

THE INFLUENCING FACTORS OF LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS IN LATVIAN RURAL AREAS

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Abstract. *Latvian rural landscapes have changed rapidly through different historical periods. Nowadays, when globalization and the strong impact of technologies take place, the existing values of rural landscapes become even more threatened. Also the lack of a clear planning system has raised several problematic issues related to rural landscapes: loss of valuable agricultural lands (transformation into forest and building areas); losing landscape and heritage values; a non perceivable image and identity of Latvia. Thus for establishing the base for a new landscape planning system it is important to determine the main factors influencing the changes of Latvian rural landscape in different historical periods. The paper focuses on rural landscape aesthetics as one of the most important resources of Latvian countryside. The survey is based on scientific literature and historical materials as well as on the authors' research on present changes in rural landscape. The results highlighted that in the period before World War II, human economic activities were the main factors. In the Soviet period political and industrial factors came to the surface. The factors of changing human life style and using new technologies became dominating in the period after regaining independence in Latvia.*

Key words: *Latvian rural landscape, landscape aesthetics, historical review.*

INTRODUCTION

Rural landscapes are often associated with traditional landscapes of the definite region [1] because they represent nature processes, human activities and traditions of the region. Thus they are an important key in the recognition of the region's landscape identity, and also the protection and preservation possibilities of rural landscapes are an important precondition for ensuring the diversity of European landscapes. In the globalisation era more often landscapes have "identical faces", and the regional singularity decreases rapidly [1]. Therefore the consideration of the regional context, mostly recognised by the rural landscapes, in territorial planning is an important aspect, since it is connected with sustainability of the regional landscape and protection of landscape identity. The preservation of landscape as well as the strategy for the development of landscape as a diverse resource thus also as an aesthetic resource, has been stated by The European Landscape Convention [2] which emphasises the specific importance and role of landscape for the creation of a qualitative space of life.

Landscape aesthetics. Aesthetics of rural landscape as an important recognizable element and resource of the country has been emphasised in several studies. A rural landscape also has a close relation to the historical development of the word *aesthetics*. The word aesthetics is connected with human perception and the concept of beauty, where one part has been developed in the human subconsciousness from nature's cognition time [3]-[6], but the second alongside with art and science trends has been reflecting the philosophy, traditions, way of life, the consequences of most important political and economic events, which are determined by the traditions and events of a definite time period [7].

The origins of landscape aesthetics have been found in the paintings of the 17-19th century in Europe [8]. Those reflected beauty of rural landscape, nature elements and rural peoples' life. Landscape aesthetics has been associated with the concept of *beauty* that significantly affects a person's emotions and feelings [9],[7], [10], the aesthetic categories besides beauty also include *sublime*, *pastoral* and *picturesque*. Statements of pleasant experiencing of landscape reflected in the work of the philosopher Edmund Burke (1757), describing the fascinating, gracefully formed 'beautiful' landscapes, as opposed to 'horrific', spacious and huge 'noble' landscapes. The philosopher Uvedale Price (1794) pointed out that the picturesque landscapes can recover 'listless beauty' and 'horrific greatness'. Thus picturesque emerged as a balance between those two opposite ideals. Pastoral in fine arts reflects an idyllic countryside landscape with cattle and shepherds. The concept of pastoral influenced literature, art and music by representing rural life in an idealistic way [9] and it was addressed mainly to people from cities. Based on it, a new direction of aesthetics – *Aesthetics of Nature* was

established. This highlighted the ideas of beauty, majesty and picturesque of nature and its elements [11]. In the 19th century Aesthetics of Nature lost its importance, but in the second part of the 20th century it was revived again as *Environmental Aesthetics* and was influenced by the growing interest about environmental problems. Environmental Aesthetics deals with philosophical issues regarding not only the world as a unity, but also the human impact on the landscape, man-made environment and ecosystems [12],[13]. Steven Bourassa combined various theories of human perception and pleasure of landscape from previous centuries and developed a new direction of aesthetics – *Aesthetics of Landscape* [14]. This direction includes a concept based on: processes in biological laws (historically developed person's abilities and cognizance to arrange his/her surroundings for basic needs according to the experience from his/her ancestry); cultural rules (impact of traditions on a person's experience of landscape aesthetics); and personal strategies (impact of temporal trends in landscape planning and design resulting as changes of a person's surrounded landscape) [15],[16]. A relatively new one is the *Aesthetics of Everyday life*, which developed an independent direction from the Aesthetics of Nature during the last 40 years. Nowadays Aesthetics of Everyday life becomes leading in landscape planning because it is connected with daily activities, environment, things and objects but not so much with art. It explores not formal characteristics of things and objects to make them beautiful but the relationships between people and things or objects to develop this experience as pleasant and beautiful [17].

Latvian rural landscape. Aesthetics of surrounded rural landscape has always been an important element for Latvian people because of their historically close relations to the land and nature. Ancient Latvians as pagans organized their life according to nature's rules, and processes in nature played an important role in their economic activities and everyday life [18]. Latvian rural landscape has undergone a lot of changes till its present image but still today Latvian people feel a strong attraction to the rural landscape. In the research of landscape perception concerning Latvian rural landscapes, questionnaires were used in different regions of Latvia [4],[19]. According to the findings the Latvian landscape identity at this period of time in society is associated with the traditional rural landscape, formed by the specific features of nature in different regions. The respondents – rural and urban inhabitants associated the countryside with pleasant feelings aroused by nature's harmony, modesty, pristine nature and vastness, patriotism, a sense of identification and belonging to a place, and nice childhood memories through tales and pictures. Bell's research [4] revealed that the most important aesthetic landscape elements were intact rural landscape, hay stacks, storks, thatched roof houses, bathhouses, old oaks in the middle of fields, old lime trees or oak alleys, tilled fields, farmsteads, winding country roads, hills and gardens in bloom. However, the processes of globalization inevitably promote the transformation of the regional identity of the historical landscape into new forms, determined by the changes in people's life styles and needs, the arrival of new technologies and materials, huge urbanization processes, migration of people and the disappearance of national characteristics [21]-[24]. Each nation has its own life space, which throughout the centuries, has shaped its mental perception and historical traditions. In this way the environment obtains its cultural and historical value [25],[26],[4]. If the understanding of this concept is ignored, the national self-assurance of a nation is lost.

The European Landscape Convention [2] emphasises the importance of diversity of European landscapes as well as preservation of existing values of landscapes. Thus this research deals with rural landscape aesthetics as a valuable key element of Latvian national identity. The aim of this study is to determine the main factors influencing aesthetics of Latvia's rural landscape in different historical periods and to compare them with the tendencies of the present development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The survey is based on scientific literature and historical materials as well as the authors' current research on present changes of Latvian rural landscape. Mapping and photography methods in correlation with historical data analysis were used to estimate changes of landscape patterns and to assess the main factors influencing them.

There are main historical periods that were detected and used for the study. They are characterized by distinguishing patterns of rural landscape in Latvia: the period when the first Balts came, the period before the land reform in 1920, the period before World War II, the Soviet period and the period after regaining independence in 1990. Within each of these periods, the main processes which affected changes in the pattern of Latvian rural landscape were characterized and the main influencing factors detected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the research are represented in Table 1. According to the results the main influencing factors of aesthetics of Latvian rural landscape were detected and divided into the following groups: nature processes; human perception, traditions, temporary trends and globalization; human`s economical activities and politics.

Table 1

Influencing factors of Latvian rural landscape

Historic periods	Processes affecting changes of landscape pattern	Influencing factors
1800 B.C. (the first Balts) – 9th Century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Economic activities, use of materials in buildings based on nature resources found close to settlements – Clearance of forest areas for agriculture – base for mosaic landscape – Life style – living, working, celebrating according to the processes in nature 	Human`s economic activities for basic needs Impact of processes in nature to everyday life and activities Human perception, cognition of aesthetics and beauty
10th-18th Century	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Improvement of tools – formation of traditional Latvian detached farm houses – Manors, castles – Reflecting of science development in nature – denying everything that existed in the past, new landscape elements reflecting human power over nature 	Development of technologies
19 th Century – World War II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Land reforms – transformation of landscape scale – from large to small – Dividing or destroying landscape ensembles of manors 	Politics
Soviet period (1940-1990)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Collectivization – Industrialization – Military areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Structural and visual changes of rural landscape – Transformation of landscape scale – from small to huge – Loss of differences – visual and social uniformity in urban and rural areas in different Soviet republics – Mental changes of landscape (deportation of native inhabitants, inflow of workers from Soviet republics) 	Politics Human perception, changes of traditions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Agricultural intensification – State farms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Development and location of new alien landscape elements in rural areas – huge state farms, buildings – Denying of cultural heritage – functional, visual and social transformations of places 	Human activities Human perception, changes of traditions
Independent Latvia (after 1990)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Privatization – Decrease of agriculture and manufacture (consumer life style) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Structural and visual changes of rural landscape – Transformation of agricultural lands into building or forest areas – Natural afforestation of agricultural fields 	Human economical activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Globalization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – New landscape elements – Loss of differences and local character – visual and mental uniformity in urban and rural areas in different places in Europe 	Politics Human perception, changes of traditions

Nature processes. Changes in climatic conditions have played an important part in the shaping of Latvian landscape. They have caused the *composition of forest stands* as well as determined *human economical activities*, for example – type of agricultural production, arrangement of fields and farm houses etc. [27], [20],[18],[28]. During the Soviet period *changes in natural vegetation* and *composition of traditional*

agricultural plants occurred. Local flora was affected by *invasive plant species* (hogweed, lupine, Jerusalem artichoke etc.) initially introduced and used as fodder. After regaining independence in 1990 and the collapse of the state farms it was possible to regain denationalized properties. But nowadays a great number of farms and lands are becoming abandoned because of people's migration to the city or abroad. Thus nature takes over the former agriculture lands and *afforestation* takes place [4]. Also *climate change and flooding* is becoming an issue today because of the growing groundwater level and drainage systems not properly managed during the last 25 years.

Human perception, traditions, temporary trends and globalization. Results show that in the period, when the first Balts came to Latvia and started to use the land, aesthetics did not play the leading role in the life of ancient Latvians. Still in the Latvian Dainas [29] the first initiatives in the *arrangement of the living place and surrounded land* could be found and the development of *traditions* according to the ancient people's cognition about the beauty of nature and its elements – the terrain, wind, odors, sounds and vistas [9],[18] could be traced. Nature elements, mostly plants and stones, played an important role in ancient people's lives. They were *symbols, elements of worship and traditions* – oak – for strength, rowan – for repelling evil, apple tree – tree of Mother, etc. After the arrival of Christianity the importance of nature elements as symbols decreased. After World War II and during the Soviet period the denial of cultural heritage as well as traditions and symbols occurred. *Standardization* in arrangement of places and buildings led to the *loss of local singularity, landscape character and identity* [9]. After regaining independence in 1990 the role of ancient traditions and local landscape increased, but also the process of globalization started. Thus more and more identical landscapes and elements were created.

Human's economical activities and Politics. Initially there were nature elements from the surrounding areas used in the arrangement of Latvian farmsteads and yards (wood, reed, clay, stones etc.) and all the economical activities were organized according to the processes in nature. One of the first changes in landscape was connected with economic activities, e.g., cutting down forests during the period of clearing woodland for farming, thus initially delineating the Latvian traditional mosaic landscape. Large forest areas were burnt down and cultivated for agricultural purposes alongside with the introduction of clearance crop-growing. The plots of land which were not cultivated afterwards, gradually were occupied by bush and tree species, thus changing the original vegetation type. At that period irrigation and drainage systems on agricultural lands were introduced [9].

Political activities and decision making also have important influence on economic activities and the development of rural areas. *Wars* had the most significant impact on changes of the landscape, for example, in the 17th century the cutting down of forests took place, because there was a high demand for timber for war purposes in Europe [19],[4],[28]. But the war factor should be excluded because it has emergency and exceptional character. The subsequent Latvian landscape transformation processes were influenced by several *land reforms* [25],[27],[18],[4]. As a result of the land reform of 1920 vast estate lands which occupied several hundreds of hectares were divided into smaller plots whose sizes were only several tens of hectares [25],[4], therefore the landscape obtained a new pattern that was characterized by *clusters of single farmsteads* in the rural landscape. From the year 1940, corresponding to the regulations of the land reform, the forests owned by farmers as well as the small plots of land on these areas with fields, meadows and pastures were handed over to forestry enterprises, as a result of which they soon became overgrown, since no cultivation was carried out. As a result of *collectivization, elements non-typical of Latvian rural landscape* appeared – rural settlements with urban type buildings and infrastructure, symbolizing equality between the countryside and cities [25],[20],[18],[4]. The people were moved from farmsteads to villages, and their lands were transformed into huge agricultural lands, which were adapted to agricultural production [26],[20],[4]. The next period of change in the Latvian landscape was associated with regaining of independence in 1990. It promoted different economic activities, *regaining of denationalized property*, and the single farmsteads came back into the rural areas again. However, during the Soviet period the people's traditions had changed, due to changes in their life style from the rural to the urban style. The national structure had also changed. According to the data of 1935 and 2014, after World War II the number of Latvians decreased from 77% to 61%, but there was an increase in the number of Russians – from 9% to 26%, Belorussians – from 1.4% to 3.4%, Ukrainians – from 0.1% to 2.3% [30]. These were the reasons why the main function of most of the farms was no longer agricultural activity, but the principle of the countryside was - the countryside as a living place and city – as a work and recreation place. This principle also lies at the basis of the creation of new housing settlements in the rural areas close to the larger cities and towns. Some farms and lands

become abandoned even more because of people's migration to the city or abroad, and afforestation takes place in those former agricultural areas [4]. Today political decision making becomes a more important factor. Many regulations and restrictions pertain to the agricultural sector. For example, the closing of sugar factories in Latvia in 2006 that affected the production of sugar beets which in turn affected the rural landscape pattern. Also *Energy landscapes* (lands with energy plants, biogas production etc.) have become a common image of the Latvian rural landscape.

CONCLUSIONS

During the Soviet period and at present political decision making and regulations become a more important factor. The factor of changing human life style (consumer life style) has become dominating in the period after regaining independence. As a result – afforestation of abandoned lands and transforming of some part of valuable agricultural lands into housing or forest areas have occurred.

Nowadays the landscape changes are more and more affected by new technologies in agriculture. Thus new and even non-typical agricultural production has arrived. Therefore the issue of aesthetical aspects should be solved at the national planning level, during the elaboration process of legislative documents.

The aesthetic aspects of landscape change are mostly affected by economic activities and the formation and management of households. Therefore those should be addressed at the regional and local planning levels with individual approaches and solutions.

The use of visually equal elements provokes uniformity of landscape (collectivization and industrialization in the Soviet period; globalization processes nowadays).

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