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ICELAND AS A LANDSCAPE INVESTIGATION PATTERN

by *Manuela Silvia Campanini*

Introduction

In the 20th century both the approaches of Illuminism and mechanicalism to nature are confronted by the systems theory, the new philosophic vision by Werner Heisenberg. Scientists which agree with the systemic approach and with ecology think that

the correct comprehension of singles parts is possible only considering their relationship with their contest (contestualization)

and modify the assumption that

it is possible to know a phenomenon only analyzing each singles part

In this contest, Vernadski (Biospheria 1926) and Lovelock, Margulis (Gaia Iphotesis 1970) become the pioneers of a new holistic approach to the earth. Their new approach defines

the earth as a living organism

Continuous interpretations and feed-back processes between living complex organisms and geochemical cycles are part of an unicum which preserves life. This approach demonstrates the existence of a landscape's interface function played in the binomious
past/ future
human/nature
urban/rural
culture/space.

Considering the interplay capacity of these functions, defining an investigation pattern gives the opportunity to a scientific approach through systemization.

What is an investigation pattern

Studying the landscape the researcher faces several cultural impacts often confusing or even in conflict.

The investigation pattern is then a useful tool for scientific research.
Due to the widening of the research field such an instrument becomes necessary in the transition

from the local cultural level to the global cultural level

and also considers the actual process which is moving culture from the global dimension to the biosphere dimension.

The investigation pattern may be defined as

a territorial context limited and complex where is possible the diachronic investigation of the landscape's human and cultural components

In this concept

- limited means defined

and

- complex means composed by integration patterns connected with both smaller and larger networks.

The investigation pattern may be used by the scientist to build up a standardized investigation grid for all kind of landscapes. The grid's dynamic is activated by the infinitive random casualties which may be placed in the grid (in term of space and identity).

Iceland as investigation pattern

Subjective and objective are two faces of the landscape approach. This is independent from the possible interface role of landscape. Choosing Iceland as investigation pattern and transforming it in pattern society for landscape studies gives the scientist an added value derived from the interface function of the landscape.

Now let us look into the single interface functions of the Icelandic landscape.
interface between past and future

the diachronic aspect offers a short history (started in the 8th century AD) which includes all the salient steps of a historical, economical and social path toward modern world:

- . settlement
- . colonization
- . dependency
- . Home Rule
- . independence
- . Republic

and the geopolitical role deriving from the geographical position:

- . discovery of Greenland and North America
- . Hanseatic League
- . Danish Crown

- . World War II
- . Cod Wars

interface between human and nature

Due to its geographical position Iceland plays in the human/nature binomious a very peculiar role. It is located

- . on the Mid Atlantic Ridge
- . at a latitude between 63° N and the Circumpolar Circle
- . in the North Atlantic branch of the Gulf Stream.

interface between urban and rural

Due to a very low ratio area/population Iceland experienced and faced urbanization only in the 20th century.

- . 103.000 Km²
- . 286.000 inhabitants (2000)

interface between culture and space

the interesting relationship between culture and space in Iceland derives from uninhabitable areas like

- . volcanoes
- . glaciers
- . marshes
- . deserts
- . lava fields
- . sandur

where attention toward natural hazards or man made radical transformations have to be considered.

Iceland pattern society. Added value of the investigation pattern

To extrapolate the potential added value they carry when considered as an interaction pattern the above listed characterizing items of the Icelandic landscape have now to be red as parts of a whole .

In the Icelandic landscape the relationship between past and future is intimately hidden to the foreigner who doesn't recognize the monumental spirit of places with strong historical (ex.: Thingvellir, Kirkjubaejarklaustur, Godafoss) and literature (ex.: Hraundrangar) value.

These places, nowadays without architectonic remains, hide a rich past only partially emerging from the new archaeological programs (ex.: Stöng, Reykholt, Holar) but layered in the icelandic soul and oral tradition.

The Icelandic landscape is characterized by large areas where nature prevails. The exuberance of the Icelandic nature overwhelms the landscape and becomes pivotal in space, culture and identity.

In sagas, folk songs and visar as well as in the tradition, space is organized monumentalizing the most durable elements of nature: rifts, rocks, mountains, volcanoes and rivers whose descriptive names become place, mountain and water names. In this process nature assumes also the role of measurement for distances (ex.: mæliferð Baula) or time/calendar (ex.: Keilir).

In the human/nature relationship the landscape organizes the orientation. The circularity of the apparent movement of the sun (in the summer solstice) gives the possibility to recognize both the mountain skyline of the highlands and of the sea front.

Dynamism is the distinguishing character of the urban/rural interface function of the Icelandic landscape. Due to road building only after World War II a slow and gradual landscape transformation began. Reykjavik started to attract people from the rural areas (nowadays almost half of the population lives in the capital town).

Rural landscape is also transformed by the land reclamation effects. Priorities focus on soil drainage of the wetlands, soils aeolian erosion of deserted areas and sandur (coastal areas affected by Jokullhlaup).

During the last decade several small villages have been unified. This process is transforming the landscape which is in transition from a subsistence agricultural economy to both urbanization and specialized agriculture.

The slow increase of renewable energy production and transport related infrastructures pertains to the peculiar urban/rural dynamics. The progressive electrification of the country has followed three steps:

1. construction of little dams near the villages for local supply
2. UNESCO Icelandic internal water survey evaluating the seasonal streams average of rivers and hydrographic bassins. Dams and hydropower plants construction begins
3. planning and construction (starting around 1960) of geothermal plants along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge (nowadays they are four: Krafla, Reykjaness, Nesjavellir, Hellisheiði).

With the increase of renewable energy production the Icelandic industrialization starts and the Icelandic Government open to alluminum industries which need large quantity of energy (Strámsvík, Grundarfjörður, Reyðarfjörður and soon Husavík).

These industries' impact on the landscape is bustering: frameworks, pipelines, dams, plants, plant's harbors and urbanization works as roads, mountain tunnel (Reyðarfjörður) and submarine tunnel (Hvalfjörður).

Due to the global energy crisis and to the Kyoto agreements (Iceland may sell quotas) this fast transformation process, often unrespectful of the landscape, becomes faster. The very beginning of the landscape transformation process may be pointed out at the beginning of last century when Icelanders reached the Home Rule and started to build lights. The Reykjaness light's first stone may be seen as the first stone of rural areas urbanization.

At those days (early 19th century) Reykjavik counted only 5.000 inhabitants (and Iceland 240.000). Lightening the external perimeter of the island the lights' ring has moved the internal landscape out of the shadow's cone.

The interface between culture and space of the Icelandic landscape is an interaction pattern within other landscape's interfaces. It has an added value.

To find it out we need to change the observer's point of view.

Studying interactions between space and culture, the landscape scientist finds in Iceland some puzzling factors.

First of all the remarkable harshness of the landscape which in Iceland shows the arizing of the Mid Atlantic Ridge and the edge of both North American and Euroasiatic tectonic plates (Thingvellir, Grjotagjá). Due to both the latitude and the Gulf Stream the sea level Icelandic flora is the same that one may find on the Italian

Alps over 2000 mt altitude. Finally Vatnajökull, the biggest European glacier (excluding Greenland), is also at the sea level.

Due to the latitude (and the terrestrial axis inclination) it is possible to experience the 24 hours days and nights. Iceland is a geologically young land without high mountains and culture developed around the perception that man is gnomon of its own space, strongly influenced by a mental pattern tied to the circularity of the experience and the eternal return myth (Mircea Eliade).

For these reasons, assuming Iceland as investigation pattern and therefore as pattern society scientists may study there also the random variables pertaining to both the landscape objectivity and to the landscape's subjective perception.

It could appear curious but the roots of these suggestions may be found already in Giacomo Leopardi's works titled Dialogue between the Nature and the Iclander (Dialogo fra la Natura e l'Islandese - Operette Morali). Leopardi never moved from Recanati (Italy), but inspired by Kant's Geographia, Acerbi's letters, Von Humboldt journeys to the equinoctial lands he sensed the Icelandic landscape secret.

Writing the dialogue he understood the importance of moving the point of view. To perceive the landscape he imagines that the Iclander had to travel to Africa to find the moral stature to dialogue with the Nature.

Nowadays Icelanders continue this dialogue. Nature is part of their soul and they take with them bits of their terrestrial landscape when they move to the elsewhere. When they move out in the sea they often name their ships or boats after natural spots (waterfalls, mountains, etc.), Moving to the town, architects build monuments inspired by wild nature like Hallgrímskirkja (inspired by Hraundrangar and the columnar basalt) or Perlan (inspired by the Geysir and the geothermal water). This is the way Icelanders compensate and take care of their perennial landscape nostalgia.

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