

A critical evaluation of the forces and concepts that shape our perception of landscapes.

Understanding landscapes involves looking at how natural formations, human interventions, and subjective perceptions come together. They can be defined as both tangible features and subjective constructs, as well as embodying the dynamic interaction of geological processes, society norms and cultural values (Cosgrove, 1984; 1998). This essay will explore how our perception of landscapes has changed over time and the different factors that influence this perception. It will also explore the differences between natural and cultural landscapes and how people's preferences and perceptions are shaped by their backgrounds and experiences.

The concept of landscape includes everything we see around us, consisting of both natural formations and human interventions (Doherty & Waldhiem, 2016). According to the European Landscape Convention (2021), landscape is defined as an area perceived by people whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors. This means landscapes embody a duality: they are physical places and subjective constructs shaped by our experiences and cultural contexts. This duality makes landscapes complex and multifaceted, inviting scrutiny and interpretation from various perspectives (Howard, 2011). Cosgrove (1984) suggests that landscapes' dual ambiguity invites scrutiny, implying it embodies a historically contingent way of experiencing the world. This view suggests an ideological concept, where social groups show their identities and relationships with nature, whilst highlighting their social roles within society. While natural forces persist in shaping the physical scenery, human interpretations and conceptualisations inspire landscapes with significance and affordances. This appears to say that the landscape is like a picture made up of natural forces and how people see it, mixing physical features with symbolic meanings.

Natural landscapes are shaped by geological processes and weathering, creating environments such as mountain ranges, coastlines, jungles, wetlands and forests. These landscapes often suggest a sense of wonder due to their untouched beauty. They are constantly evolving, shaped by the forces of nature over a long period of time. For instance, the Grand Canyon, with its vast expanse and intricate rock formations, is a testament to the power of natural forces (Lee, et al. 2013).

On the other hand, cultural landscapes show the impact of human interaction, such as cities, farmlands, and historical sites. An example of this is the rice terraces of the Philippines which is a cultural landscape that has been shaped by generations of farmers. These terraces and its people represent the Category V definition of Protected Landscapes as follows: "an area of land where interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant aesthetic, ecological and/or cultural value. And often with high biological diversity"

(Nozawa, N. et al, 2008). Cultural landscapes it appears are constantly changing as societies change and grow.

There are also designed landscapes created by professionals such as landscape architects or gardeners following specific designs. They can range from formal gardens, like the Gardens of Versailles in France, to modern urban parks. Designed landscapes often aim to balance beauty with functionality, providing spaces for recreation, relaxation, and social interaction. (Williamson, 2004)

Ethnographic landscapes which are landscapes containing a variety of natural and cultural resources that associated peoples define as heritage resources (TCLF.org, nd a; NPS, 2024). For instance, Native American sacred sites, such as Bear Butte in South Dakota, hold profound spiritual significance and are integral to the cultural identity of the tribes. Along with vernacular landscapes which are landscapes that have evolved through use by the people whose activities or occupancy shaped those landscapes lives (TCLF.org, nd a; NPS, 2024). Through social or cultural attitudes of an individual, family, or a community, the landscapes reflect the physical, biological, and cultural character of everyday life, that will eventually change that landscape overtime.

People's preferences of landscapes are influenced by their cultural upbringing, personal experiences, and social backgrounds. For example, some people, like myself, find natural landscapes calming and beneficial for my overall well-being. This is a concept known as biophilia and was stated by Wilson (1984) that humans tend to seek connection with nature and other forms of life. This idea suggests that humans have a connection to nature, which positively affects physical, emotional and mental health. It is well known that natural landscapes provide a sense of freedom and escape from the stress of urban life. Activities like climbing in the mountains or walking along a beach can have beneficial effects on mental and physical health. Recognition of the health benefits of greenspace exposure was one of the motivations of Oxford General Practitioner William Bird MBE in establishing the UK's first health walk scheme at his practice in 1995, leading to the foundation of the English Walking for Health programme (WfH) (Hanson, S., Cross, J., & Jones, A. (2016). From my personal experience, the more I visit different outdoor landscapes , I recognise that I feel significantly better emotionally, physically and mentally, almost straight away.

On the other hand, cultural landscapes also hold value for their historical importance. For example, knowing the history of a place can enhance our connection to it. These preferences are shaped by where we grew up, our exposure to different landscapes, and our education (Hutton, 2020). For example, growing up in a rural area might lead to a preference for natural landscapes, while living in a historic city might create an appreciation for cultural landscapes. I believe my perspective has been created by the location I grew up in, the exposure I have had to a variety of natural landscapes, along with the information gained through my education. This has created my sense of belonging and the connection to the natural landscape and it is where I feel my

happiest. Heijgen (2013) states that an individual's preference in landscape appreciation is intricately shaped by cultural upbringing, geographical context, and inherited beliefs and values, and this appears to be passed down through generations again highlighting the interaction between landscape appreciation and human interactions.

Similar to biophilia, topophilia is the affective bond between people and place or setting and it varies greatly in emotional range and intensity, including fleeting visual pleasure, the sensual delight of physical contact, the fondness for familiar places such as home, and joy because of health and vitality (Tuan, 1974). It has been said it can lead to a deep sense of belonging and identity connected to certain landscapes. Meanwhile, topophobia unveils the shadowy affiliations, inducing feelings of dread and anxiety towards specific landscapes (Tilley & Cameron-Daum, 2024). These feelings are influenced by cultural heritage, personal experiences, and social connections. For example, we might feel a strong connection with your own first ascent mountain or woodland that has a special meaning to you. Equally, topophobia can result from negative experiences or links with particular places, leading to feelings of distress.

The Prospect-Refuge Theory by Appleton (1975) suggests that people prefer environments that offer both open views (prospect) and places of shelter (refuge). Heijgen (2013) explains two main ideas of the theory: first, people find landscapes attractive if they can interact with them well; second, people like feeling safe when they can see their surroundings without being seen. This theory suggests that our preference for certain landscapes comes from our need for survival and security. Landscapes that afford both prospect and refuge are believed to evoke feelings of comfort and safety (Dosen & Ostwald, 2016). This explains why we often find open fields with trees or water relaxing to look at. They also now influence modern landscape design and urban planning to create spaces that make people feel safe and connected to nature. For instance, urban parks often combine open lawns (prospect) with shaded areas under trees or structures (refuge), creating spaces that are good to look at. People are also living in a far more urbanised world and are spending more time indoors (Moore, Gould, & Keary, 2003). By understanding these theories, they can help to promote natural elements into urbanised landscapes, by creating small areas of refuge such as community gardens or green rooftops it creates opportunities to reconnect with nature and experience the benefits the natural landscape has to offer. If this is done correctly, garden designers can create environments that promote mental well-being for the local community, as well as help to support biodiversity conservation efforts within their local area.

During the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance era, landscapes were often viewed through a religious lens or as resources to be used (Heijgen, 2013). Monasteries played a large role in transforming wild landscapes into cultivated gardens. These gardens often included symbolic elements representing paradise or biblical narratives (Arnold, 2012). However, during the Enlightenment period, during the late 17th and 18th centuries, there was a move towards understanding nature scientifically. Enlightenment thinkers sought to dissect and categorise the natural world, leading to a more analytical view of landscapes. This rationalist perspective

emphasised the objective study of nature but often overlooked its emotional and spiritual aspects (Bristow, 2010).

The Roman era brought a focus on the emotional and imaginative aspects of nature, with artists like Constable and Turner capturing its beauty. Romanticism emphasised the power of nature to inspire awe and introspection (Cosgrove, 1998), contrasting with the Enlightenment's scientific approach. This period saw a increase of interest in wild landscapes as a source of inspiration.

In the Victorian era, landscapes were seen as reflections of divine craftsmanship and the power of God's handiwork (Howard, 2011; Urry, 1990). This era also showed the difference between the upper classes appreciation of nature and the practical views of those who worked on the land. While the upper class enjoyed landscaped gardens and countryside views, most famously captivated by the work of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, still seen today in gardens at Blenheim Palace and Chatsworth House. Meanwhile the working class, in the Victorian Era, often had a more utilitarian relationship with the land, focused on agriculture and more importantly survival (Rushworth & Jones, 2019).

Religion has also influenced how people perceive landscapes. In pagan beliefs, landscapes were seen as sacred and intertwined with religious practices (Wallis, 2015). Features like mountains, rivers, forests and other natural features were often considered holy sites. This view contrasts with later periods when landscapes were seen more as backdrops or resources. Religious landscapes can vary widely across different cultures and faiths. For example, the Gangies River in India is considered sacred in Hinduism, and is a symbol of faith, hope, culture and sanity, as well as a source of livelihood for millions since time immemorial (Kumar, 2017). In Christianity, the Garden of Gethsemane holds significant religious importance as the place where Jesus prayed before his crucifixion (Bernabei, 2015). These religious connections can shape how individuals and communities perceive and interact with landscapes.

Landscape preference and landscape perception are closely related concepts. Preference is about what kind of landscapes people like, influenced by personal taste, cultural norms, and social values. This preference can be influenced by a combination of factors, including personal preferences, cultural norms, social values, and psychological traits (Herzog et al., 2000).

Landscape perception, on the other hand, is how people interpret and understand the landscapes around them (Kaymaz. 2012). These two concepts are connected but not the same. Preference is more about feelings and aesthetics, while perception is about cognitive processes. This helps to explain why someone might prefer a peaceful forest (preference) because they perceive it as a place of relaxation and natural beauty (perception).

These ideas link to Gibson's (1977) theory of affordances explains how our understanding of landscapes is based on our experiences and how we perceive opportunities in the environment. This theory helps us see how different landscapes offer various affordances based on our prior experiences. For example, a park with open spaces, playgrounds, and benches offers different

affordances for recreation, relaxation, and social interaction. Understanding these affordances can help in designing landscapes that meet the needs and preferences of its users. Incorporating the principles of landscape preference and perception into planning and design can lead to the creation of spaces that enhance well-being and community cohesion. Urban planners and landscape architects often consider these factors when designing parks, public spaces, and residential areas. For example, incorporating green spaces and natural elements into urban environments can provide residents with opportunities to connect with nature, reducing stress and improving quality of life.

In conclusion the study of landscapes reveals a complex interaction between natural forces, human activities, and personal views.

“Why is it, I wonder, that we have trouble agreeing on the meaning of landscape? The word is simple enough, and it refers to something which we think we understand; and yet to each of us it seems to mean something different.” (Jackson, 1984).

Landscapes are both physical spaces and subjective constructs, shaped by historical, cultural, and environmental factors. By understanding the diverse meanings and values connected to landscapes, we can create environments that promote well-being, sustainability, and cultural richness for future generations. It is clear that landscapes are constantly evolving as they are influenced by natural processes and human interventions. Our perception of landscapes is shaped by our experiences, cultural backgrounds, and personal preferences. Recognising this complexity allows us to appreciate the complex nature of landscapes and their significance in our lives.

By incorporating principles of landscape preference and perception into planning and design it can lead to the creation of spaces that enhance well-being, community cohesion, and sustainability. As well as acknowledging the diverse meanings and values attributed to landscapes, we can create environments that stay with individuals and communities, fostering a deeper connection to the world around us. We need to understand the historical and cultural influences on landscape perception, as this can also help us appreciate the evolving relationship between humans and their environments. From religious and utilitarian views to aesthetic appreciation and sustainable practices, our interaction with landscapes reflects our changing values and needs.

In summary, landscapes are a reflection of our relationship with the environment, shaped by both natural and human forces. By studying and understanding this relationship, we can create landscapes that are not only beautiful and functional but also meaningful and sustainable for present and future generations.

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