

Cultural Landscapes as Symbols of National Identity-Protection or Change?

The Shifting Aspects of Landscape Identity

Ana KUČAN

SUMMARY

The problem of landscape identity is particularly present in the view of the current changes in rural land-use patterns, where, as a consequence, the identities of traditional rural societies seem threatened. The problem lies in the perception of spatial identity as a physical phenomenon, while in reality it is an ever evolving relationship. The social conception of the national space is shaped within the processes of communication, and tends inevitably towards uniformity, regardless of its actual geographical diversity. Specific landscapes within national space emerge as representative of the whole, usually appearing as symbolic places or as conceptualized landscape types composed of various and distinct landscape features. Following the survey of historical relations between the generation of national consciousness and space, the research continued with the analysis of pictorial presentations of landscapes in tourist and political advertisements and with a public opinion survey. The results show that national identity is defined not only by symbolic places but also by special landscape types and that the popular conception of national space does not exist as an absolute: It changes in different time periods and adopts various meanings among particular social strata or groups depending on the context of its use. The study confirmed the existence of a motif that is no longer linked to a precisely specified place and thus loses the particularities of a concrete location. No longer linked to a specific geographic location, it assumes the role of the representative of the whole in the conception. Thus the concept in all its forms does not necessarily relate directly to the contemporary physical reality of the environment.

KEY WORDS

identity, landscape, social conception

E-mail: ana.kucan@bf.uni-lj.si

Department of Landscape Architecture
Biotechnical Faculty, University of Ljubljana
Jamnikarjeva 101, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

Received: December 23, 1998

Kulturni krajobrazi kao simboli nacionalnog identiteta-očuvati ili mijenjati?

Promjenljivi aspekti identiteta krajobraza

Ana KUČAN

SAŽETAK

Pitanje identiteta krajobraza je posebno prisutno u vidu stalnih promjena u seoskim oblicima korištenja zemljišta, gdje kao posljedica, identiteti tradicionalnih ruralnih društava, izgledaju ugroženi. Problem je u percepciji prostornog identiteta kao fizičkog fenomena, dok se zaista radi o stalnoj interakciji. Društveno poimanje nacionalnog prostora se oblikuje unutar procesa komunikacije, i neumitno vodi ka uniformnosti, bez obzira na realnu geografsku raznolikost. Unutar nacionalnog prostora, posebni krajobrazi izviru poput predstavnika cjeline i obično podsjećaju na simbolička mjesta ili na konceptualizirane tipove krajobraza sastavljene od različitih i prepoznatljivih krajobraznih oblika. Nadovezujući se na pregled povijesnih odnosa između generacije nacionalne svijesti i prostora, istraživanja se nastavljaju analizom slikovitog prikaza krajobraza u turističkim i političkim reklamama i ispitivanjem javnog mnijenja. Rezultati pokazuju da se nacionalni identitet definira ne samo simboličkim mjestima već i posebnim tipovima krajobraza, i da popularna koncepcija nacionalnog prostora ne postoji kao apsolut: ovisno o kontekstu u kojem se upotrebljava, koncepcija nacionalnog prostora se mijenja u različitim vremenskim periodima, pa joj različiti društveni slojevi ili grupe, pridaju različito značenje. Ovim radom se potvrđuje postojanje motiva koji više nije vezan za sasvim određeno mjesto, pa se stoga gube specifičnosti konkretne lokacije. Kako više nije vezan uz specifičnu geografsku lokaciju, on u koncepciji preuzima na sebe ulogu predstavnika cjeline. Stoga se koncept u svim svojim oblicima ne odnosi uvijek direktno na suvremenu fizičku stvarnost okoliša.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

identitet, krajobraz, društveni koncept

E-mail: ana.kucan@bf.uni-lj.si

Oddelek za krajinsko arhitekturo
Biotehniška fakulteta, Univerza v Ljubljani
Jamnikarjeva 101, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenija

Primljeno: 23. prosinca 1998.

LANDSCAPE IDENTITY

In landscape planning and design we constantly encounter the need to define the identity of the landscape. Due to the modernization of agricultural production, and, in Slovenia in particular, due to the deagrarianization processes, rural landscapes face physical alterations. Also the socio-economic change that has recently transformed the so-called "East-European" countries, combined with the eventual integration in European Union, will cause large restructuring of landscape configuration, mostly in the form and allocation of land-use. These facts brought about some fears that common agricultural politics will surpass and neglect regional differences and uniform the environment, resulting in the loss of *couleur locale* and consequently the identity of the place. The reason that landscape identity became the core of professional attention is the scope of the envisioned change. Although aware of the fact that landscapes change constantly, the society considers them as unchangeable — it is normal that we consider our environment as more enduring than ourselves, which helps build the impression of permanence and stability (Lowenthal 1994), especially in the case of traditional rural landscapes. Until recently, their changing has been slow, almost unnoticeable, and therefore they stood as a secure factor of group identity.

PRESERVATION OR CHANGE?

What immediately comes to light in the professional context is precisely the problem of the erroneous perception of spatial identity as unchangeable; it is dealt with as a physical phenomenon, a given situation in space, while in reality it involves ever new relationships. Landscapes are the results of reciprocal interaction between the space and the individuals and the society, who change the space and inscribe their history on it through their action. So, even when we collectively acknowledge some change in the landscape, we only do so to read in it the past we remember and desire. Despite that the problem obviously lies in the attitude of the society to the space, we too often treat landscape

identity as a condition. The psychological and sociological findings regarding the collective place-attachment have already revealed that this identification is about belonging to what the physical components symbolize and not to themselves as such (Lenz-Romeiss 1970). The landscape planning thus needs to seek for more precise answers to the question of how to protect and preserve, if it is possible at all, the image of the cultural landscape at a time when the ways of using the land and the relations to the space are changing fundamentally. Will this development indeed mean a *loss of identity* or will it bring *qualitative change*?

THE SOCIAL CONCEPTION OF THE NATIONAL SPACE

To look for the answers, we first have to define what is the identity of the landscape and how it evolves. The study, conducted at the Department of Landscape Architecture, Biotechnical Faculty, University of Ljubljana (Kučan 1996), focused on seeking those components, which define Slovene landscapes as "Slovene" ones, through the analysis of landscape images in the social conception. It presents and evaluates several factors that influenced the formation of landscape identity in the social conception. Therefore, it relies on the basic assumption that the national identity as a special form of group identity is established in the *spiritual sphere* of a nation, yet also embodied, outside it in the field of *physis*, in space as a totality of natural circumstances, human activity, and the social value system; that is, in the landscape.

As records of human intervention in space, landscapes can be the carriers of collective identity and historical memory (Smith 1991, Daniels 1993, Cosgrove and Daniels 1988). But, being utilitarian, they do not hold direct messages; symbolic meanings are subsequently attached to them. Landscape features act as message carriers only after they have entered the systems of communication between the society as a producer and the individual as a consumer and, as such, form the social conceptions of space.

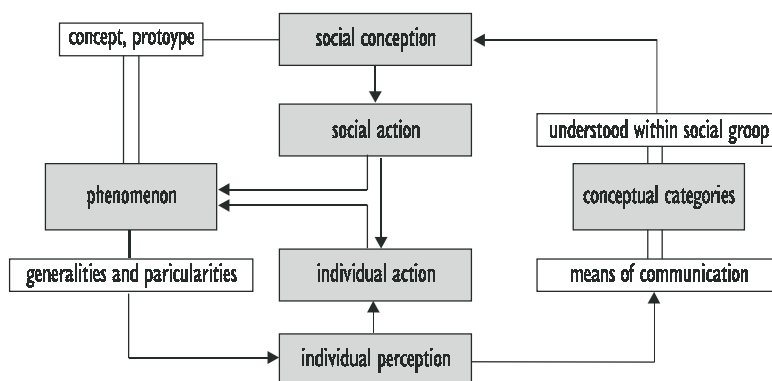


Illustration 1. Diagram of cyclical interactions between the individual, the society and the landscape showing the formation of conceptual categories.

This process is repetitive, and because the attribution of meaning is relative according to diverse interests in the processes of perception and assessment, the activation of mythical properties in the process of image-creation is unavoidable. Thus the conception does not necessarily match the spatial reality.

We should probably add here that the study did not seek the absolute landscape identity for Slovenia, describable by geographical data, but rather attempted to understand how the social conception of space was formed, and how it was linked to the national identity. Until the middle of the 19th century, the awareness of the landscape existed primarily at the local level, and people identified themselves with an area. It is generally accepted that the national consciousness began to develop at that time, and spread only gradually from narrow intellectual circles to the population in general. In Slovenia, a thesis exists that - as Vodopivec (1996:10) puts it - "national consciousness pushed out and finally replaced the provincial consciousness and the feeling of the regional belonging." Vodopivec himself does not agree, however, and believes that it is possible to prove that all the feelings of belonging continued to live side by side.

Relative to the perception of national identity in Slovenia, the question particularly arises of whether, given the well-known geographical diversity of Slovene territory, there is a possibility (and suitability) for the existence of a single conception, stable in time and in harmony with space, a symbol towards which the concept of "national unity" tends to by definition. Braudel (1988: 38) in his *L'identité de la France* characterizes France with the statement "France is variety", and critically assesses the creation of *one* image, *one* formula, *one* myth as a powerful but in the long term futile endeavor. The same could be said of Slovenia, where geographical diversity is objectively present and clearly visible in a much smaller space which, in comparison, barely corresponds to a single French region. In any case, the variety is not only apparent but also corresponds to concrete reality. Thus, the present study was accompanied by a doubt that only one singular mental image of the Slovene landscape existed; however, it was encouraged by observations that exactly this type of conception had formed in our everyday life and was exploited by individual economic and political interests. There is also the question of how such a singular image affects the relationship of the society and its individuals to the space, and thereby the diversity of the Slovene landscape reality.

HYPOTHESIS AND GOALS

The hypothesis of the study assumes that:

- the national identity is not bound merely to the territory determined by borders;
- a social conception exists that corresponds to an ideal landscape type;

- the social conception is not absolute: it depends on the familiarity with a space, on the intention with which we call it into our consciousness, and on the period; that is, on the value system currently prevailing in the society.

The following goals for the study logically emerged from these assumptions:

- to discover what are the components of a specific social conception of the national space,
- to discover the ways by which the components acquire their identification role, and
- to ascertain the relationship between the physical and symbolic factors that determine it.

To answer these questions, the study tackled the problem in three complementary ways.

THE RESEARCH MODEL

The study assembled a symbolic picture of the national space from landscape scenes linked to the conception of Slovene identity that circulates in the systems of social communication. The choice of visual material is supported by the fact that we primarily perceive landscapes visually. Because the depictions of landscapes themselves infer a choice within a value system, that is, symbolic assessments and the collection of signs are incorporated. Given the nature of the problem, the research comprised three parts, each investigating a part of the hypothesis.

The first part involved historical review, first of the evolution of the Slovene ethnic identity and later of the Slovene national identity, and a search for their links with individual parts, places, and landscape features of the "home space." It examined how particular areas entered social consciousness, and considered landscape descriptions in the works of literature and painting that reveal how artists and other promoters of Slovene nationhood tried to express the Slovene character of particular spaces.

The second part, the analysis of pictorial advertising material, was aimed at discerning the components of visual language associated with Slovene nationhood in tourist, commercial, and political propaganda between 1945 and 1995. Pictograms were "invented" to enable generalization and comparison of the images of the landscapes and their components. To each image a location was determined on the map of Slovenia, which showed the percentage of the territory included in the conception and value hierarchy between the areas.

The third part was a public opinion survey to confirm the immediate recognition of these components by the general public. As opposed to a general social conception, it provides a collection of rather personal opinions about the characteristics of the Slovene landscape. The goal of this part of the study was to discover whether there were differences in the conceptions of

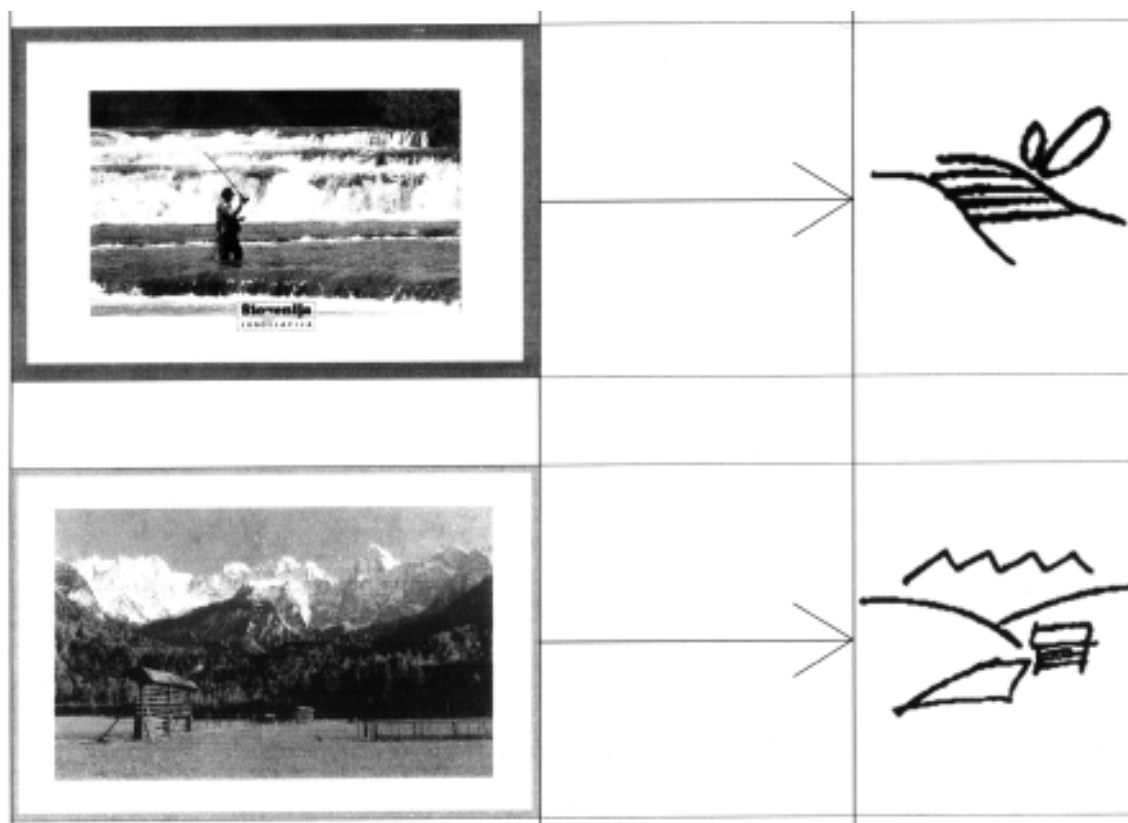


Illustration 2. The creation of pictograms for the description of landscape motifs.

individual groups within the society relative to their social standing or the location of their residence, and whether there were differences as regards the intention of the conceptions, that is, differences between the spatial conception that is supposedly transmitted between generations, a kind of “fatherland education,” and the conception used to establish and maintain one’s self-image in relation to other people. The questions were combined with photographic representations of various Slovene landscapes.

Given the subject of discussion, and in order to achieve the greatest possible validity, it made sense to carry out a public opinion survey on the basis of a representative sample whose structure would reflect that of the population. The representative sample was determined by the Center for the Research of Public Opinion and Mass Communications at the Faculty of Social Sciences, which also carried out the survey. In composing the survey, the attention was primarily devoted to the problem of how to best describe the landscape space of Slovenia without imposing our own conceptions on those surveyed. Therefore, the questionnaire retains the three levels of landscape unit size classes- place, motif, component—and asks about them with both photographs and text. The space is described by using carefully chosen spatial units that can act both as individual units and as general phenomena, depending on the context of conceptualization. The survey asked about motif at two levels: about the characteristics or selected components of the space which in various combinations formed landscape patterns and about the landscape types or broader landscape patterns with which we can describe the diversity of the Slovene space.

In contrast to the other two parts of the research, the survey, through recognizing the characteristics and significance of the landscape units that build the conception of Slovenia in the perception and assessment of individuals, was aimed at discovering more intimate layers of the place-attachment of the population to the place they live.

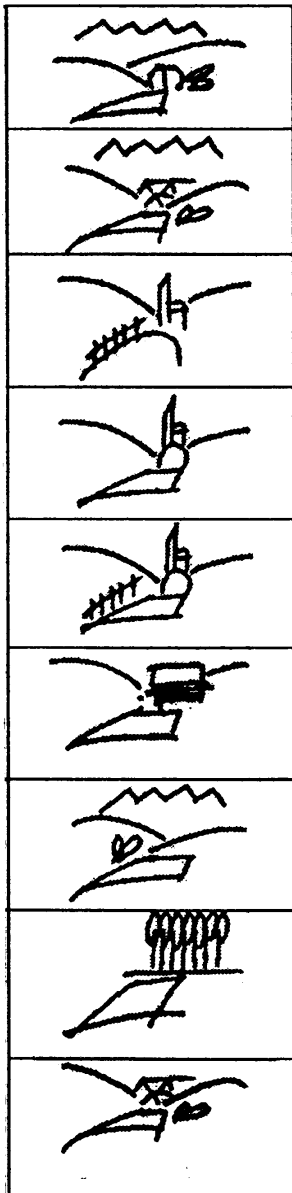


Illustration 3. Some most frequent motifs describing Slovene landscapes

RESULTS

The Changeability of the Conception-A Shifting Identity

While the first part of the research was rather informative, both the second and the third part questioned the existence of various conceptions of the same concept: they intended to discover whether differences exist in the conception of a Slovene space relative to its use. Following the research model about varying conceptions of the same concept (Roth and Frisby 1986), it is also possible to conclude that within one social group in the same time period there are many perceptions of the same object, depending on its use. If it is the perception that defines the identification (recognition) of space or the identification of an individual or a certain community with the space they inhabit, and the perception itself is also conditioned by the use (Canter 1977), then very probably there are differences in the meanings of individual parts of space, either in the places or in the landscape types and individual components. The reason probably lies in the use of the conception, that is in the purpose the concept is activated for. First is certainly an individual's personal assessment one's desire to convey a particular perception within a certain community (more precisely, to transmit values between generations, that is, the "fatherland education"), that makes it possible to maintain the *continuity* aspect of group identity. Second is the communication of one's self-image to the outside world (specifically, establishing one's identity by comparison with other groups in other spaces - the *differentiation* aspect).

Results from the analysis of the propaganda material proved that the conception of the space is relative to the time-dynamics: the analysis revealed time periods, which differ by the part of the territory included in a particular related conception, and by motifs, that is by specific aggregations of individual landscape components that can be encountered in various spatial contexts, which define the periods in terms of contents. Some of these motifs are present

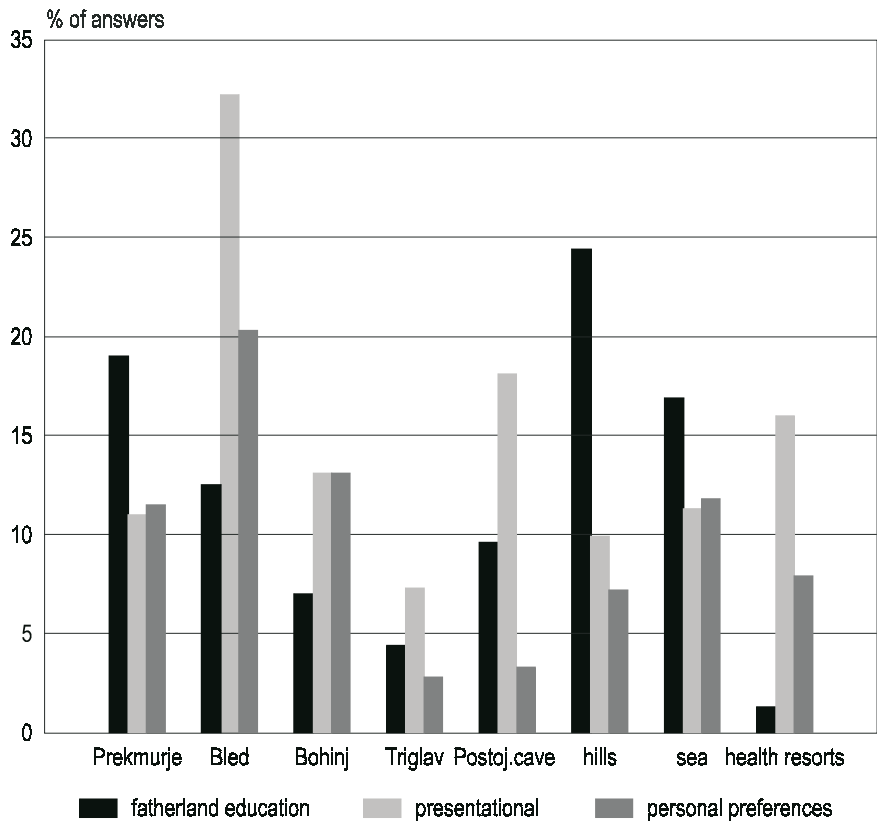


Illustration 4. Comparison between personal, "fatherland education", and presentational conception.

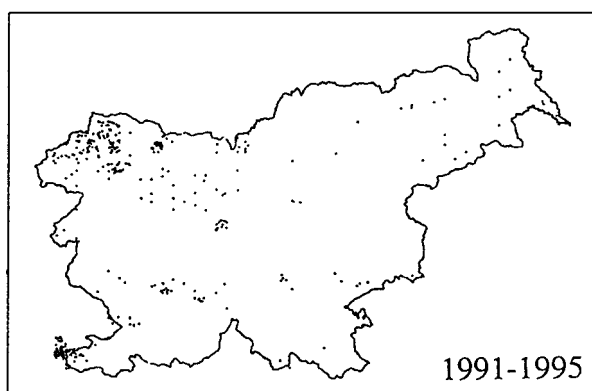
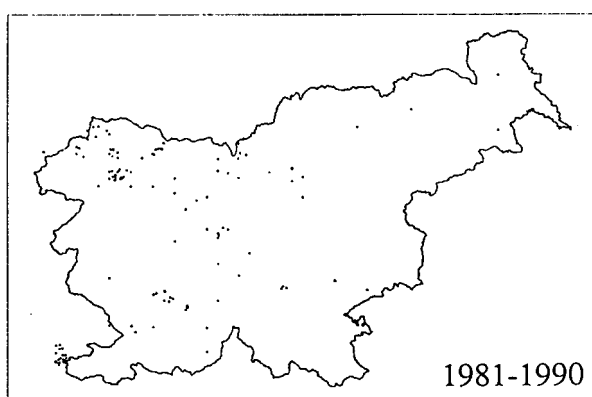
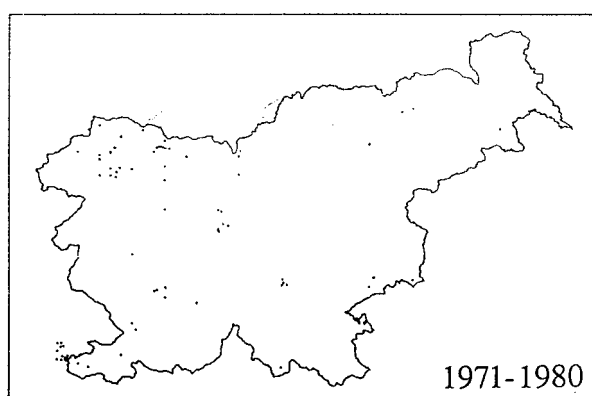
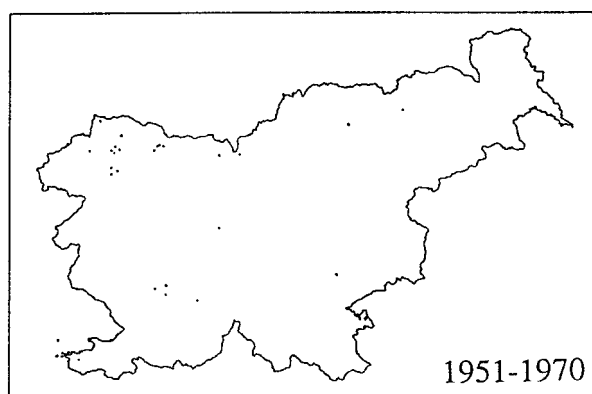


Illustration 5. Maps of Slovenia showing the distribution of locations of the pictorial representations of landscapes included in advertising material in different time periods

in all of the detected periods, and as such they act as connectors providing *continuity*, while the others pile differently in different periods. Some of the later appear more often than the others, and only in specific contexts of meaning. This is most expressive in the pictorial language of political propaganda.

The results clearly showed the differences in the size classes of landscape units: "the national" identifies conceptually with entire regions and areas, as well as with concrete places or even with individual landscape features, i.e. selected landscape components. The conception binds all of them indiscriminately into some sort of a spatial *collage*; therefore, in the conception, even geographically distant landscape features can form one image, unrelated to size and position.

The research confirmed, that some forms of the conception act as a prototype, a landscape motif(s) without clear connections to a certain place (or locality), thus creating the general landscape image of Slovenia. The social conception is, therefore, also an ideological construct: it seems independent of the changes which reformed landscapes in the course of history; it neglects geographical diversities, and often becomes an object of manipulation. Especially, when particular social groups use commonly acknowledged symbols to generalize its own system of values over the entire nation.

Despite some formal elements of continuity, the social conception of space in Slovenia also demonstrates some shifts in meaning in different time periods. Recent political propaganda pushes the conception back into the frame of the era when the idea of national identity was established in the 19th century. Today, however, the formal elements carry a different meaning: they do not represent liberal progressive ideas as they did as the symbols of establishing national identity within the Austro-Hungarian empire, but a rather nostalgic, traditionalistic, even conservative point of view. In the continuity within the media image, the only exception is presented by the period following World War II, when the spirit of building a new society prevailed, and the spirit of technology and progress became evident in the landscape conceptions, even on tourist posters. Then, industrialization was an external sign that Yugoslavia - which at the time Slovenia was a part - was capable of overcoming economic backwardness and guaranteeing progress. The healthy and idyllic rural world depicted by some popular painters was then not suitable for the "official" presentation of the country; furthermore, the spatial components, which denoted the former social order, were disappearing. However, in parallel with the pictorial material, through which Slovenia presented itself in the framework of the then new Yugoslavia (from 1945 on), the places which remained were those that ideologically acceptable positive factors and personalities linked to the national identity and the struggle for its existence. Although not always against it, Slovenia did not entirely consent to the "Yugoslav" concept: It still searched for and



Illustrations 6.

Pictorial depictions of the current attitude of the conception of national space in three different time periods:

a) the painting Rodna gruda **Native soil**, by Maksim Gaspari, a pre-World War II postcard.



b) a tourist "propaganda" from 1949: Turizem - izvrševalcem petletke. **Tourism – to the executors of the Five-Year Plan.**



c) election poster from parliamentary elections in 1992: Vrnili bomo sloveniji dušo, srce in nasmeh. **We will give back the soul, the heart and the smile to Slovenia.**

established its own identity within the multinational state. For this purpose, the geographic characteristics of its territory offered Slovenia numerous easily discernible identification components, and it looked for others within its heritage. This heritage comprised the rural idyll and the spatial components that guaranteed Slovenia's existence.

CONCLUSION

The results, rendered by all the three parts of the investigation, including the results of the questionnaire, must therefore be read in two ways:

- AS PHENOMENA - characteristics, samples
- AS EXPLANATION - circumstances, values

In the Slovene national conception, landscapes certainly play an important role as the carriers of identity. The results confirmed the original hypotheses about landscape components and patterns as the carriers of national spatial identity, as well as that the forming of a conception involves permanent interweaving of the relationship between physical and symbolic factors.

The results from all three parts of the study have indisputably confirmed the introductory hypothesis that the national identity is not only tied to the territory defined by borders but to other spatial units as well. It is not only a matter of being attached to places to which special importance is attributed in the system of social values. The national identity is also tied to a certain social conception of space, built from selected landscape types and individual spatial components. The deliberately chosen systematic cross-sections of the study show the chronological sequence of the formation of the conception and its verification in the conceptions of the modern public. Thus, it also discloses the mutual linkage of closed working units and their flowing into a whole.

The results also showed that neither the landscape types nor the individual landscape components in the sense of national identification are absolute categories, but rather that their role within the social conception of the space is changing. The continuity of the nation's identification with space is certainly based primarily on certain "sacred places of the nation." Thus, special landscape types and motifs appear in the continuity conception which at the same time determine differentiation with respect to others. In the Slovene space, it is primarily the mountain landscape type linked to the cultural (agrarian) landscape that is most often reflected in the image of populated mountain valleys. The second element of the social conception of the space is the domestic landscape with its typical components: *fields-meadows*, *vineyards*, "*kozolci*," and *small churches on elevations*. The place most frequently chosen as representative is Bled, which combines the most typical characteristics of both.

Although we are aware of its diversity, once we cross the reference threshold of "Slovene," we refer to

Slovenia as a homogenous territory from the landscape point of view. As we have seen, the landscape type representing it is a kind of a spatial collage rather than a homogenous conception. There is an ideal conception, somewhat removed from reality, with which we Slovenes as a group identify ourselves. It is probably the question of a cultural mythos through which the exceptionality of the Slovene space is confirmed. This links us to ourselves from the past (*continuity*), and at the same time distinguishes us from others, even from those who are similar (*differentiation*).

This, of course, refers to the currently predominant conception. We have seen now one and then another significance layer come to the fore. In any case, there is certainly a gap between principles and practice: 50% of the population still lives in a predominantly rural space but only 6% lives from it. In this sense the "newcomers" are transforming rural landscapes into a space that is attractive for living in accordance with their somewhat idealized view of the countryside. The new communication technologies offer almost everyone the advantages that the modern way of life and work demands, thus enabling a very high quality of life in rural environments. In this way, the rural landscapes in Slovenia are being slowly transformed into a "modern Arcadia" (Marušič 1995), tending toward a uniform environment in the physical and cultural sense. This is, however, precisely that the origin of many spatial conflicts.

The ideal conception is undoubtedly also the result of the picture conveyed by the media and other ideological apparatuses, reflecting and simultaneously impacting the value system. While, within the value system, there are differences between the principle values and those by which we orient ourselves in practice as individuals or as a society, the manipulation of the spatial identity, which occurs on the national level, can be counter-productive. Creating an unrealistic image of space and becoming infatuated with it can blur the vision and blind us to serious problems in the environment. Therefore, it makes no sense to limit the spatial identity only to the components established as national symbols during the periods of endeavors for nationhood. The knowledge about the processes of establishing the social conception of space, provided by the present study, is certainly useful information. But only further studies will be able to provide more precise answers to the questions whether the development will indeed mean a *loss* of identity or will it bring qualitative change. The countryside - and not only in Slovenia - stands on the threshold of major changes, as much in the sense of social as of spatial restructuring: the laws of the European and world markets have already brought much faster changes than those we witnessed in the not so distant past. Assuming that the need for the preservation of the patterns of land-use is demonstrated, even if only because of the principle of protecting our cultural and natural heritage, it will not be possible without substantial financial support from the state. Here it is

very important to know the socially established value system - the system of principle definitions, which society forms in relation to the space in which it lives and their disharmony with the prevailing behavior.

In spite of the universal models for managing the physical environment, it could be possible to preserve the spatial identity in this respect as well. One of the hindering factors in Slovenia is certainly the physical space; other factors undoubtedly include cultural differences based on historical memory. Neither the real space nor the social conception of it are constant but depend upon the times—they emerge and complement each other in the course of constant change. From this we can conclude that any form of inclusion in the world integration processes will not mean a loss of identity but rather its qualitative change only.

REFERENCES

- BRAUDEL, F. (1988) *The Identity of France. History and Environment*. Collins, London.
- symbolic landscapes, Wageningen, Netherlands, September 1994. Unpublished version, 18 p.
- CANTER, D. (1977) *The Psychology of Place*. The Architectural Press, London.
- COSGROVE D., DANIELS S., Ed. (1988) *The Iconography of Landscape*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- DANIELS S. (1993) *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- KUČAN A. (1996) *Dejavniki nacionalne prostorske identitete na Slovenskem. (Aspects of Spatial Perception in Relation to National Identity)*. Doctoral Thesis. Department of Landscape Architecture, Biotechnical Faculty, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana.
- KUČAN A. (1997) *Modern Social Conception of Slovene Space. (Slovenski prostor v sodobni družbeni predstavi.)* In: *Acta Geografica* 37 (1997): 111-169. Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Geographical Institute, Ljubljana.
- LENZ-ROMEISS F. (1970) *Die Stadt – Heimat oder Durchgangstation?* Calwey Verlag, Muenchen.
- LOWENTHAL D. (1994) *Landscape as Living Legacy*. In: *International symposium on Symbolic Landscapes*, Wageningen. Unpublished version.
- MARUŠIČ J. (1995): *Razpotja urejanja in varstva Slovenske krajine. (Crossroads of Planning and Conservation of Slovenian Landscape.)* In: *Vesela znanost O okolju. (Merry Science. On Environment.)* KUD France Prešeren, Ljubljana.
- ROTH I., FRISBY J. (1986) *Perception and Representation: A Cognitive Approach*. Open University Press, Philadelphia.
- SMITH A. D. (1991) *National Identity*. University of Nevada Press.
- VODOPIVEC P. (1996) *Pogovor (Conversation)*. In: Crnkovič M. Ed. *Slovenska smer (the Direction of Slovenia)*. Cankarjeva založba, Ljubljana.