Landscape character assessment in rural landscapes

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Abstract: Landscape character studies have been parts of regional and urban planning researches for decades in Hungarian landscape planning practice. However these studies – in lack of unified, generally applicable methodology – are very different in their content and details. As the importance of landscape protection increased, it became essential to support these methodologically with new researches and comparative analyses, which should be carried out in sample areas with different characteristics. We also find it important, as the duty of the general landscape planning is – among others – the protection of landscape character, which requires specific, operative landscape protection. The assessment of landscape character determining factors in rural landscapes is regraded as a significant task, forming a part of the Corvinus University of Budapest, Department of Landscape Protection and Reclamation’s research activities.

Key words: landscape character, rural landscape

Material and methods

The two sample areas of our researches were: Szentendre Island of the Danube River in the central region, and Hernád Valley located in the Eastern region of Hungary (Csima 2009, Dublinszki-Boda 2010). The landscape of both locations are dominated by mainly closed, well-circumscribed areas and extensive surrounding areas that are characterized by agricultural land-use. Basically, these are agricultural areas, with small settlements counting a few hundred inhabitants.

The main method of the researches in both sample areas was field survey, with the help of the actual topographical maps and satellite images. We studied the history of the landscape’s changes with the help of maps and literature from the 18-20th centuries (Frisnyák 1990). We took numerous pictures in order to document our researches. The following factors were the same in each research parts: combination of natural landscape elements, landscape structure, scenery, the roles of traditions and emotions in the formation of landscape character (Csima 2008). In the followings, we discuss the most important elements of the landscape character factors.

Discussion

Natural factor

The relief of the Szentendre Island is mainly considered as a plain, we may only find some diversity in its microrelief. Its hydrographical features are basically characterized by the Danube. At times of high water level
there are extensive areas of inundation. A remarkable part of the Island is a drinking water resource of national importance. It provides tap water for Budapest, the capital with a population of 2 million. Remains of its natural vegetation, consisting of forest groves in the flood basin of the Danube are under environmental protection. The agricultural areas are less compartmentalized by greenway elements (Photo 1).

In the wide Hernád Valley, the relief is characterized by a wide alluvium formed by the sediment in the river’s lower section. It is bordered by 500 to 700-meter-high mountains from the East, and smaller hills (200 meter) from the West. The meandrous Hernád River’s bed is 50-70 meter in width, and 1-3 meter in depth. The riverbank is covered by a poplar-willow gallery forest zone (Photo 2).

The main task of landscape protection in both sample areas is the preservation of the natural vegetation, as an ecological corridor. It should gain international importance next to the Danube, and regional importance next to the Hernád.

**Landscape structure factor**

The field-structure of the Szentendre Island forms the main pattern of the agricultural character. The different cultures emphasize the boundaries between the fields. The living areas of the settlements are directly next to the agricultural areas; their borders are not separated by vegetation zones (Photo 3). In the cultivated areas we often find temporary buildings.

In the Hernád Valley, the landscape structure is characterized by striped landscape, with a double settlement-zone, parallel to the river. The characteristic zones of landscape structure are: river – gallery forest – meadow – road + settlement – plough land – orchard/plough land – settlement – pasture – forest. Next to the settlements of the foothills orchards and vineyards can be found as well. The settlements had been established on the edge of the flood-safe terrace, directly on the foothills (Photo 4).

The main tasks of landscape protection include restriction and prohibition of building activities outside the settlements, preservation of the present land use in the valley and on the riverside, and maintenance of the ecological corridors between the river and the mountainside, and between the river and agricultural zones.

**Visual factor**

The road in the central axis of the Szentendre Island is also the main route to explore the landscape. In the direct neighborhood of settlements agricultural areas are located, strengthening the agricultural character of the view. From the aspect of scenery the island is characterized by the dualism of inner openness and isolation from the outside. The silhouette of relatively high mountains limits the view in the West (Photo 5).

In the Hernád Valley, Castle of Boldogkő is the ruling element of the near and far view (Photo 6). Other important buildings of the landscape are churches and mansions. The relief of the valley makes it possible to have in sight
the significant elements, and also to have a view from the elevations. In the landscape character of the valley, the views of the castle and of the agricultural land use predominate together. The main tasks of landscape protection are the protection of the visual connections, demarcation of protective zones, and restriction of building activities.

Photo 3. Landscape structure in the Szentendre Island (Dublinszki-Boda 2010)

Photo 4. Landscape structure in the Hernád Valley (Csima 2009)

Photo 5. High mountains limits the view in the Szentendre island (Dublinszki-Boda 2010)

Photo 6. Visual value in the Hernád Valley (Csima 2009)

**Emotional factor**

On the Szentendre Island, the emotional connection of citizens is determined by the relative isolation (different geographical position compared to the neighboring settlements outside the island), and limited accessibility (one bridge, three ferries). The Island’s separation can be discovered in the traditions of land use. In its agriculture, growing strawberries is dominating as a horticultural faculty (Photo 7). Water-tourism is makes the Island a pleasant holiday resort.

In the Hernád Valley, citizens feel strongly connected to the churches, which are protected monuments with national importance. The memories of land use, the small religious buildings placed on characteristic spots, and also combined with medieval beliefs – are unique values of the landscape. As an element of traditional agriculture, an old-style way of hay drying can still be seen here, while it became quite rare in other parts of Hungary (Photo 8).

The main tasks of landscape protection are the preservation of strawberry growing on the Island, protection of traditions connected to grazing husbandry in the valley; and providing area to these activities. Preservation of non-protected landscape values should be supplied by taking them into account, conservation of their condition, and maintenance of their environment.
Summary

The rural landscape is characterized by the relative balance of natural and artificial landscape features. Numerous elements and element combinations of natural features have been preserved in their original state, besides the extensive or half-intensive agricultural activity. The ratio of man-made creations, built elements, and element combinations is low in the landscape structure. That is also the reason for their domination in the scenery, and their emphasis in the hundreds-of-years-long, harmonic relation between the citizens and the landscape. In order to preserve the values, it could be a serious help if those specific tasks were determined, and those aspects (characteristics) were clearly defined, in connection with which the necessary landscape protection interventions need to be carried out.

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References


