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## Geography and Territorial Planning: Established Approaches, New 'Spaces' for Research, and Case Studies

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### EDITORIAL

Geografia e pianificazione territoriale: approcci consolidati,  
nuovi 'spazi' di ricerca e casi di studio 9  
*Giovanni Baiocchi*

### GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACHES

Dalla Piazza d'Armi a CityLife: uno spazio in evoluzione a Milano 15  
*Maristella Bergaglio*

L'espace non planifié entre lois et réalité: cas du quartier  
'Diar Zitoun' (Est algérien) 27  
*Amar Azzouzi*

L'Università tra ricerca e co-progettazione: l'applicazione del modello  
a Tripla Elica allargata ai Gruppi di Azione Locale 43  
*Sara Belotti - Federica Burini - Alessandra Ghisalberti*

Community Maps: A Participative Tool for Land Use Enhancement. 65  
The Case of Casentino  
*Marina Marengo - Lucrezia Lopez - Andrea Rossi*

Crossed Landscapes: A Walking Method Research Experience in Sicily <i>Giovanni Messina - Enrico Nicosia</i>	81
Geografia digitale: un atlante visuale in rete per diffondere il discorso ambientale <i>Erica Neri</i>	95
La natura sociale degli animali nella ‘messa in scena’ del cambiamento climatico <i>Sara Bonati - Marco Tononi</i>	115

# Crossed Landscapes: A Walking Method Research Experience in Sicily

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## ABSTRACT

The present contribution, starting from theoretical reflections on the role of ecomuseums in the valorisation of territorial resources and the idea of landscape dynamics as connectors that link communities to places also through sensorial experience, presents the case study of the *Grotte Vaporose* of Sciacca, in South-Western Sicily. Through an approach based on the so-called *walking methods*, this work aims at returning the perceptual, critical and analytical outcomes of a *flânerie* in an ecomuseum.

*Keywords:* walking methods; landscape; ecomuseum; tourism; sustainability.

*Parole chiave:* indagine sul terreno; paesaggio; ecomuseo; turismo; sostenibilità.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The present contribution<sup>1</sup>, starting from theoretical reflections on the role of ecomuseums in the valorisation of territorial resources and the idea of landscape dynamics as connectors that link communities to places also through sensorial experience, presents the case study of the *Grotte Vaporose* (Vaporous Caves) of Sciacca, in South-Western Sicily. In addition to the brief introduction, the following work is divided into three paragraphs: the first deals with the conceptualisation of landscape and its relation to corporeity and sensoriality; the second dwells instead on the role that Ecomuseums play in the interpretation and valorisation of cultural landscapes. The third paragraph finally describes a methodological

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<sup>1</sup> Paragraphs 1, 3 and 4 are to be attributed to G. Messina, 2 to E. Nicosia.

experiment based on the so-called walking methods<sup>2</sup> whose most obvious references are to be found in *Porous Naples* (Benjamin and Lacis 2020) and *The Practice of Everyday Life* by Michel De Certeau (2009). Such experiment aims at returning to the Vaporous Caves of Sciacca in Sicily the perceptive, critical and analytical outcomes of a *flânerie* in a site which is at once landscape, anti-landscape and ecomuseum.

## 2. THE LANDSCAPE/BODY RELATIONSHIP

A multitude of meanings can be attributed to the landscape which can still be thought of as an open and constantly expanding whole. The debate, still very open on this subject, has generated several paradigms, definitions, visual schemes and indicators all showing landscape's liquidity and ever changing nature as if it were a container in which an enormous Penelope's web is woven at day and unwoven at night (Zerbi 1993; Tanca 2012). Such concept, based more on ideological assumptions than on interpreting its descriptive capacity, has been widely discussed by humanist geographers. On these assumptions, Denis Cosgrove defined landscape as an idea, a way of seeing, a sophisticated visual ideology:

It represents a way in which certain classes of people have signified themselves and their world through their imagined relationship with nature, and through which they have underlined and communicated their own social role and that of others with respect to external nature. (Cosgrove 1998, 15)

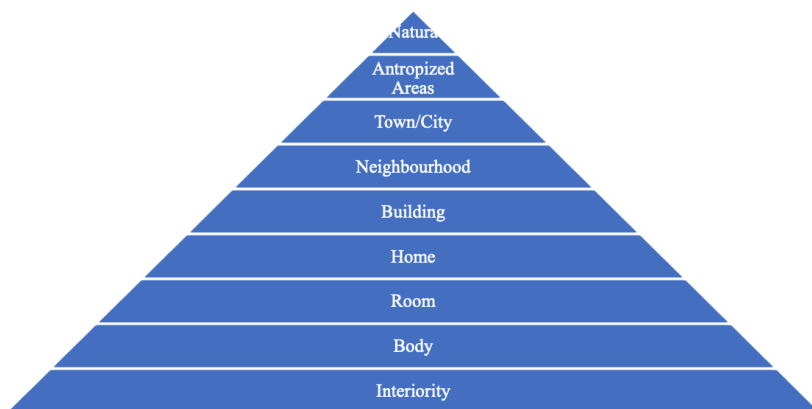
John R. Gold, on the other hand, defined it as a composite made up of three elements: the physical and tangible characteristics of an area, the measurable activities of man and the meanings or symbols imprinted on

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<sup>2</sup> To identify the complexity of the research interweavings included in the so-called walking methods, we refer to: "This chapter addresses key questions of definition regarding walking as a 'method' (in contrast to 'mere' movement or routine experience) – operating with an awareness of everyday action as embodied, cognitive, sensual, relational, visual, communicative dimensions and possibilities. It also situates walking as a method in relation to contemporary work on mobilities, the senses (e.g., the visual), and digital methodologies. We introduce the process of theorising methods 'on the move' by connecting the activity and conceptions of walking with art, philosophy, politics, and the psychosocial. It is argued that walking is an excellent method for entering into the biographical routes, mobilities, and experiences of others in a deeply engaged and 'attuned' way" (O'Neill and Roberts 2021, 15).

human consciousness. It is precisely the symbolic dimension that gives the landscape an artistic configuration, formed by a set of converging elements, moments experienced by man whilst he carries out his social life. A landscape is also the object of codes and communication activities which imply social relations, different territorial geometries of power, it embodies both the signified and the signifier. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the geographical landscape is a seesaw of openings and closings of the horizon, of metaphorical fluidifications, of codifications, the result of cultural stratifications, of tenacious spiritual dispositions which have dwelt with human becoming by moulding it according to history and time (Gold 1985; Dardel 1986; Farinelli 1991; Dematteis 1999).

The complexity of landscape as an element can be summed up using the model of a pyramid (*Fig. 1*) to represent the scalar path that leads from the intimacy of the individual's inner landscape to the natural landscape, passing through the domestic landscape, the neighbourhood landscape, the urban landscape and the landscapes of anthropized territories. Within such context, peoples' daily actions in space become sources of unique experiences which withhold emotional and sensorial perceptions, geographical imaginaries, social relations and memories (Ferrè 2021). Latest approaches suggest considering landscapes first and foremost as a sensitive and emotional spatial experience and not just an intellectual or cultural representation.



*Figure 1. – The pyramid of landscapes.*  
*Source: Enrico Nicosia.*

The way space is experienced could represent an important operational concept in the geographical analysis of spatiality. Indeed, spatial experience is a body experience which involves multisensory perceptions, arouses emotions and memories and through which interactions take place. Such experience would thus imply two levels in mutual interaction which provide a scheme of reference values for the individual, on one hand subjectively and on the other in relation with the social world (Duarte 2013). Understanding spatial experience, in a geography centred on proximity, according to Ferrè could thus shed a light on the bodily, sensitive and social dimensions of inhabiting space and shape certain relations, materials and ideals on the world (Ferrè 2021, 99). In this perspective, a landscape is experienced as an atmosphere that envelops, transcends and agitates the body.

Furthermore, due to its polysemic richness, landscape represents a powerful multisensory experience. It is not only a visual practice but an experience open to all senses, including the tactile one, an experience of sensory connection, a bodily and emotional relation with the surrounding world (Besse 2020). In addition to sight as an elective cognitive medium, new cultural geography has attributed equal exploratory dignity to the other senses, thus enriching the study of landscapes with new epistemological contents based on smells, scents, noises, sounds and tactile sensations, as well as on the subject's moods and sensations captured in the act of perception. It is precisely in the light of this renewed perspective that John Douglas Porteous (1987) declined the word landscape according to the sense of smell (smellscape), sound (soundscape), corporeity (bodyscape), interiority (inscape), domestic space (homescape) and the various phases of an individual's existence, from childhood (childscape) to death (deathscape). Consequently, this concept has been instilled with new classifications including those of cultural landscape (Cosgrove 1998) and historical landscape, but also landscape of lived space, third landscape (Clément 2005) and minimal landscape (Ferlinghetti 2009). Such a vastness of meanings testifies the malleability of this concept and especially its wit as it allows us to designate both the thing and its visual representation, thus referring simultaneously to the objective, tangible and visible reality together with its contemplation based on the subjectivity of the observer (Farinelli 1976, 1991; Omenetto 2021).

### 3. LANDSCAPES AND ECOMUSEUMS

In the search for a trigger that would both ground and guide the reasoning on the territorial and landscape role of ecomuseum structures (Messina 2022), we found a powerful one in Lucio Gambi's reinterpretation, suggested in a conference in 1989, on the harmony between territory and landscape (Gambi 2008): the temporal dimension, in its process that is both consolidative and dynamic, acts in space through rationality, determining its territorial composition and landscape aspect. Geographical reflection has dwelt on the multiplicity of relationships from Dematteis (1991) to Raffestin (2012), although the most eloquent image, that of the palimpsest, was proposed in the journal *Diogene*, by André Corboz (1983). It is then the process, in its diuturnal and multi-scalar action, the tireless function of placemaking.

What value should be given to the cultural dimension of this process? If Gambi's reflection was quite clear on this concept, Girolamo Cusimano takes it one step further. The latter upgrades an old observation and exposes the risk of an exclusively aestheticizing interpretation of the landscape, thus revealing explicitly that: "landscape is a sign of heritage, it is territorialized, materialized identity, made into a perceptible thing, to be defended on a par with the intangible baggage of culture" (Cusimano 2021, 11)<sup>3</sup>.

Shifting towards the experience of the sustainable valorisation of material and immaterial heritage, what is the relation that can be found between the territorial dynamics, landscapes arrangements and museum formulas? George Henri Rivière together with Hugues de Varine, who coined the word ecomuseum, in its founding essay of 1985, identifies four basic principles, at once synergic and divergent, around which the entire formula of ecomuseums finds its framing: the instrument of cultural policy, the identity mirror, the territory and time (Rivière 1985). The ecomuseum or the community museum as de Varine (1996) came to prefer, is indeed a complex experience. In its being a cultural space of local identities or, indeed, a mirror of the community that throughout history has forged the territorial and landscape dimension of a place, the ecomuseum can represent the narrative device of a territory, even its dimension as an instrument of cultural *governance*, a narrative that both

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<sup>3</sup> Translated by authors. Original text, in italian: "il paesaggio è segno dell'eredità, è identità territorializzata, materializzata, fatta cosa percepibile, da difendere al pari dell'immateriale bagaglio della cultura".

whispers the *memento* to the community and overflows, externally, into the sustainable tourist and cultural promotion of the region. Just like a map represents, by emphasizing them, the weave and warp of the diachronic and synchronic cultural relations that constitute territories and landscapes, so does the ecomuseum become their model and constitutes their access<sup>4</sup>.

As Constantino Caldo has already taught us in his in-depth studies on the geographical sense<sup>5</sup> of cultural heritage (1994), engraving and symbol are the main axis of the loom where the perceptive, interpretative, functional and ultimately cultural relationship between community, space and time is woven in heritage mediation. Engraving is in fact a happy image because it unveils the spatial-temporal depth of the insistence of a *monumentum* and opens to the multiform functionalisations, perceptions and interpretations that, in the palimpsest of the territory in its constant making, ground the community to its 'where' and help marking its identity. In short, an active element of the lived space (Frémont 1980). Heritage is an opportunity for the recognition of the self, which can be individual, collective or spatial. Yet the engraving refers to a punctual dimension. The cultural experience identified and validated can be so wide and articulate that it might need a proper framing. Our suggestion is that of the footprint.

As far as the value of the symbolic dimension of the geographical perspective is concerned, we cling to Denis Cosgrove's observations expressed in 1986 at the XXIV Italian Geographical Congress

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, even the ecomuseum formula is not without obvious critical issues in the process of constructing a sense of place (Davis 2009; Bowden 2017).

<sup>5</sup> For further confrontation: "In the first instance, heritage is inherently a spatial phenomenon. All heritage occurs somewhere and the relationship between a heritage object, building, association or idea and its place may be important in a number of ways. [...] Second, heritage is of fundamental importance to the interests of contemporary cultural and historical geography, which focus on signification, representation and the crucial issue of identity. Places are distinguished from each other by many attributes that contribute to their identity and to the identification of individuals and groups within them. Heritage is one of these attributes. The sense, or more usually senses, of place is both an input and an output of the process of heritage creation. Geography is concerned with the ways in which the past is remembered and represented in both formal or official senses and within popular forms, and the implications which these have for the present and for ideas and constructs of belonging. [...] Heritage is both a cultural and an economic good and is commodified as such. This multiple use and consumption occurs with virtually all heritage and is a potent source of conflict between the various interest groups involved" (Graham *et al.* 2016, 4-5).



As a principle, the use of *symbol*, *symbolic* or *symbolism* in geography refers to the recognition of cultural or human meaning in the design or depiction of geographic space and its contents. Therefore, in interpreting landscape symbolism or symbolic landscape, cultural geographers are interested in revealing the meanings that human groups attach to areas and places and the ways in which these are expressed geographically [...]. In this sense, a “new” cultural geography differs in its treatment of landscape (from the studies associated as characteristic to Carl Sauer and his followers in the “Berkeley School”) and considers landscape as a deep-substrate cultural text or system of representations whose meanings are opaque, rather than an object whose meaning is transparent. (Cosgrove 1989, 256)<sup>6</sup>

Ecomuseums are finally an opportunity for local development. Ever since their birth, back in the 60’s in the folds of community involvement, they represent up until today strong *place-based* tools anchored to a *bottom-up* development logic (Giannone 2015). It is certainly in this sense that Salvatore Cannizzaro, in his prolonged reflection on the geographical value of ecomuseum initiatives, has penned the most topical considerations (Cannizzaro 2020).

#### 4. ECOMUSEUMS AND LANDSCAPE ON THE GROUND. CROSSING NOTES AND OPEN CONCLUSIONS

Let me come to the field survey or, rather, to the notations arising from my visit. My *flânerie* on, or rather in, Mount San Calogero, in Sciacca took place in August 2022 and as will be explained below, through glances and crossings unravelled in the interplay of landscape and anti-landscape.

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<sup>6</sup> Translated by authors. Original text, in Italian: “Come principio l’uso di *simbolo*, *simbolico* o *simbolismo* in geografia si riferisce al riconoscimento del significato culturale o umano nel progetto o nella raffigurazione dello spazio geografico e dei suoi contenuti. Pertanto, nell’interpretare il simbolismo del paesaggio o il paesaggio simbolico, i geografi culturali sono interessati a rivelare i significati che i gruppi umani attribuiscono alle aree e ai luoghi e ai modi in cui questi sono espressi geograficamente [...]. In questo senso una ‘nuova’ geografia culturale differisce nel trattare il paesaggio (dagli studi associati come caratteristica a Carl Sauer e i suoi seguaci nella ‘Berkeley School’) e considera il paesaggio come un testo culturale a profondi substrati o un sistema di raffigurazioni i cui significati sono opachi, piuttosto che un oggetto il cui senso è trasparente”.

On the mountain – indeed, hill – San Calogero, or Kronio, in Sciacca (south-western Sicily) a huge concrete structure stands out in all its yellowish grandeur. Built in the 1950s, inaugurated three times but never opened to the public, it embodies the magniloquent attempt to make Sciacca a destination for religious and thermal tourism that was already shipwrecked by some obscure structural problems inherent in the building.

The Grand Hotel embodies what I would call the anti-landscape. This is certainly not because of the aestheticizing judgement that still poisons the debate with empty rhetoric (Cusimano 2021) but because it seems denying the point of view or, perhaps we should say, structure and point of view coinciding, erase themselves.

Let me try to clarify what is obviously a provocation. Except for those coming from the sea, the structure, embedded in the slope of Mount Kronio, is hardly visible from below. Being placed on a precipice overlooking the state road that connects Trapani to Agrigento, it is almost hidden from the flow of motorists that drive below and only visible to the few who are approaching from sea. The hotel, on the other hand, is at the same time landscaped. Elevated, dominant, cheeky, it dominated the Mediterranean horizon, the fertile hills sloping down to the coast, the city.

My ascent to Kronio – it seems that Kronos the father and eater of sons of Zeus had a comfortable abode there – came from the west, without entering the city. On the top of the hill, in the Basilica of San Calogero – rich of fine frescos and sculptures – presents again another dichotomy: open/closed. If the view in fact unfolds as far as the curvature on the horizon, the immense oratory adjacent to the church – both run by the Franciscan monks – a closed gate, shuts out the view.

Indifferent to the imposing oratory, I headed towards the gate that closes the way to an atrium where Nature's resilience is at work. "STABILIMENTO STUFE S. CALOGERO – GROTTA VAPORE\* E DEL MONT\* KRONIO" reads on the structure, in large letters. The missing S and E are a clear sign of neglect (*Fig. 2*).

In short, one finds itself inside a site, protected by the Oriented Nature Reserve of Mount Kronio<sup>7</sup>, where there are caves known as *stufe* (stoves) inside which flows very humid air of about 40°C rich in sulphurous salts. This thermal phenomenon was known since ancient times as

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<sup>7</sup> Look at <http://www.provincia.agrigento.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/2344>.

evidence of a jar with traces of wine dating back as much as 6.000 years ago was found in this area and constitutes a further element of the narrative concerning the *milieu* of wine in those areas (Messina 2016). Such phenomenon represents an important resource for treating specific rheumatic pathologies of men and herds as well as contributing to the history, myth, hagiography and politics of that area.

Let me start with the latter. Since 1880, institutional attention to this site has been high. Indeed, in that year, the first core of the site was inaugurated. In more recent times, the ineffective regional and state management, well before the same sad fate befell the urban thermal baths, led to the to complete closure of the facility<sup>8</sup>.



*Figure 2. – The entrance to the plant.  
Source: Giovanni Messina.*

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<sup>8</sup> The history of the site was traced thanks to the information found in the *Antiquarium*.

The importance of Saint Calogero for the history of the site is self-evident. The name of the hill. The basilica, the beautifully tiled effigies, the stoves, are solid signs of a deep cultural and cultic matrix. Saint Calogero who probably identifies multiple hieratic hermits, was an example of Christian virtue. The cult of Saint Calogero, 5th century AD, is in fact deeply rooted in Sicilian religious devotion (Buttitta 2020). Summoned to evangelise Sicily, he first went to the Aeolian islands and then settled in Sciacca, on the southern coast of the island, during a terrible plague, testifying to his faith in continuous acts of charity in favour of the outcasts. In Sciacca, he lived in the caves of Mount Kronio, driving out demons, healing and professing the Word.

Then, there is the myth.

As we have already mentioned Kronos, we must continue with Daedalus. The architect. The great cartographer. Let us fly, it must be said, for a moment to Crete. To Minos and Asterion. The belluine monstrosity of his son imposed the most grandiose work: the house-world where he would be lost forever in the cursed solitude recounted by Borges (1998). The reiterative, specular, incomprehensible house: the labyrinth. Reading the myths, it seems that Theseus is the only one to have found the way out. In truth, Theseus, helped by Ariadne's thread, found a way out of the house-world by means of a trick. He has, in other words, crossed the world without understanding it, as many of us do. Dedalus did not. Imprisoned as an artificer, in the labyrinth he solely knows the pattern – or, if you like, the map, the blueprint – he knows that the only way out is to discard, to elevate, to fly. By soaring, he loses his son – certain privileges are absolute – and looks at the world-labyrinth from above. He understands it by re-establishing harmony with the model (Messina 2019).

A divine being, Daedalus glides over the shored of Sicily and immediately embarks on a feat of his own. Excavating windpaths to benefit from the warm, healthy breath of the earth. In an absolute reversal of perspective, from Uranian to Chthonic, myth has it that the architect dug the cave that today bears its name, even equipping it with seats, each of which situated to a different ailment. The Latin inscriptions found on the cave seats are archaeological evidence of practices eternalised by the myth.

Today the caves are once again partially usable thanks to the initiative of a service cooperative<sup>9</sup>, *Museo diffuso dei 5 sensi a Sciacca*, which is taking charge of promoting visitor experiences in the municipality

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<sup>9</sup> Look at <https://www.sciacca5sensi.it>.

aimed at enhancing the local heritage and promoting sustainable tourism through a diffuse eco-museum<sup>10</sup>.

At 7 p.m. on a torrid day at the end of August, dozens of visitors were queuing up to listen to stories, linger over the displays and captions of the site's small *Antiquarium*, and venture risk-free into the steamy caves. The queue unfolded right behind the Grand Hotel, inaugurated three times and never opened to the public, which, together with the urban baths<sup>11</sup>, testifies how tourism can be both important and/or a problematic lever for its territory, its policies and its developmental prospects. Sciacca in 2022, according to the latest available data, recorded almost 330.000 presences<sup>12</sup>, ranking as a strategic destination for tourist volumes in Sicily. The tourist offer is very varied: micro-reactivity, large tour operator structures (Aeroviaggi) and important luxury resorts (Rocco Forte Verdura) compete for an important demand for seaside, gastronomic and cultural tourism. In this sense, although certainly a niche, initiatives to revitalise unique territorial resources trace a virtuous path for potential development through forms of sustainable tourism.

Traversing the places and questioning them were fruitful research experiences that allowed, through the sensory mediation of the gaze conducted on different perspectives, to find the trigger for the activation of theoretical reflections on landscape and anti-landscape and to approach the case study through a strongly sensory-mediated survey. In fact, we were able to see, thanks to a visit made during the launch phase of the initiative, how much the *Museo diffuso dei 5 sensi a Sciacca* was founded on a voluntaristic drive combined with the precision of the experiential and exhibition design. The bottom-up thrust allowed Sciacca to reappropriate a space that had been abandoned due to the management difficulties of public institutions and to reintroduce territorial storytelling dynamics aimed at citizens and tourists.

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<sup>10</sup> The ecomuseum reported that over the past 3 years the site has received more than 20,000 visits. Source: <https://www.telemontekronio.it/index.php/attualita/item/27016-20-mila-visitatori-alle-grotte-di-s-calogero-t-russo-adesso-lavoriamo-ad-altri-obiettivi>.

<sup>11</sup> Italian Geographers have worked chorally on the tourism and cultural potential of spas. We refer in particular to the valuable monographic volumes of *Geotema* (28, 46, 60) devoted to the topic. On the crisis at the Sciacca thermal baths facility, we refer to the journalistic investigation available on <https://www.tp24.it/2024/03/06/inchieste/la-storia-delle-terme-di-sciacca-nbsp-il-sogno-svanito-del-piu-grande-complesso-termale-d-europa/200984>.

<sup>12</sup> Look at the tourism data of the Sicilian Region.

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