
The Importance of Researching Landscapes in Transition: Special Issue Editorial

Exploring landscapes in transition¹

In an era marked by rapid environmental and societal changes, the study of landscapes in transition offers invaluable insights into various processes of negotiating Anthropocene changes. Landscapes are multilayered, changing spaces that as living spaces both shape and are shaped by humans and nonhumans alike. In the words of the cultural anthropologist Barbara Bender, landscape[s] are “time materialising”. Landscapes, “like time, never stand still” (Bender 2002: 103). Their social construction becomes particularly clear when considered in relation to temporal aspects: each time produces its own landscape, so that temporalities are also embedded in social relations and political processes. Understanding how these landscapes evolve under the pressure of climate change, urbanization and socioeconomic and political shifts is crucial for developing sustainable solutions. The aim of this special issue is to explore the multifaceted dimensions of landscape transitions, bringing together diverse perspectives from experts in the field.

This issue has been compiled to emphasize the importance of studying landscape in transition, the nature of transition and changes in the relationships it causes, as well as the traces, results, and consequences of transitions in landscape. The impact and perception of these transitions can vary greatly depending on the perspective from which they are examined. For some, transitions may appear drastic and revolutionary, while for others they might be imperceptible. Similarly, transitions that may be perceived as large-scale phenomena from one viewpoint could seem rather local from another. Some may experience such changes as brutally rapid, while for others they may have been anticipated or considered not unusual. To truly understand the complexity of the contemporary world, it is essential to develop sensitivity towards the various types of transitions that shape our landscapes. Past transitions can be reflected in the landscape memory. Studying transformations on a smaller scale with specific examples is a useful approach for devising effective practices for managing profound changes.

The archaeologist Marcella Frangipane has analysed the use of the term “transition” in archaeology and its theoretical implications (Frangipane

1 The DeepL translator and ChatGPT 3.5 were used for linguistic and stylistic purposes in this text.

2021). In archaeology the continual flow of past time is broken into periods and phases, which is practical for creating the clues for orientation that are necessary for analytical purposes. The transitions are the moments between the periods or phases. In two examples from the Turkish Euphrates valley, Zeytinli Bahçe and Arslantepe — two sites that are not far from each other — she shows how a change recorded in the material culture can be interpreted (Frangipane 2021).

We tend to think about landscape in terms that are similar to archaeological periods and phases. We are used to speaking about the romantic landscape of the Lake District in the UK, about the mining landscape of Erzgebirge/Krušnohoří on the German/Czech border, about the industrial landscape of Corpus Christi Oil Refinery in Texas and about the Renaissance cityscape of Telč in the Czech Republic. However, each of these names only tells one story. They are used as an abbreviation to aid understanding and to fix and homogenize these landscapes. Every landscape has fragments of previous or other stories and histories (Jaramillo 2017 or Wheeler 2014), and each contains a much more complex bundle of relations and has come through a series of developments or transitions.

The idea for this special issue originated from our panel at the SIEF Congress in Brno in the Czech Republic, which was held last June. The theme of the congress was “Living Uncertainty,” and our panel was titled “Landscapes in Transition: Tracing the Past – Facing Uncertainties of the Future”. It was a panel of the SIEF Working Group on Space-lore and Place-lore, of which we are members, and its aim was to explore the concept of landscape in the (post-) Anthropocene, addressing uncertainties from interpreting the past, living with its effects in the present, and facing the future, as a valuable addition to the study and methodological exploration of landscapes.²

The panel offered a comprehensive examination of landscape transitions across various European regions. The papers covered topics such as energy transitions, agrarian landscape changes, the heritagization of such changes, and transformations in (r)urban areas.

The first session delved into the multifaceted transitions of industrial landscapes and communities within Germany and Lithuania, with a particular emphasis on the sociopolitical and cultural implications. This session provided a nuanced understanding of how energy transitions and industrial decline are reshaping landscapes and communities, highlighting diverse experiences and interpretations, from political changes to cultural memory and perceptions of emptiness.

2 See the abstract and content of the panel in the programme of the SIEF Congress 2023, look for Envi03; Link: <https://www.siefhome.org/congresses/sief2023/programme#all> (last accessed 6 August 2024).

The second session explored the intricate relationships between heritage, landscape transformation, and sociocultural changes. It focused on how these transformations impact local communities, local ecologies, ecological practices, and cultural identities. These presentations illuminated the importance of heritage, cultural practices, and socioeconomic dynamics in these processes, emphasizing the need to understand the complex and often contested relationships between people and their environments, as well as the evolving meanings attached to these landscapes.

The third session examined landscape transformations through the lenses of tourism, urban development, and the reinterpretation of industrial and rural spaces. It focused on how these transitions influence relationships with the environment and shape future sociocultural and economic dynamics. It highlighted the evolving relationships between people and their environments, showing how former industrial areas and rural spaces are being reimagined and repurposed to meet contemporary needs and aspirations. This session underscored the complex interplay between economic development, cultural identity, and environmental stewardship in shaping the future of these landscapes.

Decades of dialogue

In the seminal landscape studies book *The Making of the English Landscape* by the English historian William George Hoskins from 1955, we can follow the “making” of the landscape from pre-Roman times to the Industrial Revolution and the “landscape today” in the final chapter as a series of transitions that left their traces in the landscape palimpsest (Hoskins 1973). Landscape transition and change has been studied not only by historians such as Hoskins and Whyte 2004, but also experts in other fields, such as architects and geographers (e.g., Aimar 2024; Antrop 1998; Kolen – Rene – Hermans 2015), archeologists (Tilley 2017; Bender 2002), anthropologists and ethnographers (Ingold 1993; Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017; Gan et al. 2017) and authors attempting to bridge the sciences and humanities (e.g., Head 2017). Transitions in the landscape have left their traces, some of which are remembered and curated, and are often understood as a part of landscape memory (see, e.g., Pauknerová 2019; Pauknerová – Woitsch 2019). Some parts of landscape pasts are curated as heritage, while some are silenced (Soler 2021 or Pauknerová – Gibas 2021), and sometimes it is worth reflecting on curated decay (DeSilvey 2017). Landscapes can have a symbolic character and embody developments of the past that radiate far into the future. They are associated with promises, perceptions of time and power relations within them (Schuchardt 2023a; Schuchardt 2023b).

Historical changes in landscapes have been influenced by an often inextricably entangled combination of natural and cultural processes. A major role is now being played by climate change. Dramatic changes can be caused by draught, erosion, sediment deposition, the spread of certain organisms and so on. Of course, humans have always intentionally and significantly altered landscapes since prehistory, through forest fire management, agriculture, deforestation, mining, urbanization and industrialization. However, the human impact is not monolithic – different cultures and societies influence the landscape differently. In recent times, people have made major landscape transformations via dramatic urbanization and extractive activities, but also through the conservation and restoration of landscapes. The development of cities and the spread of industrial landscapes and areas for transport has created isolated patches of natural habitats, which has endangered many species and caused large scale pollution. All these changes have socioeconomic, cultural and biodiversity effects. (For a general overview of landscape change/transition in Europe, see, e.g., García-Martín et al. 2021 or Pinto-Correia – Primdahl – Pedroli 2018; for the driving forces of landscape change in Europe, see Plieninger et al. 2016; and for historical landscape evolution, see the special issue of *Land* edited by Piero Bellotti and Alessia Pica (2023). For a more complex review of landscape in transition, see also Pauknerová in this issue.)

Collective insight: Landscape in transition in this issue

This special issue contains four studies that deal with different landscapes in transition. In “Rethinking Landscapes in Transition through an Anthropocene Lens”, Karolína Pauknerová approaches the theoretical dimensions of landscapes in transition. By expanding the approaches to landscape theories presented in the issue, she presents a view of landscapes as a genuine part of everyday Anthropocene life. She argues for the inclusion of a more-than-human approach and for an understanding of landscapes as mediating elements of large-scale or global influences.

Aušra Teleišė focuses on practices of reappropriation in a former industrial area in Lithuania. In her article entitled “An ‘Empty Place’? The Transformation of the Industrial Landscape in Contemporary Lithuania” she discusses the changes in an industrial area in the context of larger political developments and the significance of deindustrialisation for individuals’ perceptions of these places. Aesthetic and visual signs in industrial spaces become markers of transition through memories and individual practices.

In her article “Navigating Nature’s Transitions: The Bohemian Forest and Its Temporalities in the Early Tourist Literature”, Anna Kolářová explores perceptions of the Bohemian landscape through the lens of tourism. She analyses the region’s historical transformation from a timber producing area to a popular area for tourists. Based on contemporary travel literature from the second half of the 19th century, she shows how natural disasters were handled and combined with tourism.

Jenny Hagemann and Hannah Wellpott analysed contemporary transitions in a German mining region. In “Landscape in Transition, Heritage in the Making: Understanding Lusatia’s Post-Mining Landscape as a Practice of Past Presenting” they debate concepts of remembering and transitions as an inclusive element of reorientations. The region of Lusatia has always been a landscape of change and transition. As the end of mining approaches in the area, there is a growing trend toward historicizing perspectives, leading to new conceptualizations of post-mining landscapes.

The contributions in this special issue provide an insight into cultural anthropological perspectives on landscapes in transition. Focusing on people and their practices of negotiating transformation alongside theoretical approaches enables a deep insight into lifeworlds in transition. The contributions show the extent to which changing landscapes go hand in hand with feelings such as security and insecurity and how these perceptions differ. The emotional attribution to landscapes is another important factor, which becomes visible when we place people’s perspectives in the foreground.

In summary, this special issue delves deep into the multifaceted concept of landscapes in transition. The featured articles collectively enhance our understanding of these dynamic processes. Political and economic shifts are also explored, framing discussions of landscapes in transition within the broader context of the Anthropocene. Together, these contributions provide valuable insights and foster a comprehensive dialogue on navigating and understanding the transitions that define our contemporary world.

Field insights or grounded knowledge: Lusatia and Ralsko in transition

This issue is driven by the conviction that researching landscapes in transition is crucial for understanding the profound changes that are taking place around us. Our own research in Lusatia (Germany/Poland) and Ralsko (Czech Republic) exemplifies this commitment, offering grounded insights into the ways these regions are navigating their respective transformations.

Katharina Schuchardt's research focuses on Lusatia, a region located in eastern Germany and western Poland that is currently affected by the prospective phasing out of open-cast mining.³ This region is on the territory of two countries due to the redrawing of borders after the Second World War.⁴ Lusatia has been an area of extensive lignite mining since the beginning of the 20th century. The mining activity was initially underground, but then moved to the surface with open cast mining. The ongoing extraction has dramatically changed the region's appearance and the perceptions of the people living there. Lusatia's landscape is a contrasting mix of large craters where lignite is still extracted and numerous lakes created from former mining sites. Lusatia has undergone changes for centuries as it was once a prosperous region for textiles and glass production – the latter facilitated by the extraction of by-products from mining, such as quartz sand.

The German part of Lusatia became the centre of energy production for the GDR, as lignite was the country's only domestic energy source. This led to the devastation of many villages in order to extract the lignite beneath them, with craters left behind. After the collapse of the GDR, the Lusatian landscape changed again, when a large part of the lignite industry was closed down, which led to the abandonment and rewilding of opencast mines.

No other industry has left such a significant mark: for much of the 20th century, coal and lignite symbolized the promise of progress and prosperity. This promise gradually disappeared after 1990 as a result of a radical deindustrialisation programme. In 1989 around 80,000 people worked in the industry, whereas today the figure stands at around 8,000. Nowadays the local tourism industry conveys a new picture of the flooded mining craters of Lusatia. The Lusatian Lake District is largely a landscape of artificial lakes. By the end of the 2020s, it is set to become the largest artificial lake landscape in Europe, which will be the region's signature. Current developments are focusing on the landscape's new potential, such as renewable energies.

As a consequence of the region's past, its inhabitants are inextricably linked to its mining history. The surrounding landscape is a constant reminder of Lusatia's rich history of transitions. The lignite industry has left profound marks on the landscape that have been inscribed in people's lives. Thus, researching the phasing out of mining in Lusatia means exploring the relations of its inhabitants to the landscape.

3 A more detailed description of the project can be found here: <https://www.isgv.de/projects/folklore/energy-transition>.

4 A very small part is also located in the Czech Republic.



Figure 1abc Recultivated areas of open-cast mining-sites in Lusatia. Newly planted trees and bushes in formation can be seen in the foreground, with excavators for mining and the Boxberg brown coal power plant in the background. Photo by Katharina Schuchardt.

Karolína Pauknerová and her colleagues have been researching the region of Ralsko in the north of the Czech Republic.⁵ Ralsko is an area that has undergone major transformations during the 20th and 21st centuries. The area was depopulated after the Second World War, when the German majority was expelled. These abandoned villages were partly repopulated, but soon after the people were moved away, as the region was transformed into a vast military training area of around 170 square kilometres. The area was occupied by thousands of Soviet soldiers from 1968 until 1991 and was closed. Moreover, uranium deposits were discovered in the region and classical and chemical extraction began in the 1960s. The sanitation of the area from uranium mining continues to today. These massive transformations left profound marks on the region, which is now undergoing a new type of transformation into a recreational landscape. However, the region does not lack traces of an older past, such as the ruins of old castles, remnants of iron ore mining, the remains of Baroque estates, and the remnants of military farmyards built after the establishment of Czechoslovakia. Each transition has left traces, but each is differently visible and made visible. The material fragments of the original villages are only cellars of houses, a few standing walls, some restored crosses, a few old solitary trees and other relict vegetation. With the passage of time, the traces of the Soviet and military presence have disappeared materially, the mine shafts and boreholes have been closed and the past is commemorated with memorials, museums and suchlike. Each transition has been partly erased and partly overlaid by the newer one.

When researching the landscape of Ralsko with all its transitions, it is important to be aware of the rich landscape sediment that contains layers, some of which are almost unreadable and faded and overlaid by others. This landscape sediment contains everything, from the presence of uranium deep down to the great trees – witnesses of past use of the landscape – along with relict woods, ruins, a network of tarmac military roads, new solar power plants, production forests, and newly built infrastructure for tourists, to name just a few. All of these elements, along with their complex relationships, form the deep structure of the Ralsko landscape, which my colleagues and I are attempting to analyse, and, in my case, through the lens of more-than human relations.

5 This project has been supported by Strategy AV21 (Czech Academy of Sciences): *Resilient Society for the 21st Century: Crisis Potentials and Effective Transformation*, under the activity *Traces in Resilient Ralsko* (PI of the activity – Jan Frei, activity coordinator – Karolína Pauknerová). This activity is part of the broader *Resilient Ralsko* activity bundle, led by Martin Nitsche (<https://www.odolneralsko.cz/>). My closest colleagues in the Ralsko landscape research include Petr Gibas, Jindřich Prach, and Jiří Woitsch.



Figure 2abc Ruins of the medieval castle of Děvín in Ralsko, with inscriptions in Cyrillic above the Hamr Lake. These ruins were once part of the recreational landscape and now are part of the current recreational landscape – a point on tourist path, a romantic place as well as a nature conservation area. Photo by Karolína Pauknerová, 2023.

The urgency of now: The importance of landscapes in transition research

Climate change is accompanied by natural disasters such as droughts and floods, and its consequences include e. g. the closure of fossil fuel extraction sites in some places due to energy transition and the emergence of new landscape markers, such as wind turbines or other landscape transitions. People are having to adapt to drastic landscape changes at an ever-faster pace. And they are casting their shadows ahead and are often perceived as negative, which is why it is urgent to understand transition, to be aware of its complexity and that it has ties to the past and the future that it impacts. The consequences are far reaching and are always more than local. We want to make this relationship between landscapes, humans and nonhumans a little more tangible, because processes such as climate change have far-reaching consequences that affect all aspects of everyday life.

We hope that this special issue will inspire researchers and perhaps policymakers, and practitioners to consider new strategies for understanding, making relevant and managing landscapes in transition. It is our belief that through collaborative efforts and innovative research, we can contribute to the resilience and sustainability of our ever-changing environments. Understanding transition in the landscape and new strategies that include more than just human needs are important for dealing with the changes to come. Thinking about “new strategies” can help improve the liveability of the world in general. Understanding the transitions we have gone through and are going through right now may help us cope with changes in the future.

August 2024

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