Landscape research – Why is it important?

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Lanscape research opens our eyes to our landscapes and creates the basis for a shared culture that allows us to understand their profound value. To ensure this research is utilised properly, it must serve as a springboard for landscape policies and action. A departmental council and two regional nature parks present their know-how in the leveraging of knowledge through action.

The Seine-et-Marne departmental council and the Gâtinais français and Vexin français regional nature parks felt the need to conduct landscape research: the council drew up an Atlas and the two parks prepared landscape charters. The goal was to understand the distinguishing features of the landscape and share them with stakeholders. Since their inception, these documents were to be reference works for the understanding of these regions, but also for the undertaking of concrete projects. This was reflected in an exhaustive assessment of their scope of action, with the same focus applied regardless of the status of the various landscapes encountered: this was done in one go for the department's Atlas and over a more extended period for the two parks, so their scope could be covered by a complete mosaic of landscape charters. Descriptive input and recommendations for development in the region highlighted the main issues (both weaknesses and strengths), the areas in need of continuous attention, etc. These guidelines were used, honed and developed both in large-scale landscape policies and in development projects designed to transform the landscape for new uses.

The Landscape Atlas: a new reference work for road-routing

In Seine-et-Marne, the Landscape Atlas was approved in December 2007 and drawn up jointly by the departmental council's road service and the Council for Architecture, Urban Planning and the Environment (CAUE). This situation might seem a little strange, but it simply reflects an operational reality: the road service needed a tool like this and so was keen to participate in its creation. At the end of this four-year experience, the Landscape Atlas has indeed become the reference work for the road service's landscape policy. This applies both for carrying out roadworks and for the more specific consideration of green roadside verges, where one of the main outcomes was a voluntary policy in favour of planting trees alongside the road. The Atlas very clearly identified this plant structure as a major feature of landscapes. In this way, it boosts the importance of and need for ambitious action on this topic and also outlines the technical principles. Next, the Roadside Tree Plan is drafted as a direct offshoot of the Landscape Atlas; the roads are essentially lines cutting across landscape units and the detailed knowledge from these units allows the tree-planting to be carried out very accurately. Seeing the roads move from one landscape type to another offers a first glimpse of the route's various transitions; in the process, highlighting these major thoroughfares and the advantages they all possess for the planting of long lines of trees, an iconic motif of the department and of a large part of the Paris basin. At the scale of the landscape entity, it is

the importance of the roadside trees at local level that is revealed: are they part of the identity of the place? can they or should they be a major motif? how do they interact with agricultural land or boundary lines? It is this information, used in each of the preparatory stages, that highlights the importance of the Landscape Atlas for projects with multiple spatial planning activities.

The Atlas is just as effective when it comes to designing new infrastructure. A comparative analysis of several potential routes can be made by overlaying them on the landscape map: this highlights the number of entities crossed and the position of the alignment through the entity (along the edges or through the middle) shows very quickly the impact of the road on the area. This allows the various proposed routes to be assessed objectively. Then, to define a landscape scheme, the knowledge of the various entities guides the landscape planner by highlighting the landscape motifs on the ground, providing the basis for a balanced project in the process.

The Landscape Atlas as a vehicle for establishing cross-project development principles

All development projects in places that enjoy regulatory protection are subject to a very close assessment of their consequences on the area. In this context, applicants are aware of the site's status and design projects more carefully from the outset. However, regular landscapes with no special status are more at the mercy of developers. For these places, the Landscape Atlas is often the only leverage to ensure well-located, well-designed projects. This is a particularly sensitive issue in Seine-et-Marne, where there has been an increase in the number of inert-waste storage facilities (*Installations de stockage de déchets inertes*, ISDI) and quarries. The Landscape Atlas

allows the various sites to be assessed before any action is taken. It discourages the authorisation of such facilities in the intimate setting of a forest clearing or where there is gentle soil creep, for example. By the same token, a new quarry in a site that already has some form of mining activity would be encouraged, rather than digging up a recognisable and long-standing agricultural landscape somewhere else.

The Atlas offers insight therefore on a landscape's ability to sustain a new project; it is not, however, a substitute for the designer's job of drawing up the plans. It provides recommendations and above all encourages each development proposal to match the situation. This does not mean lining the perimeter of a proposed site with trees to have the project approved, but rather considering what kind of new face and lines a site might offer to the landscape. In the same way, converting a gravel pit into a wetland does not have to be the only solution in every case; it is essential to rebuild a landscape that mixes grassland, woods and farming areas in line with the layout rules of the landscape entity.

From landscape charter to landscape development project: along the lines of the "genius loci"

The restoration of the view of Grand Rocher in Fleury-en-Bière

The landscape scheme took inspiration from the recommandations in the Bière Plain and École Valley landscape charters: "Recognise the parks and châteaux in the urban planning documents and protect them by listing the enclosure walls of the great estates found in the landscape entity maps. Raising awareness of owners and informing them when the perimeter is visible from public domain. Preserve and restore as much as possible the

outer perspectives of old estates in the development of public places."

The Park made a modest financial contribution to the research and work when compared to the overall investment (10%). However, the technical information in the charters and the encourgement to employ a landscape planner were essential in allowing the project to take shape. The coordination and investment of partners such as the CAUE and the Seine-et-Marne departmental architecture and heritage office were decisive in the project's final outcome.

Development of a parking facility near the Santeuil train station

Based on the landscape charter drawn up on the village, several projects were set up, some of which were carried out as part of a rural contract: enhancing the village centre, creating a garden cemetery and building a parking facility near the train station.

For the latter project, the landscape charter detailed a number of points: the creation of a parking area near the station to encourage people to travel by train, the need to provide access to the Vexin Français regional nature park via this mode of transport (starting point for walks, signage), the connection of the Viosne Valley with the village by means of a planned walking area beyond the parking facility.

The continuity given by having the charter and the projects overseen by the same design team helped ensure a quality project. This quality is evidenced in the design, the simplicity of the materials, especially the use of word as a bordering feature (between stabilised soil, grass areas, planted areas), the knot that brings plant diversity and evokes the river, the bench so in keeping with the rural setting that invites daydream to the sound of river Viosne.

The recommandations drawn from this landscape research have greatly benefited today's landscapes while highlighting how they are rooted in the history of the local landscapes. They also provide a coherent framework for the landscapes to develop while preserving the local character, be it urban or rural.

Bibliographical references

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