

## Landscape Grabbing. A New Concept for Geographical Analysis?

*We observe, in particular in the Northern countries and, specifically, in Europe – in urban and rural areas – an ever increasing and drastic landscape reshaping. Generally, it is the effect of very rapid changes in the environment and society, linked to factors such as: development strategies, policies based on utilitarian and competitive logic, privatization of public places and commons, commodification and large-scale production models. The result is that people suffer tremendous changes in their life context, misplace sense and values of their landscape, and lose their territorial identity and sovereignty, although they formally continue to be the owner of their residences and lands. Landscape transformation, dispossession and mystification, historically produced by the industrialization and urbanization process, are pervasively advancing at a stunning speed due to neoliberal globalisation. Therefore, considering that the well-known «land grabbing» concept is not adequate to describe the observed phenomenon, we propose a suitable conceptual frame based on four cornerstones: the rapid and drastic reshape of landscape; the «indirect» grabbing acts and tools; the exogenous promoters; the territorial conflicts between the inhabitants and developers.*

### **Landscape Grabbing. Un nuovo concetto per l'analisi geografica?**

*Nei Paesi del Nord e, specificamente, in Europa si osserva – nelle aree rurali e in quelle urbane – una sempre più diffusa e drastica modificazione del paesaggio causata da trasformazioni sociali e ambientali molto rapide. Queste generalmente sono il prodotto di strategie di sviluppo, politiche basate sulla logica competitiva e utilitarista, privatizzazione di beni e spazi pubblici, mercificazione e modelli di produzione su larga scala. La popolazione – benché continui a essere formalmente proprietaria di case e terre – subisce cambiamenti significativi nei propri luoghi di vita, smarrimento di senso e valori legati al paesaggio, perdita di identità e sovranità territoriale. La mistificazione, l'espropriazione e la trasformazione del paesaggio, prodotte dai processi di industrializzazione e urbanizzazione, a causa della globalizzazione neoliberista, si diffondono a una velocità sbalorditiva e in maniera pervasiva. Il concetto di land grabbing non è adeguato a descrivere il fenomeno osservato. Si propone quindi un quadro concettuale basato su quattro pilastri: il rapido e drastico cambiamento del paesaggio, atti e strumenti di appropriazione «indiretta», promotori esogeni, conflitti territoriali fra promotori/sostenitori e abitanti.*

### **Landscape Grabbing. Un nouveau concept pour l'analyse géographique ?**

*Dans les Pays du Nord et notamment en Europe, nous observons de plus en plus – dans les zones rurales comme dans les centres urbains – une modification drastique du paysage causée par des transformations sociales et environnementales très rapides. En général, ces dernières sont le produit de stratégies de développement, de politiques basées sur la logique compétitive et utilitariste, de privatisations des biens communs et des espaces publics, de la marchandisation et de modèles de production à vaste échelle. La population – même si elle continue à être officiellement propriétaire de ses maisons et de ses terrains – subit des changements significatifs dans ses propres lieux de vie, l'altération du sens et des valeurs attribués au paysage, la perte d'identité et de souveraineté territoriale. À cause de la globalisation néolibérale, la mystification, l'expropriation et la transformation du paysage – produites par les processus d'industrialisation et urbanisation – se répandent à une vitesse stupéfiante et de manière envahissante. Ainsi, étant donné l'inadéquation du concept de land grabbing à décrire le phénomène observé, nous proposons un cadre conceptuel basé sur quatre piliers : le changement rapide et radical du paysage, les actes et les instruments d'appropriation « indirecte », les promoteurs exogènes, les conflits territoriaux entre les développeurs et les habitants.*

**Key words:** landscape grabbing, neoliberal globalization, conceptual frame

**Parole chiave:** landscape grabbing, globalizzazione neoliberista, quadro concettuale

**Mots-clés :** landscape grabbing, globalisation néolibérale, cadre conceptuel

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## 1. Why do we need a New Concept?

Landscape transformation, dispossession and mystification, historically produced by the industrialisation and urbanisation process (Dagognet, 1982), as well as by each form of colonisation, are pervasively advancing at a stunning speed due to neoliberal globalisation.

The latter produces rapid changes in landscapes due to the associated place-based spatial development strategies. We observe, in particular in the northern countries and, specifically, in Europe, an ever increasing and drastic landscape reshaping. Generally, it is the effect of very rapid changes in the environment and society, linked to factors such as: development strategies, policies based on utilitarian and competitive logic, privatisation of public places and commons, decline of «physical» social interactions, elimination and substitution of the functions of the traditional public spaces, commodification and large-scale production models, and progressive sacrifice of the quality and distribution of the public services. The result is that people suffer tremendous changes in their life context, misplace the sense and values of their landscape, lose their traditions, territorial identity and sovereignty (that is to say the capacity to decide on actions taken on their own territory, although they formally continue to be the owner of their residences and lands). In the urban context, we refer to the gentrification process, landscape management projects, urban sprawl, growth of tourist activities, Disneyisation of cities and their transformation into theme parks (Bryman, 2004). Whereas in rural areas, the spread of intensive monocultures, big renewable energy plants, tourist resorts, aesthetic and recreational «conversion» of the rural landscapes (that is a phenomenon substantially similar to urban gentrification) can be seen. Certainly, this phenomenon can be observed in the sea and mountain areas, too.

This phenomenon is wider and more complex if compared to the already well known «land grabbing» concept. This refers to the (legal and illegal) acquisition of the fertile lands of Southern countries by old and new industrial countries and/or big corporations (Cotula, 2012; Sellari, 2013; Hall et al., 2015; Grillotti Di Giacomo and De Felice, 2018), which are ever more in demand for the biomass production for energy and fuels (Dauvergne and Neville, 2010; Vermeulen and Cotula 2010). Nevertheless, the land grabbing concept is not ad-

equated to describe the grabbing phenomenon observed. In fact, land grabbing starts by the appropriation of the land and can advance to modify the landscape. In contrast, the phenomenon that we observe regards mainly the landscape that is «grabbed» (i.e. modified and/or reshaped) by political decisions, law mechanisms, intangible valorisation processes, and financial flows, while the land ownership does not necessarily change. Therefore, if land grabbing can also cause landscape grabbing (for example, in the case of legal or illegal land appropriation to deforest and realise a plantation), the landscape grabbing does not necessarily cause the land acquisition. Moreover, the landscape grabbing can refer both to the loss of landscape (because of exogenous decisions and policies) and to the so-called valorisation or regeneration project on the landscape (referring to the transformation in order to satisfy some specific interests). Thus, we can state that landscape grabbing, even if acquisition of the land is not attained, significantly produces material and immaterial deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. The latter dispossesses the inhabitants of the sense of the place and changes the performative potential of the landscape.

## 2. Landscape Grabbing

### 2.1. A New Concept?

The expression *landscape grabbing* has surfaced recently and only sporadically in the literature. In fact, research in the bibliography and on the web has returned very few occurrences, including some referring to the «classic» definition of landscape, which is limited to considering only its visual/aesthetic elements and therefore does not interest us.

With regard to the use of the concept in contributions relating to geographical studies, apart from some speeches presented at the 9th EUGEO Congress (Galway, Ireland, 15-18 May 2019), we have identified only very few in-depth researches addressing this topic.

Lazarus (2014) used the expression *landscape grabbing* in a morphological and ecological sense, to scrutinise the failures and possible risks of alterations induced on a local and global scale; his concern is well expressed by the words that conclude his very short note: «If we want to gain insights into Earth's future, we need to under-



stand better how our manipulation of its surface functions as a geomorphic force». It is an idea of «landscape» somewhat à la Biasutti (1962) and it hardly corresponds to what we mean.

Other scholars (Anguelovski et al., 2019a and 2019b) have made use (in truth, only in the title of one of the two articles) of a very close concept (*grabbed landscapes*), dealing with the Colombian city of Medellín. In both contributions, the reference is made only to the urban landscape and to urban «regeneration» policies, through «green infrastructure» (urban green conversion, regulated and intended for leisure). The authors looked at some projects involving lands located in self-built informal neighbourhoods. These lands corresponded to areas that are likely vulnerable to hydrogeological risk, but in part, they were used individually or collectively also as vegetable gardens for self-consumption and productions. According to the projects, some of these lands have been transformed as ecological and recreational urban parks and others into «professional» gardens for the consumer market in certain allowed neighbourhoods. We share the opinion of the authors, who view this intervention as a form of *gentrification* (*greentrification*) and analyse it accordingly; although we believe the issue could open up a broader analysis. The authors emphasise the implications of these projects, in terms of competition for the resource-space and of definitive dispossession against the less protected inhabitants («accumulation by green dispossession»: 2019a, p. 136). They place emphasis on socio-spatial aspects, distributive justice, the use of 'ecologically sustainable' projects such as a picklock to speculatively reconfigure urban areas, creating «elite green ghettos» (*ibidem*, p. 134), producing «a new potential green rent» for municipalities, private investors, and privileged residents (Anguelovski et al., 2019b, p. 1065) and, ultimately, to generate «commodification of natural resources (Castree, 2008)». These authors consider the fact that regeneration policies are based on the concept of natural (and common) goods firmly established in the formal framework of the market economy, and that are pre-eminent in the urban context. An assessment which seems to be acceptable, but which focuses essentially on the formal/material elements of the urban landscape. Only indirectly, and only implicitly, does this approach also affect the intangible elements of landscape conception and perception.

A strong focus is also made on the intangible

components, such as the cultural values integral to the landscape, which is found in very few other contributions addressing an idea close to *landscape grabbing*. Zanotelli and Tallè (2019), in an ethnological work referring to a small region of southern Mexico (of which the Huave are an indigenous community), face «the neo-liberal specifics of natural resource exploitation; phenomenological and embodied effects on territories and people; moral economy and political resistance» (p. 111). Here, too, the approach is partial, as it applies to specific cases of competition between «traditional» (indigenous) territorial forms and modern forms of re-territorialisation. The eco-political perspective adopted identifies substantial (re)colonisation, which generates competition between the perception and evaluation of the landscape by different actors. In this case, the Huave community's concept of the «landscape» is complex and woven with material and intangible values, including religious ones. According to the authors, the landscape at the Huave is

the precarious result of the constant co-agency between nonhumans (meteorological, geological and liquid elements) and humans, which interact at different timescales [...] is the resulting concretion of political negotiations between humans (especially religious and political authorities) and nonhumans (sea, lagoon, wind, lightning, clouds, animals), a kind of negotiation characterised by conflict and its resolution [pp. 111-112].

A definition that we could serenely accept, and apply to the idea of «territory» in the geographical sense. The authors' *landscape grabbing* seems, in fact, almost the equivalent to our concept of «deterritorialisation» (Lefebvre, 1974; Deleuze and Guattari, 1980; Raffestin, 1980 and 2005; Turco, 1988 and 2010; Berque, 1990 and 2008; etc.). If, however, the landscape is a sensitive expression of a territorial construction, it can be understood that the process of deterritorialisation taking place against the Huave is actually the «theft of landscape», in essence *landscape grabbing*, and that is the meaning that we assume here.

It is in this complex and more modern geographical sense that we consider the concept of *landscape grabbing* as unpublished. Therefore, we propose to develop this definition as a geographical analysis tool: considering the landscape as a sensitive expression of territorial construction, the social product of the negotiation between human and non-human; and therefore also as a sen-

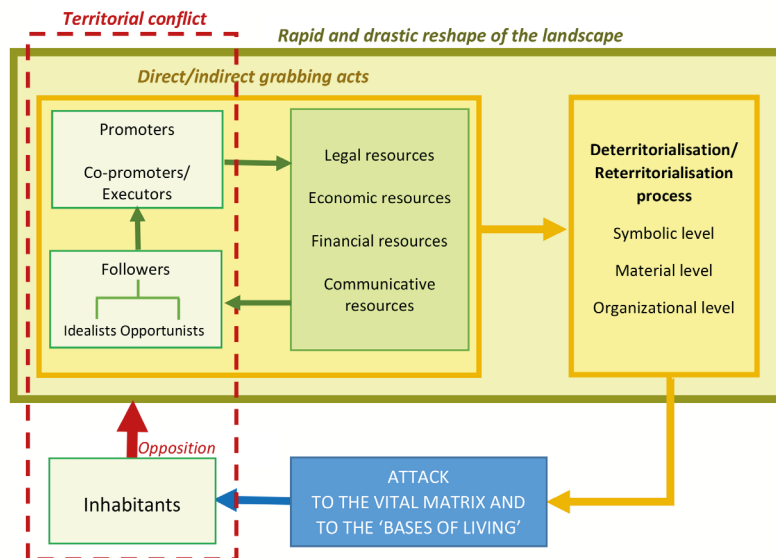


Fig. 1. The Landscape Grabbing Process

Source: authors' elaboration

sitive and expressive projection of the values shared by the producers of the territory, namely, the communities. Landscape theft is defined by the attack on the coherence of the territory (deterritorialisation) and its result in the loss of sense and recognition of the material and intangible values shared by the community. Examining the manifestations of *landscape grabbing* and their effects on the communities involved could therefore prove to be a useful tool to more fully grasp the geo-social and geo-cultural dynamics.

## 2.2. An Operational Concept

We define landscape grabbing as a *rapid and drastic* reshape of the landscape caused by the radical change of rural lands and urban spaces by new actors, and that is unequivocally connected to significant environmental impacts and socioeconomic changes that can cause considerable social opposition. Therefore, founding our analysis on the crucial question of possession of power, we propose to outline and examine the landscape grabbing process based on the three classical factors of political geography or, as Raffestin (1980) states, the «stakes of the power»: people, territory and resources. In this sense, the «grabbing» is undertaken by some actors who use (material and immaterial) resources in order

to realise their aims on a specific territory (fig. 1).

The «grab» can be direct, such as policies and initiatives designed to manage and/or restructure the landscape, and/or indirect, such as the outcome of development policies. In both cases, the decisions are top-down and the implementation of the development instruments (policies, initiatives, funding, etc.) is in accordance with the utilitarian and competitive market logic. So, the territorial imposition is realised by the legal, economic and/or financial resources, supporting the new activities and/or land uses. The result is a very low level of democratic decision-making and, consequently, the reduction of territorial sovereignty. In this way, a lot of the process has already been realised: namely, the industrialisation applied to different sectors (agriculture, manufacture, tourism, etc.); the commodification of resources; the privatisation of public spaces and commons; the externalisation of environmental and social costs; the substitution of traditional knowledge for high technological knowledge; diffusion on the global level of the large-scale production model (of agriculture, renewable energy, etc.); the building of large facilities and gentrification. Generally, the «grabbing» acts are supported by a very rhetoric discourse that disguises deep contradictions. For example, in regard to renewable energy (RE), world agencies and gov-



ernments have gone to great lengths to embellish bioenergy. They propose bioenergy as a solution for climate change and other energy-related and economic issues, but, actually, the predominant production model (based on first-generation bio-fuels developed on the global scale) creates ecological impacts throughout the production chain, as well as social unrests and territorial conflicts (Ciervo and Schmitz, 2017).

The actors can be divided into the following categories: promoters, co-promoters/executors, followers and inhabitants. The promoters are exogenous actors (frequently big corporations and/or global institutions) that act on the territories and their resources for their own economic gains and/or political interests (as is well exemplified, for instance, by Anguelovski et al., 2019a). On the local scale, individual actors can act in the same sense (but with fewer resources) also if they are not exogenous and alien to the local culture. It occurs when local individual actors are enticed by mutated or hybridised value systems, as well as when they are driven by social relations reconfiguration. However, their actions, on the whole, result in what we can define as «landscape grabbing» (for example, the urban sprawl process). On a larger scale, co-promoters and executors, usually governments and public agencies, are generally exogenous actors. Followers, both endogenous and exogenous actors, can support the promoters and co-promoters for ideal reasons (they believe in their vision and support the dominant project) or for opportunistic motives (they anticipate personal benefit from the promoter's project). Inhabitants, if they're not given ideal or opportunist reasons to become followers, generally perceive these initiatives as a threat to their landscape, environment, local economy and territorial identity, and subsequently oppose the development. In some cases, promoters and co-promoters use the so-called participation process, which generally involves a consultation to gain social acceptance. In this regard, some studies reveal how policy makers can use the participation processes in a rhetorical way to develop initiatives, according to the visions and interests of dominant actors and, specifically, for propaganda, manipulation, placation and consent (Hamel, 1986; White, 2000; Cinq-mars and Fortin, 2007). However, if the inhabitants do not have any real influence on the decision process, their participation is only a gesture to «allow the power-holders to claim that all sides were considered, but makes it possible for

only some of those sides to benefit. It maintains the status quo» (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). For example, referring to the EU bioeconomy strategy (EC, 2012), the online consultation has been finalised to collect *information, views and opinions* from stakeholders and civil society, not to open a public debate. Therefore, the information is used in order to promote bioeconomy and the «involve-ment» of people aims to simply *reassure* them, to *facilitate consensus* reaching, to *ensure acceptance* and, ultimately, *avoid oppositions and social tensions* (EC, 2012, pp. 27-28; Ciervo, 2016a).

The grabbing of the (material or immaterial) resources produces a deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation process. The first is an alteration or destruction of pre-existent relationships among the local actors and/or the change in the population-resources relationship (Raffestin, 1980; Turco, 1988). The reterritorialisation refers to a new spatial organisation driven by exogenous actors, as seen through the modification of the landscape. This can disrupt the vital matrix (water, soil, air and biodiversity) and the «bases of living» (Turco, 2003), which is the existence of all elements characterised by the attitude to *endure*, the capacity to *autonomously* preserve one's own identity after the change and maintain the conditions for change. This is to say an *attack on the territorial competence, control and cultural legitimacy*. Therefore, the popular experience and the tacit knowledge of native people (that permits satisfying vital needs) are substituted with the technical and abstract know-how of the experts; the inhabitants lose control of their own home territory and their real capacity to have an effect in the decision making process. Finally, the grabbing acts contrast with the local values and culture. For example, referring to the olive quick decline syndrome (OQDS) and the presence of the *Xylella fastidiosa* (Xf) quarantine bacterium that has affected the Apulia (a land of thousand-year old and secular olive trees that characterise the landscape and economy), the governmental plan provides measures that could trigger a significant deterritorialisation process and initiate a tremendous attack to the vital matrix and to the «bases of living». In fact, the demolition of the trees (infected and not infected), extensive use of pesticides and the prohibition on planting the Xf host plants, could have irreversible effects on the landscape, ecosystem, local economy and human health (Ciervo, 2016b). On the other hand, the authorisation to plant only two olive varieties (not autochthon and, in one

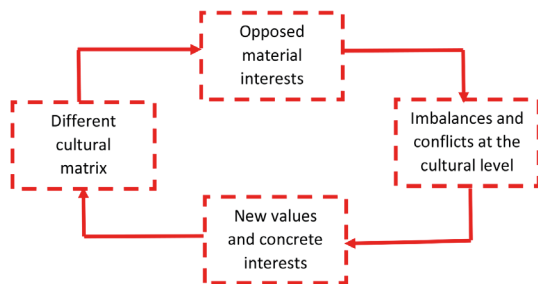


Fig. 2. The Territorial Conflicts Retroactive Process  
Source: authors' elaboration

case, also patented), to encourage super intensive crops, indicates an incipient reterritorialisation process. This, looking at the global market and the competitiveness thereof, consequently affects the local economy (based on the traditional cultivars and practices, the little smaller and family farms), as well as the ecosystem (for the mechanisation, the overuse of chemical products and water) and the landscape (transforming the traditional countryside in agroindustrial fields) (Ciervo, 2019).

Many other cases can be presented, referring also to the already solidified past and «made landscape». This is to say that the past deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation process have produced the current landscape that we nowadays consider as the «traditional landscape». In this sense, we can consider landscape grabbing as the effects of; reclamations, deforestation, big infrastructural works, planting small trees in place of centenarian trees, construction of big dams, foundation of cities, obliteration of the collective territorial management, productive reconversion of the lands, etc. In all these cases, the landscape has been completely modified, deconstructing the coherence among the traditional vital options of the inhabitants and the potentiality of the landscape, sometimes altering or even eliminating the cultural value of the society-territory relationship. Concerning this last aspect, the inhabitants become producers/consumers without a territory nor a landscape in that they can acknowledge themselves. They have been transformed into anonymous dwellers whose lives no longer really dwell in places, but rather, in economic spaces.

The attack on the vital matrix and on the «bases of living» generally incites territorial conflicts over the use and/or user's methods and/or the change in concept of the space. Generally, the

conflict begins at the material level and reaches the symbolic level, and it is characterised by two phases: in the first phase, the conflict appears essentially about the political and/or economic level, namely the conflict between opposing interests; in the second phase, the conflict reaches the cultural level, namely the contrast among between different perceptions, values and visions (Ciervo, 2006, 2010, 2019). However, it concerns a continuous retroactive process: the opposed material interests have a different cultural matrix and produce imbalances and conflicts at the cultural level, which in turn generates new values and concrete interests, and so on (fig. 2).

This territorial conflict produces an increase in awareness and collective learning that, generally, leads to the systemic reading of the «problem». This calls into question the role of the institutions and decision makers that support and legitimate exogenous interests, as well as the dominant vision, according to a circular and cumulative mechanism that feeds the territorial conflict (fig. 3).

The conflict can develop in various spaces (i.e. physical, legal, institutional, media and web spaces) and at various levels of spatial scale.

### 3. First Conclusions

When the conflict reaches the symbolic level, the «feeling of the landscape» as perceived by the actors involved can provide important insight.

The profound/irreversible changes in the landscape frequently instigate societal conflict and spur an implicit «attack» on the resilience and survival of local communities within the framework of their value systems.

*Landscape grabbing* deprives communities of not only economic values, but also makes them progressively alien within their living spaces. As in the processes of political colonisation, reterritorialised spaces according to exogenous logics appear, in a sense, almost fungible to each other: the systematic, constant, universal application of uniform utilitarian logic makes each specific territory functional to a specific type of project, which is essentially based on an economic metric. Functional and evaluative homologation diminishes the individuality of territories and tends to reduce differences to unity.

This phenomenon, which can be considered a particular form of «colonization», can be easily observed even in suburban and peri-urban areas

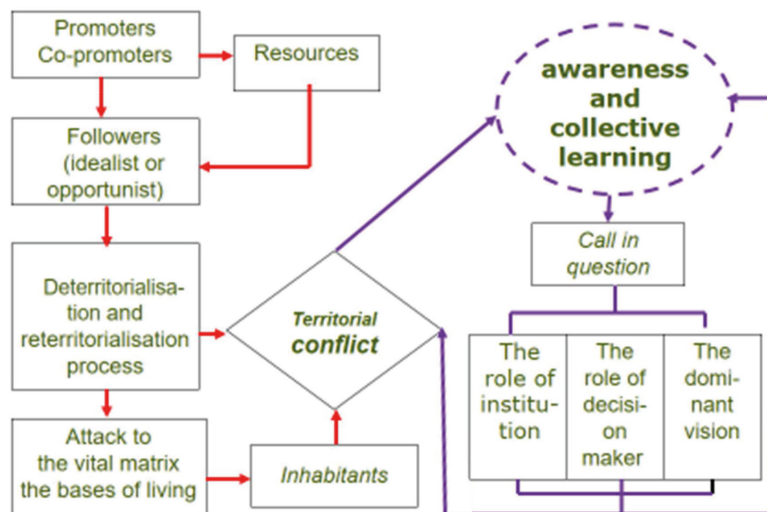


Fig. 3. The Circular and Cumulative Mechanisms Feeding Territorial Conflicts

Source: authors' elaboration

affected by the urban sprawl, including the more or less spontaneous and atomised areas, the effects of which are the same everywhere: deterritorialisation, *landscape grabbing* – waiting for a future new, eventual, coherence. This is also the result of a societal conflict, which is further exacerbated when economic factors are in play, such as expulsion from the urban residential market, psychological factors, such as the search for individual well-being, policy factors, due to the inability of urban public policies to produce a collective well-being, utopian factors, with the production limited to only individual, private, or a segregated (mini)landscape, which filters contact with the world. The territory of the sprawl is broken up and rebuilt by paratactical fragments, expropriating the original inhabitants, changing vocations and values: a summation that obliterates a system, and a collective impact that obliterates a community.

Any new landscape, expression and signal of any «new territory» does not belong to the original community, since it no longer reflects or represents it.

The «theft of landscape» impoverishes the community on the cognitive, emotional, sentimental, and moral levels as much and perhaps more than on the material level.

*Landscape grabbing* is not just a sign of deprivation: it is a cause of further deprivation. The territory and its landscape express a fundamental

performative, «pedagogical» function on behalf of the community that recognises it (Turri, 1974 and 1998). Juxtaposition, overlap, intersection of signs and meanings make the territory a «text»: its weaving, its grammar and its syntax demonstrate, in the coherence of the argument, the organisation and values of the community and together give it substance and support.

The landscape allows the opportunity to read that text. Tearing or rewriting pages makes the text incomprehensible, reduces its communicative capacity, and degrades its pedagogical function. Consequently, the landscape loses the ability to be read, to «educate» future generations on the meaning of the community and its territory, and essentially eliminates an integral part of their lives.

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