

Areas of cultural and ecological re-equilibrium in human settlements

Rita Colantonio Venturelli

Dr Colantonio Venturelli is a research fellow at Ancona University where she teaches territorial and town planning based on the principles of landscape ecology and urban ecology. Her research has always been carried out not only in Italy but also in other European countries (Switzerland, Germany). She is a member of several scientific associations including the World Society for Ekistics (WSE). The text that follows is an edited and revised version of a paper made available by the author to participants at the WSE Symposium "Defining Success of the City in the 21st century," Berlin, 24-28 October, 2001, which she was finally unable to attend.

Introduction

"Cultural landscapes reflect the interactions between people and their natural environment over space and time. Nature, in this context, is the counterpart of human society: both are dynamic forces shaping the landscape. In some regions of the world, cultural landscapes stand out as models of interaction between people, their social system, and the way they organize space. A cultural landscape is a complex phenomenon with a tangible and an intangible identity. The intangible component arises from ideas and interactions which have an impact on the perceptions and shaping of a landscape, such as sacred beliefs closely linked to the landscape and the way it has been perceived over time. Cultural landscapes mirror the cultures that created them." (DROSTE, PLACHTER and RÖSSLER, 1995).

Area of re-equilibrium – The concept

Modern Western thought that has arisen from the Industrial Revolution has tended to see the concepts of nature and culture as distant from each other and, as technological progress advanced, even opposite to each other. Instead of being viewed as complementary, some disciplines – land planning among them – have for a long time been conditioned by such an attitude. This has contributed to shaping a strongly unbalanced cultural landscape, where all the functions connected with technological culture have come to be concentrated in the large urban settlements, resulting in the neglect and eventual loss of the fundamental relationship with the historical culture of the sites, with their physiographic characteristics and their natural heritage. This is a fundamentally wrong attitude because all these elements constitute a unitary and intimately connected system – the total landscape.

Over the last decades, after the waning of excessive confidence in technology and economic expectations, new forms of management of the cultural landscape have actively been sought. UNESCO's action for the protection of cultural land-

scapes of universal value is one such initiative. However, action should also be undertaken to manage landscapes that do not have universal value, because these too have the potential to rebalance, so to speak, the areas where the dense concentration of functions associated with technological culture has replaced all the other components of the total landscape.

The need for integrated management of land and the environment

There are cases where cultural landscapes are not allowed to exert this action of re-equilibrium, frequently because of mismanagement of land and the environment. These activities are often planned on an excessively small spatial scale and on an excessively close temporal scale. By contrast, amending errors of this kind would allow the achievement of the three main targets that are essential for the fulfilment of the local potential:

- the protection of the cultural as well as the natural identity of an area;
- the development of the model of potential growth suggested by the local cultural and natural features; and,
- the linkage of this integrated cultural and natural model to its wider spatial context.

The need for setting up observatories of the transformations of the cultural landscape

Integrated planning of the cultural landscape seen in all its facets cannot be successful unless the evolution of its essential features is continuously monitored (fig. 1). To do this, it would be helpful to select some observation points from where to monitor both the ongoing and the potential transformations with a view to identifying evolutionary models that can be useful not only locally but also in other similar sites. Indeed, several sites could be connected into networks of similar cases. In addition, these observatories could provide the administrative bodies responsible for the planning and management of land and the environment with the data on the state of the landscape indices that would allow the monitoring of these areas as well as the prediction of future transformations.

A case illustrated in this paper represents a significant example of the scope for managing in this way a border region between Italy and Switzerland – Insubria, in Lombardy. This region has a rich cultural and historical heritage and considerable natural resources, and could contribute – if properly managed – to rebalance the landscape of an area of Lombardy that has undergone a most marked anthropic transformation (fig. 2).

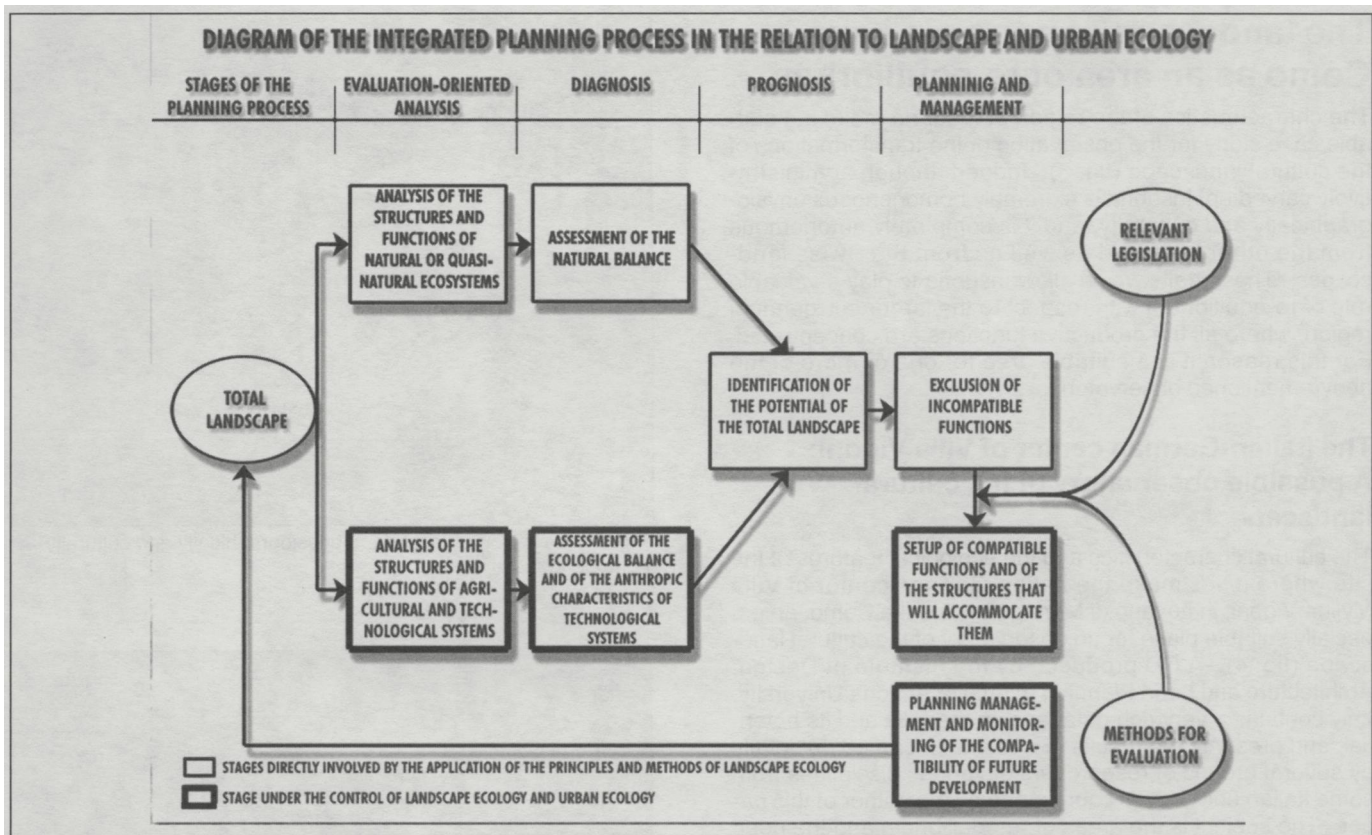


Fig. 1: The integrated planning process in the relation of landscape and urban ecology.

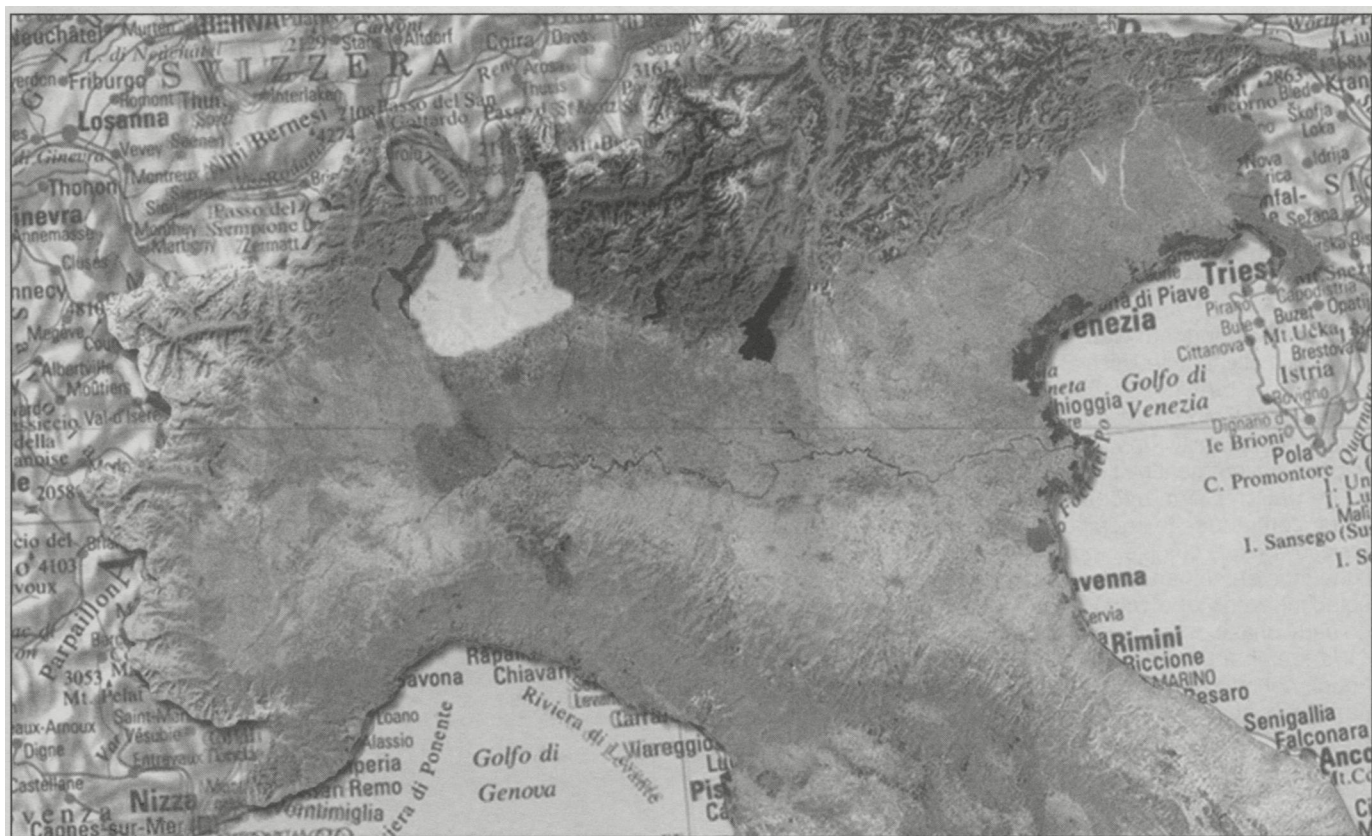


Fig. 2: An example of the concept of area of re-equilibrium – Insubria in Lombardy, a border region between Italy and Switzerland.

The landscape of northern Lake Como as an area of re-equilibrium

The characteristics of the region of Insubria make it a suitable case study for the observation of the transformations of the cultural landscape (fig. 3). Indeed, though administratively carved up, Insubria is extremely homogeneous physiographically and culturally, and it is completely autonomous from the other Lombard as well as from the Swiss landscapes. These traits would allow Insubria to play a valuable role of re-equilibrium with respect to the larger surrounding region, where all the productive functions are concentrated. For this reason it is a suitable area for one or more of the above-mentioned observatories.

The Italian-German center of Villa Vigoni: A possible observatory of the cultural landscape

The cultural characteristics and the ecological features of the site where it lies make the Italian-German center of Villa Mylius-Vigoni, in Lovenio di Menaggio, on Lake Como, an especially suitable place for an observatory of the cultural landscape (fig. 4). A CD produced by the Institute of Design, Architecture and Land Planning (IDAU) of Ancona University, Italy contains a very rich database on the Villa and its potential, and presents the results of a research carried out jointly by several groups of researchers of various disciplines from some Italian universities coordinated by the author of this paper. The subject is the areas of re-equilibrium and the need for setting up a series of observatories on the cultural landscape, focusing on the Mylius-Vigoni estate (COLANTONIO VENTURELLI, 2001).

The history of this property, which lay on the route of the "Grand Tour," began in the mid-19th century. In this period the model of cultural landscape characterized by a system of villas and by long stays abroad by the rich European families became established. In this context, Heinrich Mylius, a Frankfurt banker who had been living in Milan for several years, bought the property for his summer residence, as was the custom of the Lombard high bourgeoisie. After the death of his only son, Julius, in 1830, Mylius decided to dedicate to his memory both the park and his art collection (fig. 5).

The park was designed according to the criteria of the German romantic garden – which were nearly unknown in Italy at the time – and was made to fade directly into the 40 hectares of wood that were partly used for farming (fig. 6). The physical characteristics of this layout reflect an exchange of concepts between Italian and German cultures which started with Heinrich Mylius and continued throughout the history of the family, up to the donation of the property to the German government by the family in 1983.

The Italian-German center of studies, set up after this event, contributes to keeping this tradition alive. Its history has allowed this complex to remain intact and homogeneous in the face of the transformations that have subsequently affected the landscape, and to stand as a valuable testimony of the early phase of this type of cultural landscape (fig. 7).

We feel that this site can and should play an active role, though not by being enclosed within the walls of a traditional museum but by allowing it to reach a larger public through interactive visits. There are therefore all the conditions for this handsome complex to achieve its potential as an eco-museum. This point of observation of the transformations of the cultural landscape can provide a valuable body of data also to the administrative bodies and to those in charge of the planning and management of land and the environment.



Fig. 3: The region of Insubria, a physiographically and culturally homogeneous area.

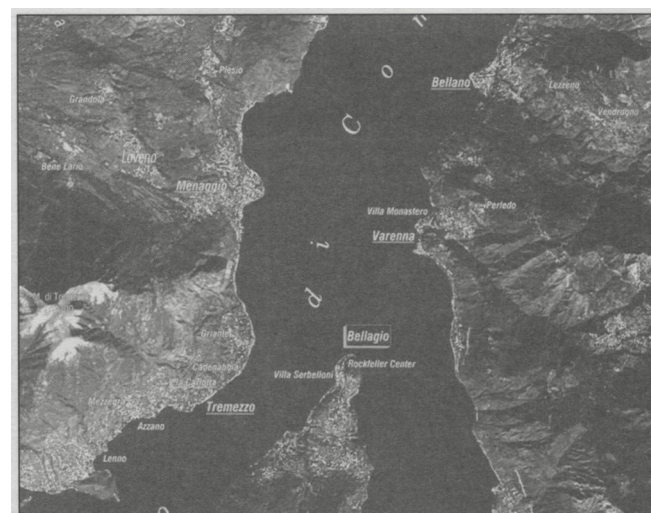


Fig. 4: Location of the Italian-German center of Villa Mylius-Vigoni in Lovenio di Menaggio on Lake Como, Italy.



Fig. 5: Map of the area where the Villa Mylius-Vigoni is located, with the park in the southern part of the property.

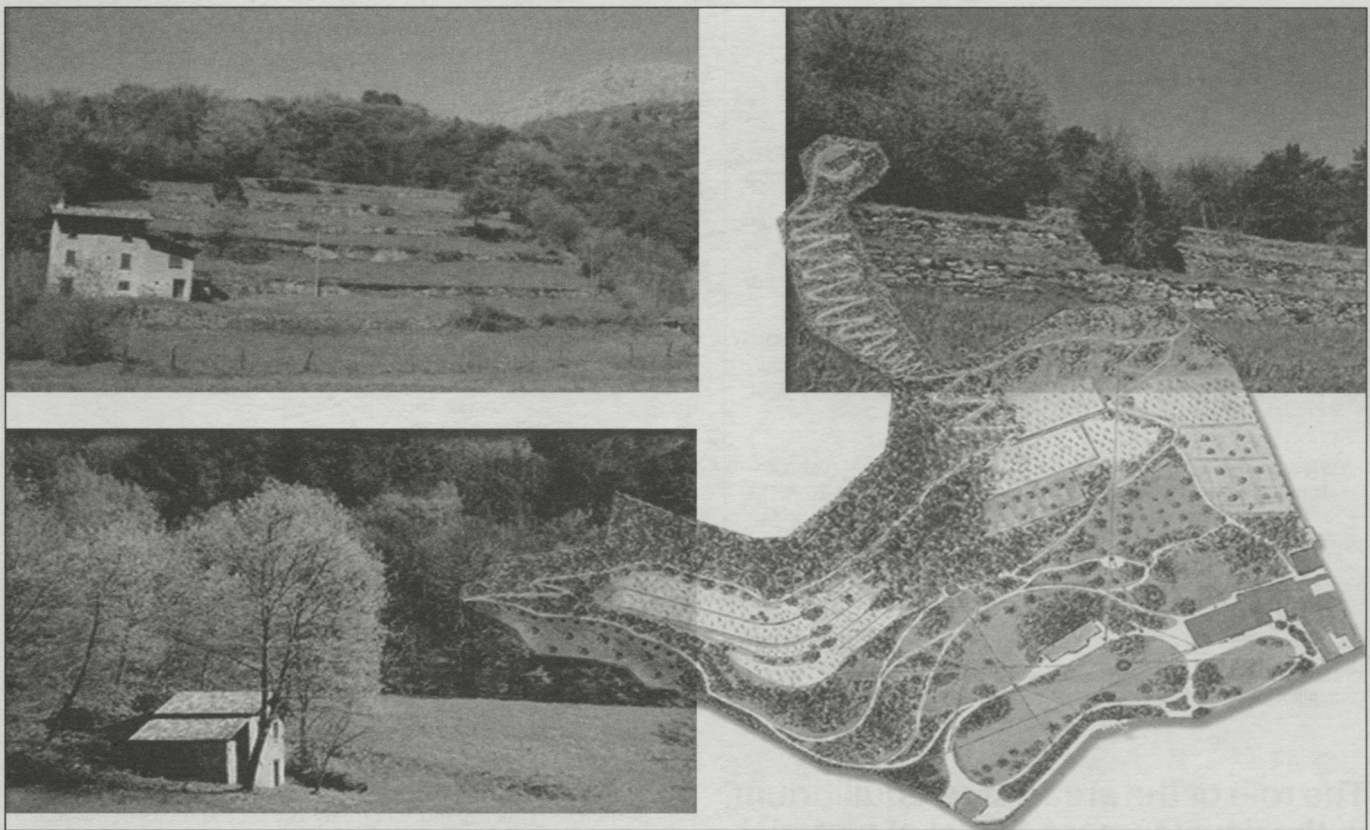


Fig. 6: Villa Mylius-Vigoni – The layout of the park and views of the overall development.



Fig. 7: Villa Mylius-Vigoni – The impressive landscape that still remains intact.

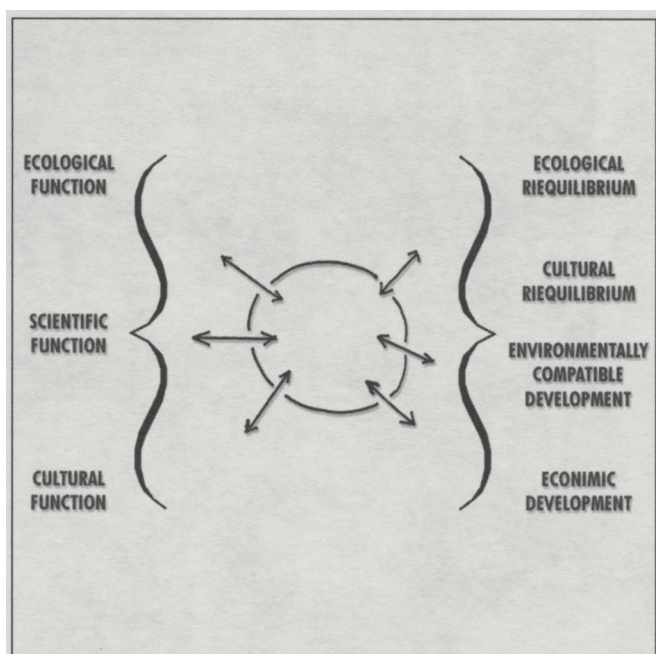


Fig. 8: The Italian-German center of Villa Mylius-Vigoni – The multiplicity of its functions and its contribution to re-equilibrium.

The role of the areas of re-equilibrium in the development model of material and virtual networks

The multiplicity of the functions – ecological, scientific, cultural – that are concentrated at the Italian-German center of Villa Mylius-Vigoni can concretely contribute to the re-equilibrium of the region and, linked to those provided by the other points of observation, they can come out of the microcosm that generated them and connect to the larger scale of this typical cultural landscape in its wider area. Thus, if its role of ecological re-equilibrium is accompanied by that of cultural re-equilibrium, eco-compatible development can sustain economic viability (fig. 8).

This type of network is linked to a series of other networks, both material (e.g. ecological, the road system) and virtual (scientific institutions, museums, other institutions) which now irreversibly tend to characterize its future development model. Thus, the richer in functions the intersections among the different networks (i.e. the more numerous the networks that intersect at a given point), the more significant these intersections promise to be. And of course the more different the networks involved, the more interesting and varied the information provided. The biodiversity generated by a correct ecological management thus needs to be set in the frame-

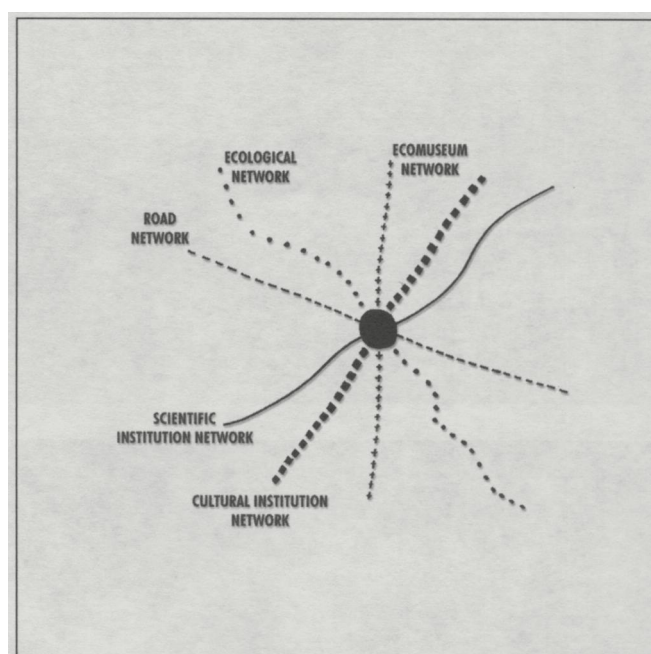


Fig. 9: The role of the areas of re-equilibrium in the development model of material and virtual networks.

work of a wider, complex and correctly organized “multifunctionality.” This multifunctionality will be the basis of the action of re-equilibrium exerted locally and by the whole area of re-equilibrium (fig. 9).

Conclusion

At the beginning of the second wholly urban century – to quote a very significant concept expressed in *Urban 21*, the report presented by Professors Pfeiffer and Hall – the issue is no longer and not only that of controlling and qualifying the growth of the individual urban areas, but rather of guiding them towards the creation of complex regional models aimed at developing the specific and different potential of a system of local and global networks (HALL and PFEIFFER, 2000). The areas of re-equilibrium and their observatories can provide great opportunities to this end.

References

- COLANTONIO VENTURELLI, R. (ed.) (2001), *Per un osservatorio sul paesaggio culturale*, CD (Ancona).
- DROSTE, B. v., H. PLACHTER and M. RÖSSLER (1995), *Cultural Landscapes of Cultural Universal Value* (Jena, Stuttgart, New York, Fischer, in collaboration with UNESCO), p. 15.
- HALL, P. and U. PFEIFFER (eds.) (2000), *Urban Future 21. A Global Agenda for the Twenty-First Century Cities* (London, Alexandrine Press).