

Understanding of the Cultural Heritage Landscape from Perception to Reality

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Abstract

Obviously, conservation of a historical site requires understanding of its actual values and adapting planners' and managers' perception to such real values. It is helpful to planners and managers to recognize landscape values of cultural heritages towards appropriately conservation as well as providing these sites as tourist attractions. For better understanding of cultural heritages, it is important to convey the actual value of the landscape to the visitors.

This paper is about landscape values of Shushtar's Watermill Site and perceptions of such values. The city of Shushtar was one of the key centres of Khuzestan in Sassanid era and it had a special position in mentioned region. This historical city includes valuable relics and monuments from the ancient times. The Historical Hydraulic System is the most famous historical site located in Shushtar, which has been registered on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites since 2009, as Iran's 10th cultural heritage. After recognizing characteristics of cultural and natural landscapes and the existing definition, as well as functions and cultural values of the site in different periods of the history, it can be inferred that Shushtar's Watermill Site is a cultural landscape and it falls into designed landscape category introduced by UNESCO.

Keywords

Landscape, landscape values, cultural Heritages, Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System, watermills.

Introduction

“What he is looking for, he makes clear, is a reintegration of man and nature, something like the conformity between a river and its bed” (Lopez, 1998). As Sorving argues, Metaphor of the river and its bed suggested by Lopez, although makes a fine antidote to fuzziness, but there exist both complexity and ambiguity in this regard. “Without its bed, the river is formless; without the water, the channel is never cut. But does this mean that water and soil or stone are not different at all?” (Sorving, 2002: 2) Landscape is the manifestation of a long and intimate relationship between Man and nature. It is like an inscription on which, man has written his story, more or less deep and accurate (Mansouri,

2004: 71). Nowadays, landscape is considered to be a living and dynamic creature affected by man and his life style and affecting civilization, culture and human life style, through its form and memories, which have been recorded over time (Mansouri, 2000). As Cosgrove (1989) argues, all landscapes are symbolic, because they are symbols of collective cultural concepts. This paper aims to study landscape values of Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System, particularly the Watermills Site. Issues such as differences between cultural and natural landscapes, tourists’ perceptions of sites’ landscape and UNESCO’s criteria for selecting cultural heritages have been considered in this paper.

Tourists and their perceptions of sites’ landscape

As Huff (2008) argues, landscapes are difficult to segment and investigate, but their structure, attitude, protection and rebuilding help us understand the relationship between human and place. Understanding of values of a given site’s landscape considerably affects the conservation of the site and it would be helpful in managing it. Obviously, conservation of a historical site requires understanding of its actual values and adapting planners’ and managers’ perception to such real values. “Planner’s perception”, “visitor’s perception” and “reality of the site” are three key elements, which should be considered in planning of both cultural and natural sites. Planner undertakes several measures to keep and enhance the attraction of a given site, depending on his own perception. On the other hand, a tourist, under the influence of various factors, has a specific perception of the site which may be similar to or different from planner’s perception. Finally, both planner’s and tourist’s perceptions may be similar to or different from the real nature of the site. As Healy (1994) suggests, the ability to view

interesting natural and artificial landscapes is the main part of the tourists’ experience and it is likely to be a basic motivation for the visit. It is similar to the suggestion of Macagno et al. (2010) that landscape characteristics of the destination can considerably influence visitors’ decision on choosing a tourist destination (Mikule& Antouscova, 2011). Figure 1 demonstrates interaction model between tourists and landscape, which is a modification of Garrod et al. (2006) approach by Mikule and Antouscova (2011).

One of the key questions in tourism studies is that whether space is created for tourists based on their needs and wants? or space is created first and then, it is consumed by tourists. Those who argue that tourism space is created as a result of tourism demand believe that tourists are the first decision-makers for developing tourism sites. In fact, certain definitions of tourism, such as those by Mathieson and Wall (1982) and Ryan (1991), only focus on tourism and ignore other contributing factors in tourism process. This view is based on the assumption that tourists are decision makers; they decide which sites must be visited and

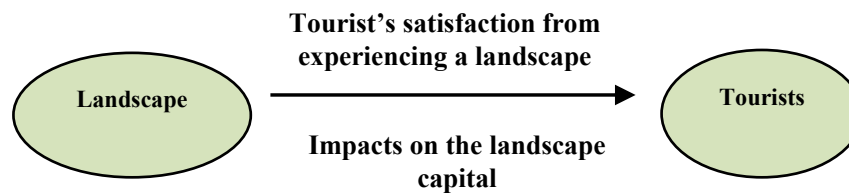


Fig 1. Model of the interaction between tourism and landscape
Source: Mikule, 2011: 273.

how they must be interpreted (Kalantari & Farhadi, 2008:65). Such view regards tourism as a consumer; however, today it is argued that tourism must be a tool for protecting natural and cultural heritages towards sustainable development. In Dugstate's (2007) opinion, "landscape is connected to the visual hegemony and it is expressed in the terms as the tourist gaze and place consumption" (Mikule & Antouscova, 2011:273). In Urry's (1996) opinion, tourist gaze is the essence of tourism. As he believes, tourists are looking for places other than their usual place of residence and they travel to see and stare thoughtfully at unusual natural and urban objects. According to this view, tourism consumes time and place. Urry believes that tourist gaze influences consumption of services within destinations. So, for developing a theory about tourists' behaviour, a range of concepts and arguments are required to recognize what tourist gaze is specifically in tourism and what is common among tourists. Urry categorises objects of tourist gaze into three groups: romantic/collective, historical/modern, authentic/unauthentic. He recognizes a clear contrast between what people experience in their daily life and what is extraordinary and new. Tourist gaze is influenced by social conditions of places, globalization and popularity of tourist gaze, consuming tourism services, tourism symbols, modernism, history, heritages, local culture and post-modernism (Kalantari & Farhadi, 2008).

Due to the fact that there is an inevitable relation-

ship between Man and nature, some historical sites are deemed as natural attractions too. The perception of the real heritage landscape is crucial. It is because probably during time, natural attraction around the cultural site becomes a core attraction for visitors, and consequently, cultural values of the site disappear. One example is the Historical Hydraulic System located in the City of Shushtar which due to possessing both cultural and natural landscapes, its identity and values are not exactly being perceived by visitors. The site was registered on UNESCO's list of World Heritage Sites in 2009 and now it is one of Iran's tourist attractions. Economic and social prosperity in the City of Shushtar has depended on Karun River. Ab (Water) in the Syriac language is the name of the last month of the summer. "The water is light" is a popular proverb among Iranians, which indicates importance of water to the Iranian society. The water has played an important role in Iranian architecture and life style. Due to the shortage of water in certain parts of Iran, Iranian people invented efficient methods for saving, exploiting and consuming water, as well as unique methods for proper water distribution to avoid wasting water. Iranian Man has employed various techniques and has created beauty and art. The most accurate technology, complicated systems and efficient establishments for water exploitation have been created in Iran, signs and symbols of which still exist in traditional customs and beliefs (Kolahkaj, 2012: 35). Iranian people

consider water as a symbol of purity and a reviver Material. They express this belief through worshipping holy symbols that indicate the value of the wa-



Fig 2. A view of Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System.
Photo: Milad Maasoomi, 2013.

ter (Mirshokraee, 2001). Shushtar Hydraulic System is a symbol of ancient humans' art and craft. Since the registration of Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System on UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites in 2009, several measures have been undertaken by the authorities towards preserving and repairing the site and their positive effects are undeniable. On the other hand, due to the reputation of the site as a world heritage, and according to increased number of visitors, advocates and protectors of the site have decided to undertake some measures towards enhancing its attractiveness. Releasing fish and ducks in the site or idea of planting trees alongside the margin of the Gargar River¹ are some examples of the mentioned measures. Such efforts have only been effective in increasing natural attractiveness of the site. Several questions are raised here; first, whether visitors exactly perceive the messages that the site is trying to transfer? Second, whether to some extent the future of the site depends on visitors' tastes and interpretation? And finally, what is planners' role in protecting the values of the site? Real values of the site are evident from criteria introduced by UNESCO for register-

ing heritages on the list of World Heritage Site. In the next section, while describing these criteria, a brief review of the definitions of natural and cultural landscapes, symbolic and natural values of the site will be mentioned.

Natural and Cultural Landscapes

There are some questions raised. Whether there are differences between landscapes? What are differences between urban, rural, agricultural, humanity, cultural and natural landscapes? The landscape, as a future discipline, answers these questions: all of them are landscape; they have the same nature, but since they are different in characteristics, they have different names. The landscape is a compilation of the environmental symbols and Man's perception of these symbols. Symbols have been produced by humans in the environment, and they are different; for example, a landscape with dominant cultural symbols is called a cultural landscape and a landscape of a city within which there are symbols of human lifestyle, is called urban landscape. A natural environment, without any intervention, is called natural landscape, but when there are many symbols of Man's interventions in a natural environment, depending on his historical life, that nature is considered to be an ancillary layer of the said environment, it is called cultural landscape.

The term cultural landscape embraces a diversity of manifestations of the interaction between human-kind and its natural habitat. Cultural landscapes often reflect specific technique of sustainable land-use, considering the characteristics and limitations of the natural environment they are established in, and a specific spiritual relation to the nature².

Culture has long been connected to the nature. Sometimes, it is difficult to separate natural and cultural elements of historical heritages; nonetheless, some of the heritages include dominant natural aspects; inversely, some include dominant cultural ones. Table1 indicates definitions of "culture"

and “natural” concepts.

According to UNESCO’s classification, world heritages are divided into the natural and cultural categories. Cultural heritages including cultural landscape fall into three main categories (Operational Guidelines 2005, Annex3): designed landscape,

evolved landscape and associative landscape. Cultural designed landscape is purposefully designed and embraces recreational gardens and parklands. A landscape organically evolved results from an initial social, economic, administrative, and/or religious imperative and has developed its present

Table 1. definitions of “natural” and “culture”. Adopted from Sorving,2002.

| Definitions of “Natural” | Definitions of Culture |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Produced by or present in nature, not artificial or man-made -Unaltered -Inherent or inborn, not taught or acquired -Expected, accepted, morally certain -Primitive, uncivilized, or unregenerate | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Working the soil to produce plant crops -The process of breeding plants or animals -A growing-medium for microorganisms, or organisms grown on such a medium -Artificial -The total learned behaviour specific to a particular community or group -A group or population characterized by a set of learned behaviours and Beliefs -Social transmission of behaviour, and the range of behaviours so transmitted -Social and intellectual formation; sophistication or knowledge -A style of expression particular to a society or class -The arts collectively, including intellectual activity -Development or improvement through training |

form by associating with and in response to its natural environment. Such landscapes reflect that process of evolution in their form and component features. Evolved landscape is able to continue its evolution process like a dynamic and live place, as well as playing its social role in the contemporary society. It is also likely that evolution process stops and the landscape becomes fixed in its form. Associative cultural landscape refers to the cultural customs. It is a physical place within which intangible aspects of the cultural heritages have been fitted. Considering such landscapes in the World Cultural Heritage List is due to the religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element; for example, holey gardens and mountains³.

According to the definitions of the cultural and natural landscapes, it can be said that Shushtar Watermills Site possesses a dominant cultural landscape, because this site is manmade and has not been created by nature or by itself. This heritage is a mas-

terpiece of the ancient era engineering and it had a unique technology in its time. Shushtar Hydraulic System indicates interaction between ancient man and nature. The cliff in the site is a symbol of the resistance and the water is a symbol of the purity. There exist valuable cultural symbols in the site which are indicators of the cultural landscape falling into designed landscape category introduced by UNESCO, because it has been purposely made by the man.

Selection Criteria

in the late 2004, world heritages were selected based on 6 cultural and 4 natural criteria, but after approving Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, since 2005 all criteria have been considered as follows:

1. To represent a masterpiece of human creative genius;
2. To exhibit an important interchange of human

values, over a span of time or within a cultural area of the world, on developments in architecture or technology, monumental arts, town planning or landscape design;

3. To bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared;

4. To be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates a significant stages in human history;

5. To be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change;

6. To be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance;

7. To contain superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance;

8. To be outstanding example representing major stages of earth's history, including the record of life, significant ongoing geological process in the development of landforms, or significant geomorphic or physiographic features;

9. To be outstanding example representing significant ongoing ecological and biological process in the evolution and development of terrestrial, fresh water, coastal and marine ecosystems and communities of plants and animals;

10. To contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.

Shushtar Hydraulic System, as a world heritage, possesses an international reputation. As Huff

(2008) argued, today it is said that there is a narrow relationship between identity and border, because places are becoming commodity and consequently are being sold in a compressed world of time-space. After the increase in research about the site, document of Shushtar Watermills Site was provided; but according to the fact that watermills site is only a part of the integrated complex of Shushtar Hydraulic System, accordingly, document of Shushtar Historical Hydraulic System was provided. In annual summit of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee (June 26, 2009) held in Seville, Spain, the site was registered on UNESCO's world Heritage List based on criteria 1, 2 and 5. In following section criteria and reasons which demonstrate the capability of the site as a unique world cultural heritage, are described⁴.

Criterion (i)

Shushtar Watermill Site, as one of the engineering masterpieces of the ancient world, is a perfect sample of the land-use in the past. Based on evidences, most of the present lands of the City of Shushtar which are now being used for dry farming had been cultivated through creating accurate irrigation networks. Waterfalls have been acting as a huge manufacture for producing products. Analyzing the technique through which this installation has been constructed indicates that engineering science had been applied for creating such ensemble. Accordingly, it can be said that the history of the world's hydraulic engineering is concealed in this region. So, we can recognize human creative genius in the ancient era by analyzing the process through which this ensemble was established.

Criterion (ii)

Undoubtedly, in addition to the experts' ideas, customs of the people who had been living in this region were effective in shaping this unique ensemble, because in addition to the advanced irrigation

techniques, samples of cultural aspects can be seen in the site. One example is Chahartaghi (Penthouse). The Other characteristic is extroverted architecture of some houses located near the complex. It must be noted that this kind of architecture is not in congruence with Iranian culture. Undoubtedly, the said architecture has been adopted only for looking at the natural view of the site.

Criterion (v)

As Spearin argues, the language of the landscape is our main language. Landscape was the main settlement for humankind. Man touched, saw, heard, smelled and tasted the landscape. He lived within it. Landscape was the first human text which was read before existence of any sign and symbol (Swiffield, 2005). According to the special climate, Shushtar has a unique architecture. Due to the hot weather in the summer, every house includes a Shabestan⁵ where fresh water exists for habitants' resting. Since the City of Shushtar has been surrounded by several tunnels, local residents constructed some aqueducts. The Mentioned aque-

ducts pass through Shabestan and provide required water for every house. Around the site, there exist old houses which have been constructed on tunnels. Residents of the houses acquire their needed water through byways. Several stone stairways have existed within the watermills site of which only two stairways have remained in western and eastern parts. These evidences indicate the role of the site in people's usual life during ancient times.



Fig 3. A view of Chahartaqi (Penthouse).
Photo: Zahra Nadalipour,2014.

Conclusion

Landscape as an objective-subjective phenomenon with cultural and natural elements both affects human culture and civilization and is affected by man and his lifestyle. Shushtar Historical Hydrolic system which has been recognized as a world heritage since 2009, like other phenomena around the world includes cultural and natural symbols and concepts that shape its landscape. After observing certain measures which were done towards enhancing natural attractiveness of the site, these questions were raised that whether this complex is primarily a natural landscape within which a foot print of an old civilization has remained? Whether it must be adorned by heterogeneous and inappropriate elements towards responding to man's touristic and recreational needs? After recognizing characteris-

tics of the cultural and natural landscapes and the existing definition, as well as recognizing functions and cultural values of the site in different periods of the history, the raised questions can be answered. Although construction of Shushtar Watermills site absolutely depends on water and natural elements located around it, but its landscape values goes beyond the water and buildings. The nature and the culture are linked together in this site so that it is difficult to analyze each one separately; ancient humans, however, with their genius and art could overcome the nature. According to the definition of natural and cultural phenomena and UNESCO's classification, as well as values and functions of the site which were described before in terms of criteria and reasons for registering the site, it can

be said that Shushtar Hydraulic System is a cultural landscape. It is also a designed landscape which has been purposefully constructed by mankind. The site was dynamic in several periods of the history and today it has remained as a cultural heritage. Intrinsic values of the site are enough to attract visitors and it is not required to add inappropriate elements to the site. What must be noted is representing and introducing such values to the visitors. Certain measures must be undertaken to-

wards introducing and maintaining values of the site. Miller's culture and their lifestyle as well as construction technology of mills are examples of what have been forgotten and must be revived. Undoubtedly, any plan towards maintaining heritages or developing them as tourist sites requires commitment to keep and introduce landscape values of the site in order to avoid mistakes in protecting them for present and future generations and in providing them for tourists.

Endnote

1. According to the report of Fars News Agency, Friday, February 17, 2012, and author's observations.
2. icomos.org/landscapes/index2engl.htm#
3. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape#2>
4. Adopted from Management and Conservation plan of Shushtar Cultural Heritages
5. Shabestan is an underground space that can be usually found in traditional architecture of mosques, houses, and schools in ancient Iran.

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