

Chapter 9

The Didactics of Archaeological Landscape: A Project in the Staffora Valley With Local Institutions – Searching for a Lost Landscape

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ABSTRACT

The object of the Staffora Valley Project is to reconstruct the landscape of the area beyond the river Po in the province of Pavia, during Roman days. While promoting a debate about the Romanization of this territory, the project facilitated the popularization of an archeology of the landscape, meant to foster civics and public spirit. Through a series of archaeology workshops, students of the Lower Staffora Valley discovered the history of their territory, learning to preserve, respect, and appreciate its traditional farming vocation. This experience resonated with families, associations, and public institutions, gradually fostering an awareness for their surroundings, an indispensable basis for responsible land use. Thus, archaeology becomes a privileged path to educate a community to think in terms of history: a guarantee of mindful living, preventing speculation and any other pursuit that may destroy local traditions and alter the balance between economic needs and the quality of life.

INTRODUCTION

Why is an education to the understanding of an archaeological landscape important? Because landscape is endangered, and its historical value often overlooked.

The idea of landscape cannot be limited to a natural, wild, or romantic setting. Today, our landscape is most often the result of an interaction between nature and human intervention, mainly farm-related.

On the other hand, especially for the younger generations, cultivated land in itself may appear unfamiliar, novel, something to discover. In Italian schools, geography and history are separate disciplines,

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taught over a mere handful of weekly hours. Students do not learn to develop the idea of landscape as a series of different chronological layers. The youngest members of the population are at risk of losing touch with their own environment. Memory is lost, and with it, our individual and shared sense of identity.

The tale of the little fish is exemplary: an older fish is peacefully swimming early one morning. When he meets two young fish coming from the opposite direction, “Hello, youngsters”, he says, “How is the water?” The young fish stare at each other. “Water? What the heck is water?”

Landscape archaeology helps strengthen collective awareness through knowledge, development, and communication. It fosters the creation of a collective memory; it strengthens local identity while opening up to other cultures and avoiding close-minded, self-absorbed sectionalism.

Our task, then, includes not only research, but also communication. Archaeology becomes an authentic civic duty; the archaeologist becomes a civil servant.

In cooperation with the University of Pavia CRIDACT (Center for Interdepartmental Didactics of Classical Archaeology and Ancient Technology), the author has been working for some time on the meaning of “city” from antiquity to the present, convinced that the difference between the study of antiquity and the disciplines studying the Present is only nominal.

Why focusing on the city?

Because the many topics typifying an urban context create an ideal ground for the coming together of contemporary disciplines and the study of antiquity. The city is one of the most evident and impressive phenomena of the varied, millenarian human experience.

This is the ground where the effects of history on the contemporary environment can be measured, without relegating the Present to the uncertainty of aporia, and the Past to mere commemorative rhetoric.

Daniel Liebeskind, well-known architect and an authoritative voice in today’s cultural debate, states that innovation, transformation and creativity cannot be separated from tradition and history. If an architectural project is abstract, and disconnected from the Past, the result will be meaningless; It is always necessary to look back if one wish to understand where to go.

This line of thought informed the projects of *education to citizenship* over the past few years. If archaeological research, through school seminars, but especially thanks to the invention of the *archaeological cube* has been the mainstay (Frapiccini & Recanatini, 2009, pp. 105-112), the city has become the focus of scientific initiatives (Maggi, 2009) and didactic projects (“Educazione alla cittadinanza,” Comune di Pavia, Pavia, 2009-2012; “Archaeologia in corsia”, in the Pediatric Oncology Ward of the University of Pavia). To this end, the author reached out and collaborated with specialists from many fields. Archaeologists, scholars of antiquity, and chemistry experts work with him today, alongside scholars of the modern age, paleographers and archivists, engineers, architects, and geologists.

In Italy, during these times of economic crisis, the cost of humanities departments is deemed a luxury. This myopic way of thinking, however, misses the point; these disciplines are essential to developing an awareness of human values, acquired through a critical analysis of the world and of ourselves; they train people to think out of the box; and, in general, they point out the importance of the humanities, understood as education to citizenship, and of creativity.

The concept appeared some time ago in an article by Salvatore Settis, published in the Italian press; the author highlighted the necessity for contemporary society to encourage its citizens to be creative, prosperous, and – in simple words – to thrive. A society can be affluent but not thriving, while a thriving society is always prosperous: history demonstrates this. The key to this interpretation of thriving as blossoming (*fioritura*) has its origins in Aristotelian philosophy. *Eudamonia* is not transitory happiness (success), but rather a sense of life fulfillment and actualization of our potentialities. It is a feeling that

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