Contemporary landscapes:

A case study of Rabaçal Castle – Penela – Portugal

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Abstract— **Landscape is a reflection of the mark left by Man on Earth over time. It is nature, as its materials are natural, and it is culture, because it reflects the will and plans of a people and its culture. So we can say that landscape identifies and is essential to Man. It has evolved and transformed to cater for different needs, different wills and different powers. First, for reasons of sustenance, then of pleasure, but always according to the underlying economy and power. Contemporary landscape continues to be the reflection of economic policies that often endanger ecological, cultural, artistic and poetic values that identify it. As we run the risk of losing it, we need to regain the principles and values that have made it ours. Our case study – The Promotion and Valuation of Rabaçal Castle – is an approach to act on and design the landscape in line with the idea of preserving the values of our landscape that we urgently need to assume again.**

Keywords-Landscape, Identity, Landscape Architecture, Rabaçal Castle

# Introduction

Given the presence of two major fields of knowledge on landscape – the Ecological and Perceptual and the Aesthetic – this dichotomy between nature and culture has led many authors to make a distinction between two different landscape realities: natural landscape and cultural landscape. As landscape architects, we feel that both landscape components need to be integrated and not broken down into natural and/or cultural, but rather preserving the overall concept [1] [2].

Landscape is cultural as it reflects the marks left by Man over centuries, more or less continuously, on the territory. Over time, Man adopted, changed and adapted it to his own needs, according to his own experience transmitted from generation to generation, according to his own knowledge and his intuition.

These traces, these marks and impressions layered out over the surface of the Earth reflect Man’s lifestyles and represent his desires, culture and identity [3].

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We can then say that landscape is, in itself, a representation, a work of art made of geology, hydrography, relief, soil and vegetation. In other words, the natural systems determined by the climate; natural because they belong to nature, making landscape a natural feature [4] [5].

The natural aspect of landscape is given by its materials, its natural systems, and by the natural system that it forms, where natural processes occur [6] [7].

Seen under this perspective, landscape is not only nature, it is not its surrounding physical environment, it is not where we are or what we see, but rather a cultural construction formed by elements and natural systems. It represents a set of ideas, sensations and feelings once formed and that are still forming from the experience of a place [8] [9].

As a construction and a representation, landscape also has to be interpreted, characterized and be experienced as an emotion by those who stand before it and experience it [10].

In other words, the construction of landscape involves cultural phenomena that depend on sensibility and aesthetic considerations based on a specific value [11]. Landscape is a convention that varies from culture to culture, from one geography to another, from one place to another with different physical natural features [12] [13].

However, as it is an idea and a construction of Man, it also represents, at a larger scale, the economies and established policies [1]. It represents both private and public power [14]. Today, we can say that landscape is a result of community subsidies and policies.

This leads to the globalization and homogenization of landscape. What was once the will and culture of a people, that is, its identity, now tends to be diluted into a monotonous, productive and exterior homogenization. We don’t see ourselves in it anymore. What once made a landscape in northwest Portugal stand apart from a landscape in the northeast, in the center or in the south [15], happens today a much smaller scale, at the microscale of the land owner or the community that still maintains a relationship with the land.

The mountains from the north to the south of the country are covered with extensive stretches of eucalyptus and pine forests. To the south, in the Alentejo, the cork oak forest has been replaced by wheat, sunflower and irrigated crops, in particular intensive olive groves and beetroot [5]… changing in color to golden, yellow, grey, green [16] [17] ... the color of money. Ecological and cultural values are under threat.

Tourism, today seen as the last and unique opportunity, brought about a number of luxury resorts along the coastal areas, followed by so-called “resorts” affordable to all, without any concern for ecology or architecture, which ended up impairing cultural, ecological and aesthetic values. The globalization phenomenon exists across the planet at great speed and scale in developing countries, where the population is excited but mislead by the wrong idea that there will be more jobs and wealth [18].

Portugal has seen a change of attitude to a more “cultural” tourism, to “local accommodation” for which the subsidies available are sufficient to rehabilitate houses and rent them at a good price. However, some of the consequences of this are not quite positive: rentals have increased alarmingly and there are few houses available to rent to those who need housing and not tourist places. The houses and farms undergoing rehabilitation will not be available to be rented out, as they are only being rehabilitated.

This is the landscape of our contemporary culture, a reflection of our society and our way of living. Nevertheless, where essential balances needed for the continuation of systems are questioned, we need to readjust the established principles and protect the ecological values, biodiversity, heritage, the connection to the land, culture, identity and the poetry that gives us the feeling of belonging and makes us wish to return to a place [10] [9].

# Case Study

## Purpose

Landscape architecture works towards the protection of all values: ecological, biological, heritage, cultural, identity, aesthetic and emotional [19]. The aim is to return to a complementarity that has been endangered: Man-Nature [1]. The topic of this case study is a proposal for the “promotion and improvement of Rabaçal Castle”.

The purpose of this approach is to value the landscape of an area that has tremendous cultural, heritage and recreation potential, aiming to benefit the tourist offer, so needed in the local, regional and national economic strategy, yet one that protects the identity of landscape and the impacts arising from the overload or misuse thereof [20].

This approach is based on a legal framework and on a sensorial dimension which we consider essential, and also on the objectivity of the landscape that this study brings to the light of day. It is also articulated with other heritage elements, in particular the ruins of the Roman *villa* of Rabaçal, the Roman road, and all elements and symbols in the vicinity of the area under intervention.

## Framework

The European Landscape Convention states that populations have the right to “enjoy high quality landscapes and to play an active part in their development” [21]. This linkage is quite clear in the municipality where the intervention work will take place. The population values traditional cultural aspects and, to ensure their subsistence, they use the products from this landscape to form the region’s brand image. The culinary heritage is gaining momentum, especially the production of cheese and olive oil [22].

The existing heritage site, the new Rabaçal museum and the implementation of the Network of Schist Villages can confer identity and singularity to the municipality. The latter, in turn, should promote environmental education activities, value and disseminate the cultural and historical heritage, and, on the other hand, invest in other aspects of heritage to strengthen the identity of the landscape.

Landscape cannot be distorted if it supposed to highlight culinary heritage. Awareness should be raised in respect of the particular features of animal life and plants and of the biophysical aspects of this land. Products such as cheese owe, of course, their characteristics, their special features to the essence of the landscapes from where they are obtained. They are the result of temperature, altitude, wind, rain, heat, cold, and plants [23].

It is quite frequent to find the presence of traces of humanization in this landscape dating back to ancient times, for example, the presence of megalithic structures. Moreover, the Roman road section connecting Conímbriga and Sellium (Tomar) may have contributed to the thriving humanization of this landscape.

The Rabaçal depression is an agriculture-intensive fertile valley situated in the heart of central Portugal, where morphology is uneven and the common denominator of the landscape’s identity is the prevalence of forests, hence the permanent green scenery throughout the year. The eastern boundaries of this extensive area, measuring about 12 km in length, becomes rugged in shape and evidences a number of small hills that form perfect viewpoints over the landscape [22]. The small hill of the Rabaçal Castle, which dates back to 1139, is one such viewpoint and is the subject of our case study. With its conical shape and standing 367 m high, it is topped by a military construction and lies parallel to another twin hill to the south.

The topography of the area of intervention is uneven, making it difficult to access the top of the hill, and for some age groups it is even too much to handle.

The predominating farming activity leaves its marks on the landscape.

The alluvial deposits deep in the valley were essential in providing the right grounds for this activity. The villages and the orientation of the agricultural and cultural mosaic are a measure of the valley’s fertile nature as opposed to the slopes. These slopes consist of loose-stone walls and show traces of some stone removal and may indicate the previous practice of some dry land agriculture. They may also serve as fences for keeping the sheep herds protected while they grazed on the arid lands [22].

Due to its limestone soils, the region is characterized by oaks, holm oaks and cork oaks.

The rough and exposed slopes are typically without vegetation, a characteristic of limestone soils.

The arid soil that prevents large trees from growing is particularly appropriate to the development of some bulbous plants and rhizomes, foe e.g., the Mediterranean orchids, the Narcissus sp., purple iris and the yellow petticoat daffodils. Their presence marks the landscape with large patches of yellow and purple [23].

On the northern side of the hill, where the water line is more rugged, there stands a dense patch of vegetation.

Coniferous woodland can be found at the base of the hill, facing southwest.

## Our Approach

The main concern of this study is to preserve the ecological balance of this landscape. Recognising its current importance is due to the fact that part of this area is now part of the legal planning and management instruments.

Our intervention process is two-phased: a Preliminary Study and the Execution Project.

In terms of method, we felt that in order to characterise and determine the potential and qualities of this intervention area it would be interesting to develop the proposal along two parallel and complementary lines: one is the access route to the fortification and the other covering the resting sites.

To understand this landscape, we had to interpret and characterise it beyond the administrative borders of the intervention area, so our first analysis describes the site beyond such boundaries. We also consider that the guidelines of this proposal and its development will always be the result of direct intervention action complemented also by the knowledge beyond the physical boundaries of the intervention area.

In addition to the more objective aspect of the landscape’s characteristics, we also added the sensorial component, which is essential to the visual aspect and is based on experience and knowledge of the local characteristics.

The legal conditions (farming and ecology) will determine its restrictions, and other legal constraints (legal statutes involved) will be observed.

As a result of all these analyses, maps have been produced for the site.

After reading and interpreting the landscape, we conducted a Landscape Valuation to identify the more sensitive landscape areas (humid areas, areas with steeper slopes or more eroded, particularly through the misuse of all-terrain vehicles), and to: find ways to add more value to the intervention areas by adding the historical heritage, in particular by identifying the existing archaeological findings along the paths and trails; take note of the critical areas, preparing maps that show the unfavourable situations introduced by artificial systems, for example, scrap yards and the introduction of exotic vegetation.

The overall aim is to:

* Promote an intervention based on protection and conservation, providing for recreational and circulation areas;
* Value and protect the existing vegetation, providing for a stable landscape and the survival and settlement of animal life;
* Introduce native vegetation to value and protect the existing green structures and the layout of built structures.
* Define, in the specifications, the cleaning work needed to maintain the existing vegetation;
* Enhance and restore some of the existing access paths in order to reduce soil intervention to a minimum;
* Enhance the visual layout with the surrounding areas within the intervention area, in particular by providing landscape information panels;
* Choose and lay out furniture and other equipment;
* Identify the sites for indicative and interpretation signposts;
* Study and define the plants for the various strata.
* Produce a regulation containing the basic principles, rules and specifications for the proper management/planning of the Rabaçal Castle site;

The specific aim is to:

* Define the vehicle and bicycle parking areas;
* Study and select the best spots for the resting/picnic areas;
* Define the location of the facilities to support the visits to the ruins;
* Define the location of the visitors’ support sites along the access road to the castle;
* Study and define the inert materials used to stabilize the access road to the castle and the visitors’ support and resting areas;

## Proposal

This intervention work is characterized by simple project features.

The built solutions guarantee the greatest comfort to the user; however, to ensure the ecological balance of the landscape, it must be somewhat difficult to prevent the massive use thereof.

A large ornamental tree will be planted on the hilltop and others will mark the resting places along the trails “Fig 1”.

Visitors can access the reception centre from the road between the town of Penela and Rabaçal village.

The road widens towards the parking facility, allowing cars to reverse in and out.

The pedestrian access to the hill begins on the western side of this wider area. Trees and bushes line up along this path, along



Figure 1 - Punctuation of the permanence zones with massifs of vegetation

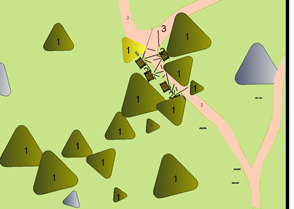


Figure 2 – Permanence zone

the built road-supporting structures, giving it a “nobler” look and inviting visitors to walk up the hill. A number of limestone blocks allow visitors to stop and rest.

The use of traffic controls allows access only to emergency and service vehicles “Fig.2”

A resting site is planned for the northern slope, on one of the hill’s ledges. From here, visitors can enjoy the view of the north-facing castle walls. An old trail provides access to this site, which will be stabilised to ensure a comfortable access to visitors.

Outdoor furniture and planted trees will give this area a human scale and protection.

To increase the load capacity of the trail, blocking structures will be used throughout the path. Given the nature of the furniture proposed for the site, this area could be used for picnics “Fig. 3”.

The ruins of the military building stand at the top of the hill – Rabaçal Castle. The north-facing walls, rebuilt with the material from the castle ruins, cut short the relation with the northern quadrant.

The ruins are laid out in a triangular shape with rounded corners. Inside them, there are traces of old constructions.

We suggest the construction of a raised wooden structure adjoining the walls facing north so that visitors can view the ruins from above. This structure should extend across the interior of the construction and connect the east and west entrances.

To the east, a panel offers information to help visitors interpret the ruins, giving an explanation about its history.

To the west, a landscape information panel along the walkway helps visitors interpret the valley and the history of its human occupation.

An ornamental tree will be planted at the eastern entrance.

Small bushes will be lined up along the ramps accessing the wooden structure “Fig. 4”.

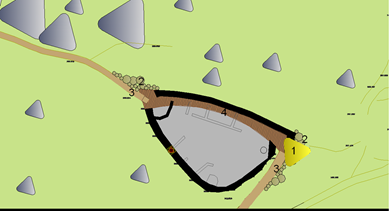


Figure 3 – Belvedere and access pathway.

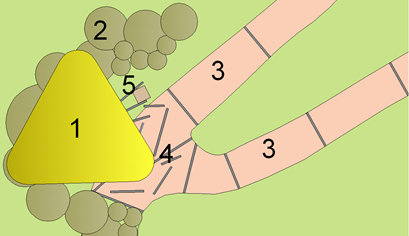


Figure 4 – Permanence zone along the pathway.

Small resting sites will be available on the path leading to the top of the hill.

These constructions will be informal, with firmly anchored stone blocks, as in the access paths long the way.

The location of these small resting sites will depend on the slope of the terrain. There will be, either on site or slightly further away, viewing points overlooking the surrounding landscape.

# Conclusion

Man is inherent to landscape, as so his consciousness and experience. This makes landscape of aesthetic order. In the landscape designed that we presented here, this concept of idea and construction resulting from the men’s action above the territory and resulting from a symbiosis between nature and culture. Landscape is holistic and a product of a natural and dynamic system. It is in continuous transformation and evolution reflecting people/community identity.

A natural system in constant change, determined by natural systems dynamic and men’s action. It is a natural, cultural, social event and a support. In this concept, as in our proposal, contemplation and experience that constructs landscape are included. Also this concepts and principles have produced theory and praxis in Portuguese landscape architecture.

The understanding of landscape as a continuous, complex and dynamic system, resulting of natural and cultural processes in a continuous transformation determines its return to a multifunctional dimension. And is in this way that we landscape architects understand landscape – holistic, integrative, inclusive, systemic, dynamic and multifunctional.

We share the idea that the world includes social and natural systems that are complex, interdependent and interrelated, to which harmonisation and sustainability they offer various principles centred in the soil use organization related with its ecologic aptitude. This way they contribute for the long-term natural systems and resources preservation and to the creation of stronger and cohesive social communities. So we defend a systemic approach of a multifunctional landscape that provides new experiences in the understanding of the human condition. Also the landscape design in the 21st century should be close to the natural ecosystems design, as it happens on Rabaçal Castle. We should learn with the natural systems metabolism where all the waste are recycled in resources for future growing [24]. This is a political matter but also for the general public that need to make pressure on the central and local governments as in the investors to adopt practical perspectives.

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