

When the city invades the countryside – cultural-historical environments in spatial planning

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Abstract

This article focuses on the effects of landscape changes that take place in the outskirts of towns and cities, with special focus on how pressure on land resources affects the preservation of cultural heritage and cultural-historical environments. The effects of modern housing projects and modern road building are significant in these areas. Hereby the traditional structures of farmsteads are diluted, and the historic structures of the landscape are erased. Cultural-historical areas on the suburban fringes have to be protected from fragmentation, and at the municipal planning level there is a growing understanding of the necessity to see wider spatial areas as a planning unity. However, in order to be able to counteract strong forces working in different directions, there is an urgent need to develop long-term strategies for handling cultural-historical environments areas situated on the peripheries of the big cities.

Keywords: urban fringe, cultural heritage management, local spatial planning, cultural landscape structure.

1 Introduction

This article presents some of the results from the Norwegian research project "Threatened landscapes – A study of the decision making, legitimacy and practice of cultural heritage management in local planning" [1]. The effects of the landscape changes that take place in the outskirts of towns and cities form the starting point for the discussion. The main focus is on how pressure on land resources affects the preservation of cultural heritage and cultural-historical environments. This pressure comes from several sides: urban development



creates a need for better transportation, demanding wider and more modern roads. Then follows a demand for new industrial estates, workplaces and office blocks situated close by the main approaches to the city. Population growth increases the demand for new housing, resulting in housing estates being laid out in the outskirts. The consequences for the landscape are enormous, but how much do we actually know about the effects such rapid changes inflict on cultural-historical structures and cultural heritage resources from various time periods?

This article discusses to what degree conflicting interests appear between area changes and cultural-historical qualities in landscapes under pressure; and if such conflicts exist, how are they being solved?

Addressing these complex questions entails performing a cultural-historical landscape analysis as well as a contemporary analysis of planning procedures. An interdisciplinary approach was needed, and researchers within social sciences as well as from the humanities have participated (representing disciplines such as archaeology, architecture/social planning, sociology, ethnology) [2].

2 The urban–rural interface

2.1 Study areas

The two municipalities where the study was carried out, Madla and Nannestad, each lays on the outskirts of a major town – Stavanger and Oslo, respectively – in southern Norway. Both areas are experiencing pressure of different kinds and degrees. Today, Madla has status as a town district of Stavanger, but constituted up till 1965 a separate municipality primarily based on agriculture combined with fishing. Proximity to the city combined with easy accessibility to the coastline and natural recreational areas are turning it into an easy target for building projects.

Nannestad was up till the early 1990s a municipality dominated by agriculture. Some minor housing estates were established mainly for local inhabitants in the outlying fields close to the forest areas. This changed when political decisions at the national level dictated that Norway's new international airport was to be placed in the proximity of Nannestad. Resulting new infrastructure, such as better motorways, railway connections, businesses and storehouses, represented potential threats to the cultural-historical environments.

Both areas are rich in heritage features, and continuous human use of the landscape covers a very large stretch of time, going all the way back to the Stone Age (8000 BC). Subsistence based on agriculture has dominated the last 3-4,000 years, and has left a rich legacy in the form of burial monuments, prehistoric occupation sites, ancient roads, medieval churches and church-sites, along with a deeply-rooted agricultural settlement pattern. However, Norway's agrarian society has never relied exclusively on farming. This has always been combined with the exploitation of other subsistence resources: in Madla, fishing and coastal resources in general have constituted the main supplements, while in Nannestad it was the resources found in the surrounding forests. Both areas



contain plentiful archaeological remains that reveal just how important a part the wilderness and outlying areas played in the overall use of the natural landscape by former communities.

2.2 Cultural-historical landscape as structure

Our analytical approach focuses on the individual landscape's cultural-historical structure, which then forms the basis for assessing how that landscape's cultural-historical qualities are affected when land-use changes occur. It also provides a proper foundation for discussing the way in which spatial planning decisions can influence the legibility of the individual landscape's history/histories. Analysis of cultural structure enables us to interpret and explain how the various heritage features and cultural environments in a given landscape are connected to each other and to their surroundings.

This landscape study is based on the idea that the observed arrangement of heritage features in a landscape have pattern, and that this is not fortuitous but has come about within a framework of options and constraints, be they natural or social. Identifying a particular landscape's sociocultural structures is therefore a key element in getting to understand that landscape and why it is what it is today.

Two different methods were applied for the landscape analysis of the investigation areas; visual methods and historical map overlay. Other methods applied were a) interviews with planners, the heritage management as well as local informants, a) studies of regional and local plans and planning processes and c) a discourse analysis.

2.2.1 The structure concept

Regarding the concept *structure*, Hodder offers the following clarification: *All uses of the term imply something not visible at the surface – some organizational scheme or principle, not necessarily rigid or determining, visible only in its effects* [3]. *Structure* is one of the fundamental concepts in modern sociological theories, such as Giddens' structuration theory and Bourdieu's theory of practice. Giddens has formulated a theory that both takes into account the effect of individuals' actions and recognizes the importance of underlying social structures, and how these two aspects interact. He argues that *agency* and *structure* form a *duality*, with structures both providing opportunities for and placing constraints on the individual [4]. As with social structure, there exists a dynamic reciprocal relationship between material structure and our thoughts and actions.

Applied to landscapes, this means that changes in social traits will give rise to changes in the landscape, and may result in transformation of its cultural structures. Because there is a relationship between action and landscape, any study of landscape history must seek to determine how both the cultural and physical structure of a landscape relate to different kinds of practice. Key points in such an analysis therefore include identification of a) the specific practices that are responsible for giving the area in question its structure, and b) the specific actions/activities that were responsible for the formation of the individual heritage features – sites, monuments etc – within the area [5, 6].



2.3 The rurban landscape

Many of the larger towns today find themselves in a situation where there is a fluid, relatively indistinct transition from what people would characterize as the city proper and the surrounding countryside. When it is no longer possible to draw an unmistakable line showing where city ends and countryside begins, it may be that terms such as *region* can provide a better description of the situation. According to the Norwegian sociologist Dag Østerberg, *regionalizing* is to be understood as ‘the geographical expansion and spread of the functions and activities of built-up areas across municipal boundaries, resulting in the blurring of the “town – country” division, among other things’ [7]. As a consequence of this process, paired opposites that were in widespread use previously – such as urban and rural, centre and periphery – have lost much of their meaning. And so arose a need for new terms that enable us to define and perceive the essence of the fragmented and patchwork-like settlement patterns emerging in the urban regions [8, 9]. The post-war decades in particular saw the search for and discussion of terms that would provide appropriate descriptions of such areas [10, 11]. The term *rurban* – defined as a state somewhere between the rural and the urban – was first introduced quite some time ago now, at the end of the 1960s [12].

The settlement in this “middle ground” along the axis from urban to rural results from a phenomenon called “the sprawl”, which denotes a gradual, more or less unplanned building expansion that in time can transform a landscape dramatically [7]. It involves the superimposition of a multitude of new elements and structures on top of the cultural-historical elements, which puts the latter in danger of becoming severely fragmented and losing their historical context and identity. In these densely populated areas, new and ever-more complex landscapes appear. The situation is extremely dynamic, and it has to be admitted that we really do not know very much about the processes that take place [13].

In the course of time, the results of development plans become manifest – though often affected by the working of other processes and activities. The passage of time is in many ways the x factor: for instance, the time that elapses between the making/implementing of a decision and the detectable manifestation of that decision’s effects in the landscape. The totality of change that takes place in the landscape is the product of many lesser changes: changes in use, in building density etc. Individually, and over a short stretch of time, they may have little effect on the character of an area, but the combined long-term result is difficult to predict.

The landscape that grows out of such complex, dynamic processes is interpreted by some scholars as a composite of contradictions [7, 14, 15]. However, changes in a landscape can be viewed and judged either as improvements or as impairments in relation to a previous condition, and dependent on the needs or motives that gave rise to the changes. Assessment of positive versus negative impacts will often vary considerably from one observer to the next, depending on their viewpoints [13].



If one is to make head or tail of these in-between landscapes, it is vital to wear the “right pair of spectacles” and keep an open mind with regard to their composition and content. Schumacher and Koch describe such areas as ‘an urban reality that has emerged through the collision of conflicting forces’. They are by no means the result of any overall design, and therefore do not fit into any framework or model that we can identify and understand. When we are ready to confront and accept this, it then becomes possible to devise methods that enable us to tackle these problematic areas in a meaningful way [14, 15].

2.3.1 A morphological perspective

One important approach in certain urban studies is the analysis of form [16]. In some such studies the characterization *fan-form* has been used to characterize towns that display a clear structural similarity to Oslo, Norway’s capital, where one finds arms of dense settlement extending outwards from the centre. We have drawn inspiration from aspects of this approach, because both our study areas conform to the fan-form model. We believe that finding the correct position of each study area on the axis from urban to rural better enables us to identify key characteristics of the two municipalities, and consequently makes it possible for us to place our study matter and findings in an appropriate spatial planning context.

We have analysed the correspondence between our two study areas and one of the very latest models of spatial structures, itself based on a recent study of Paris [16]. The figure below is a schematic representation of Paris and its outskirts, detailing the connections between the different areas, and showing the degree of urbanization from innermost core to the outer edge of the areas that are under the city’s direct influence. The peripheral areas are divided into different zones, which have varying functions and structures. Core and periphery are linked by road and by rail, facilitating mobility and access.

Our two study areas in Norway can be fitted into this model quite nicely. Madla, with its residential areas, shopping centre and some industry, belongs on the border between “inner suburbs” and “outer suburbs”; it has become subsumed by Stavanger city. Nannestad, in contrast, has managed to retain its separate status and can therefore be placed in the outermost zone. However, with its proximity to the new national airport (served by new motorways and a new railway) and the growth of new housing estates for commuters who work in Oslo, Nannestad has been drawn closer to the capital city, and is on the way to acquiring a rurban character.

Oslo/Stavanger	Madla	Nannestad	
Inner city/urban	suburban	rurban	rural/land

Figure 1: Axis from urban to rural.

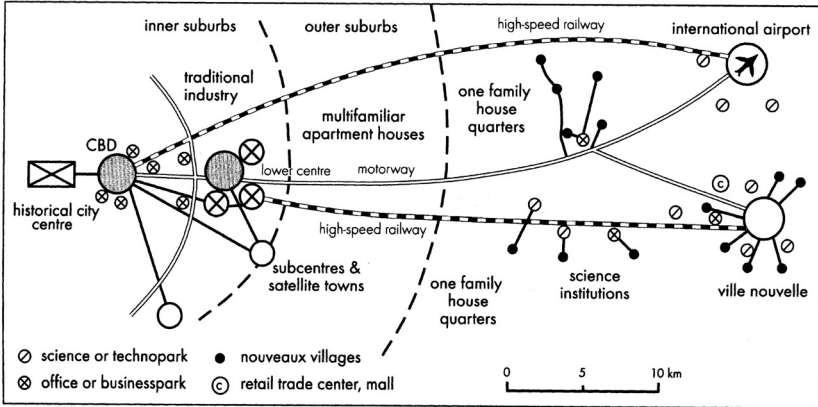


Figure 2: From Borsdorf 2004:26.

3 Areal changes and cultural-historical landscape qualities in areas experiencing development pressure

3.1 Cultural-historical landscape values in local planning

In Norway, the principal piece of legislation governing the bulk of municipal planning is the Planning and Building Act. This is primarily intended to regulate the process of development, and contains very little in the way of specific provisions concerning the cultural heritage aspect. Municipal development plans are mostly concerned with defining the kinds of development to be permitted within designated areas, and there is not enough focus on or awareness of which areas – areas at risk – one should strive to preserve within larger areas targeted for development. How does this legislation system affect the cultural landscape and cultural environments?

Agriculture, nature conservancy and tourism/recreation are all priority areas in the planning arena, and all three are loosely associated with cultural heritage, which is viewed as an added attraction. One persistent idea among planners is that if only these “green” interests are looked after well enough, it automatically follows that cultural heritage will be safeguarded too. Not so: both Madla and Nannestad can provide numerous examples to show that agriculture is by no means always a good guardian of historical remains; indeed, surveys have revealed that agriculture is responsible for a considerable proportion of monument attrition in Norway. If we are to ensure that a particular landscape’s heritage content and existing cultural structure are given adequate consideration, cultural heritage will have to achieve a more elevated and independent position in planning than it now occupies. There is an urgent need to take a close look at how this can be accomplished.



Gladly, the importance of looking after the values to be found in cultural landscapes seems to have gained wider recognition. Dispersed settlement can be accepted in an agricultural landscape, and is regarded as a form of development more in harmony with a rural settlement pattern. Nevertheless, the piecemeal building of housing can lead to gradual erosion and ultimate obliteration of historical farm systems, reducing the legibility of the agricultural landscape. The result is an indistinct neither/nor landscape where it is easy to become confused about what kind of landscape one is dealing with. It is neither urban nor rural, but something in between. Assessing and managing such a landscape on its own particular premises and merits thus presents a major challenge.



Figure 3: Erasure of farm structure in Madla, Stavanger.

3.2 Changes in infrastructure – an integral part of urbanization

In both Madla and Nannestad, the landscape is going to be marked by modern transport infrastructure in the shape of motorways for the foreseeable future. One aspect of our studies has been to analyse the relationship between these new arteries and the historical road system. The communication and transport principles underlying the traditional road and the modern highway are very different, and the difference in scale hardly needs pointing out. The old roads follow the local topography, and they form a network linking the farmsteads and smaller settlements. The documented association between these roads and archaeological sites and monuments reveals that they have considerable continuity of use, probably stretching back to the Iron Age (1-2,000 years).

Modern roads, in contrast, derive from the need for urban network structures. Communication between cities remains urban in context and is in effect an

extension of the urban sphere of action. Planning such roads is not a local responsibility. It is conducted by regional or national transport authorities, and in accordance with the overall transport plan for improving intercity and interregional communications. The same thing takes place at a supranational level in Europe, the aim being to link distant parts of the continent more closely together.

However, when planning is done at regional or national level, local interests tend to become subsidiary. The all too frequent manifestation of this is the new motorway that slices through landscapes with little heed for local cultural structures, is rudely superimposed on local topography, and is in minimal contact with the local situation. To local communities such a road can easily become an alien and disruptive element, an obstruction to freedom of movement and an inconvenience to local activities.

4 Landscapes and cultural environments in local and regional planning

Although there exists a relatively clear awareness of heritage features as individual objects, recognition of historical cultural environments is much more problematic. In order for these to become a priority area in their own right and be given due consideration in municipal planning, we believe it will be necessary to develop new, appropriate methods and practices. The European Landscape Convention [17] has signalled a lot of intentions regarding local participation, public awareness campaigns, greater familiarity with landscape values, and the general importance of taking care of all kinds of landscape, including both outstanding as well as every day landscape and degraded landscapes.

This aspect is now being worked on in several Norwegian municipalities, and is also on the agenda in a number of other European countries. Renewed, improved planning processes that place greater emphasis on local participation and effective dialogue between local communities and heritage management authorities certainly represent one way of achieving better preservation of cultural environments that mean something to – and can be identified with by – the local community. A more open planning process should provide greater opportunities for the exchange of arguments and views, the aim being to achieve a common platform of understanding rather than focusing on points of conflict. However, the basic problem is that methods and procedures capable of translating theory into practice are still largely lacking [18].

The EU's recent directive on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is regarded as a significant step towards achieving sustainable development of the environment in Europe [19]. In Norway, it resulted earlier this year in amendments to the Planning and Building Act, which require impact assessments to be carried out not only in the case of individual development projects, but also in connection with all broader-scope plans that contain directives concerning development. The aim is to achieve more uniform and comprehensive planning at municipal and regional levels, planning that is better equipped to ensure that aspects such as the environment, natural resources and cultural heritage receive



proper consideration at an early stage in the preparation and authorization of plans and projects.

Our study areas occupy a middle ground in relation to the axis from city to countryside. To be sure, there are well-established systems for planning in purely urban and purely rural areas – what we lack are the requisite analytical and management tools for those areas that are neither the one nor the other, at least as far as looking after the interests of cultural heritage and cultural environments is concerned. Perhaps this stems chiefly from the fact that these in-between landscapes continue to elude clear, appropriate definition by both the planning/management apparatus and the research community.

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