed on the identity card onto a region: a recognised name – a real sign of identity when the inhabitants can be described by an adjective derived from it (which allows them to use their place's identity as a part of their own); an address, that is a location; a size, that is an area; a specific history, if not a date of birth; distinguishing features, which give it its geography; a face, that is to say landscapes; it can also have symbolic attributes – emblems, a coat of arms, logo, flag, anthem, motto, etc.

## Identity and landscape

Landscape studies and projects draw heavily on the concept of identity – even if they are not alone in doing so, as a region's identity greatly outweighs that of its landscapes. This approach is encouraged by the European Landscape Convention, which invites each signatory State “to *identify* its own landscapes throughout its territory” (art. 6.C.1.a.i). Well before this convention, the *Atlas des paysages* (landscape atlases) have been drawn up for around twenty years in French departments or areas such as natural parks, identifying landscape units and describing the characteristics that make them unique.

The search for identity is not always explicit, as landscape units are defined more by their homogeneity, as per the official method of the Environment Ministry (Luginbühl, 1997). The units are nonetheless identified in this process, most often using a name or the boundaries that mark the changes in geomorphology or land use. The name is often an indicator of the strength or weakness of the units delineated in this way: Some atlases show incongruous names that simply reflect how the landscape planner felt on the day he visited the area. These names have little or no connection with local history and are used likewise elsewhere. This gives a sense of how identity is much more than just homogeneity or what a person might feel on a given day, but it is rooted in a

long history and shared relationship with the local people.

## Identifiable territories

Landscape units are not only defined by purely visual criteria. The perception of landscapes is also linked to their use: those that are frequented on a daily basis are more strongly felt as belonging to a single unit rather than those that are not. A “population basin” (an area where most of the people spend most of their lives, such as a town and its satellite villages) therefore acts as an important criterion in identifying units, even if there are no visible limits or differences in the landscape. The best examples are where the “population basin” can be superimposed over a unit of relief or land use, or even both. The ideal case is where there are view points from where the whole unit can be viewed in one glance<sup>1</sup>: this occurs in places such as Mantes, Meaux, Melun and Montereau, which are both geographical and population units.

However, no one method of delineating landscape units can take precedence over another: the perfect delineation does not exist. Landscape units are rather a knowledge tool, to be utilised by projects that are likely to have a direct impact on them. For this reason, even if a *Schéma de cohérence territoriale* (or *Scot*, French regional strategic plan) is operative only within its boundaries, it should also take into account what is beyond them, across the entire area of all the landscape units affected. A readily identifiable landscape unit such as the *plaine de Versailles* (Versailles Plain), is

more difficult to manage when it is shared between several municipality associations<sup>2</sup>

Territories that stand the test of time should be built around a strong identity, whether landscape is a strong marker of this identity or one marker among others. The so-called *territoires de projet* (project territories) only apply for the duration of the relevant project, much shorter than the life of institutional divisions (as of today, 220 years for the French departments, 150 years for Paris within its current boundaries). If inter-municipal bodies (in France, *communautés urbaines*, *communautés d'agglomérations* and *communautés de communes*) are to stay for that long, they should as well have an identity. In regions other than Île-de-France, inter-municipal bodies have been naturally established around the immediately identifiable entities that are the urban areas around the main cities. In the same way, in rural areas, inter-municipal bodies have been drawn upon cantons, which are not only electoral constituencies, but reflect an ancient structure of village satellites of a market-town.

In Île-de-France, as the inter-municipal bodies that first arose were too small (sometimes just two municipalities!), there has been a shift towards much larger groupings, which are often not focused around a central town. Even in places where there is a centre, the name doesn't always make reference to it (*Plaine Commune* rather than Saint-Denis or *Grand Parc* instead of Versailles). Other names are just as lacking in originality: *Deux Fleuves* (Two Rivers), *Étangs* (Lakes), *Boucle de Seine* (Seine Loop), etc. Because the name encapsulates the identity, an unoriginal name reflects a weak identity (as for a grouping of unrelated entities) or an unaccepted identity (as for a refusal to recognise a centre's predominance).

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<sup>1</sup> See the article by Jean-Christophe Bailly, “La ville entière” (The whole town), in the eponymous issue of *Cahiers de l'École de Blois* (Journal of Blois Landscape School), March 2010, pp. 6-9.

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<sup>2</sup> See the article by Marie de Naurois, “La plaine de Versailles «entre projet et réalité»”, *Les Cahiers de l'IAU*, no. 159, 2011, pp. 52-53.

Furthermore, local communities that reflect clearly identified entities are a major issue for local democracy. The turnout at canton elections is always higher in rural areas as the canton is centred around its principal market-town, whereas in urban areas, the canton is a mere constituency. Can the inhabitants build an identity for these new groupings that can inspire a sense of belonging?

The issue of regional identity can be felt as passionately as that of peoples or individuals. Knowing how many wars and conflicts can be attributed to identity<sup>3</sup>, some are wary of defining identified territories and prefer “project territories” that are more consensual because of their greater flexibility. Violence, however, has always come from the idea of land as property. However, if we chose to consider that it is the inhabitants who belong to the region, strengthening its identity could help newcomers integrate better without having to relinquish that which makes up their own identity.

### **Landscape units in Île-de-France**

The Île-de-France database of landscape units is part of ongoing work to identify and describe landscapes (just like the departmental landscape atlases), encouraged by the European convention.

There is no ideal subdivision that would match with a large landscape unit. The “departments” are arbitrary subdivisions of French territory and their origins have little to do with landscapes; the French “regions” are similarly lacking identity, being collections of departments rather than geographical or historical entities: the Paris basin is much larger than the current Île-de-France region, and the former Île-de-France province extended further north and not as far to the east). The region has the advantage of being a larger area than the department, hence with fewer units overlapping its boundaries. In addition, the database is not simply a compilation of departmental landscape atlases – this compilation being a State’s ongoing project<sup>4</sup>, not only in Île-de-France, but also across the entire country.

Initiated during the drawing up of the regional strategic plan<sup>5</sup>, the database of landscape units benefited from input from the Departments, Regional Nature Parks, the CAUEs (architecture, planning and environment advisory bodies) and State and Regional offices. This collaborative work the various subdivisions (there is no one ideal method), in order to converge them or to agree on why different subdivisions would be kept. The database represents one layer of the regional geographical information system. There is a guide available that describes how it was created and offers the content in maps sorted by the various attributes of the units (see Tricaud, Legenne et al. in the bibliography below).

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<sup>3</sup> See Lothar Baier, “Irritante identité” (The trouble with identity), *Études*, October 1994, pp. 313-317.

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<sup>4</sup> See the article by Jean-Luc Cabrit, “L’État et la préservation du paysage francilien”; *Les Cahiers de l’IAU*, no. 159, 2011, pp. 30-32.

<sup>5</sup> See *Carte des entités fonctionnelles et paysagères* (Map of landscape and functional entities), pp. 118-119 in the Sdrif (Île-de-France strategic plan) adopted in 2008.

Unlike the atlases, this database did not go as far as including an illustrated description of the approximately 900 units identified. It did, however, incorporate the notion of identity by seeking to subdivide units by the identity factors outlined at the beginning of this article rather than by homogeneity. In particular, the existence of a recognised name was a determining factor. The methodology was guided by the following principles:

**Levels.** Three nested levels were established: the “small units” level highlighted local places, “terroirs”, prominent sites; the “large units” are generally well identified groupings, somewhere between local and regional size (plateaux, valleys, towns, etc.); the “country” level divides Île-de-France into a number of very large, well known, structural and/or historical units that overlap the regional boundaries (traditionally referred to as *pays*, *i. e.* “countries”: Brie, Beauce, Vexin, etc.).

**Topology.** At every level, each point of the area belongs to one and only one unit in the database (even if in reality the boundaries may be vague and the point may belong to several units). Every attempt was made to keep units in one piece without any enclaves, but this principle could not be adhered to in every case.

**Boundaries.** The delineation was not designed to create frontiers in the landscape, but to identify, in addition to the units, interfaces or transitions that also play an important role: boundary lines, ecotones, water divides, watercourses, linear infrastructure, urban edges, etc.

**Naming convention.** As the name is considered here to be the embodiment of all the other attributes, the goal was to find names that best expressed identity and were the most easily recognised and shared. Unoriginal names are avoided as they are shared by too many places. In the absence of a specific name, valleys were generally named after their watercourse, and centred units, be they urban (towns) or rural (plains, plateaux, clearings, etc.) by their central town or village.

**Attributes.** “Country”: structural relief (plateau-plain or valley); “large units”: one attribute only, combining relief (large or small valley, plain or

plateau) and land use (urban, agricultural or forest); “small units”: dominant relief, dominant land use (whether it is exclusive, predominant or just significant), but also the relevance of the name.

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