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LANDSCAPE PROTECTION AND NATURE PARKS IN STYRIA/AUSTRIA: EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS.

The discussion on role and necessity of landscape planning and protection in Austria has attracted considerable public attention in the recent past due to some obscure political decisions and disputes about projects sustainably affecting the environment. After a general discussion of goals and expectations concerning landscape protection, the function of provincial development programs for landscape planning is demonstrated. By the example of the Austrian nature park idea the pros and cons of landscape protection are contrasted. Some large-scale projects in the province of Styria (a motorsports center in Upper Styria, the Semmering railway tunnel, a high tension electric transmission line), prove the influence of political interventions on decisions of environmental relevance. Finally the Natura 2000 network of the EU is presented as a means of promoting regional sustainable development in combination with nature protective goals.

Introduction

The discussion on landscape planning, environmental protection, and the role of nature parks has attracted great attention through the media and the public in Styria and whole Austria only recently (Fig. 1). The reason for the discussion was the decision of the Austrian ministry of the environment to refuse the confirmation for the realization of a project to install a center of aviation, motor testing and technology in Spielberg, Upper Styria on the territory of the former A1 formula 1 motor course which had lost its function in 2002.

Fig 1: The Austrian Provinces



The above refusal was based on severe procedural mistakes in the course of the environmental impact assessment executed by the Styrian provincial authorities and their neglect of pleas from environmental pressure groups and local citizens initiatives. They have feared irretrievable damage to the local landscape character and peoples living conditions.

This example which shall not be discussed any further shows quite clearly the still existing inequality in the practical implementation of economical and environmental goals within the European Union despite various political declarations and statutory determinations. Thus the role of landscape planning and the possibilities of landscape planners to sustainably influence, preserve, or alter the image of cultural landscapes are rather limited. Nonetheless without their watching eye on planned or unplanned changes of the environment we probably would have to face much worse developments in Europe.

General goals and expectations concerning landscape protection

In 1956 for the first time protected landscapes had been installed in Styria following the still valid "Reichsnaturschutzgesetz" in order to conserve the diversified cultural landscape worth to be protected. Since no other legal instrument had existed then this law was the only means to protect the environment from the consequences of rapid economic growth accompanied by dynamic construction activities after World War II. Landscape protection was primarily designed to protect Alpine areas, big forests, wetland biotops and characteristic features of Austrian landscapes.

Moreover it had to somehow execute the still missing agenda of spatial planning.

Still an unsolved problem is the preservation of typical regional housescapes. They were and still are threatened from at least two main-stream developments in rural architecture: a conservative one, and a modernist one. The first one is astonishingly followed by a predominantly urban or rural group of dwellers who from a nostalgic, neo-romantic attitude of life stick to rural folklore and forms of living, buy typical farm houses which they renovate, or pull down to carefully transfer them to a completely new environment where these house-types (like the Salzburg-Tyrolean style farm house or the West-Styrian, Pannonian, or Carinthian house types) never had existed before. The second one is mainly upheld by the middle-class farm population who by tearing down their old, traditional farm houses and replacing them by new and "modern" types of detached houses as they are used by urban settlers had thought that they would simultaneously break the mental links with a not always easy and pleasant past.

So, falsely interpreted linkages to what we call "Heimatverbundenheit" or patriotism on the one hand and an also wrong understanding of the terms "modern" and "progressive" including their architectonic symbols led to today's disintegrated, disorganized, and shapeless forms of rural housescapes and settlement structures (cf W. Zsilincsar, 1998).

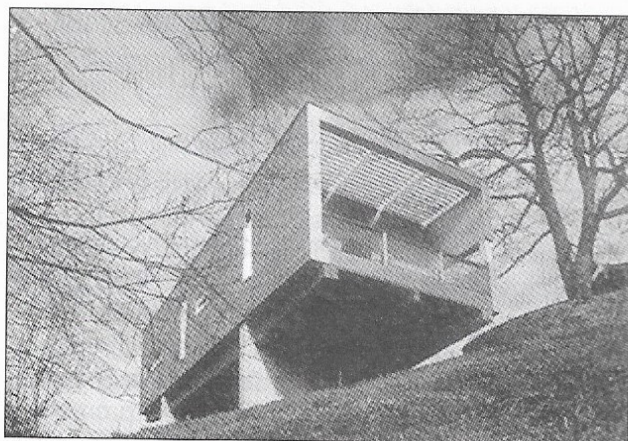


Fig.2:

Private guest-house in Admont (Upper Styria).
Source: K. Amtmann. 2003.

In the recent past, however, a new and positive trend which originated in Vorarlberg can be observed in rural architecture or, better, in modern architecture within a rural environment.

Progressive, energy saving houses, using predominantly wood as a renewable and traditional building material and following a language of design that expresses clear forms and lines, acknowledging surrounding nature as a guide line for the selection of colours, and the utilization of glass seem to point to a way out of the dilemma in which the built environment of European rural landscapes still remains (s. Fig. 2) (K. Amtmann. 2003. *Baukultur hierzulande*. In: *Natur- und Landschaftsschutz in der Steiermark*. 199. *Naturschutzbrief*, 3/2003, Graz, p. 13).

The Styrian provincial authorities tried to canalize this unwanted development into a more controlled direction by elaborating and editing "Landesentwicklungsprogramme" (provincial development programs) and urging the single communes to work out and enforce zoning plans, which were to be revised every five years. The first Styrian community that had disposed of a legally valid zoning plan was Bad Radkersburg in 1979.

The provincial development programs formed the top of the new hierarchically structured planning instrument that was based on thematic expertises, regional, small-regional, and local development programs. The topic of landscape protection was to be discussed on every one of the various planning levels. One important goal of the discussion was to review the necessity and maintenance of protected landscapes.

The success of prudent, well-balanced, and responsible activities of agriculture and forestry in landscape protected regions, is not a self-evident truth. Sometimes long-lasting and stubborn negotiations are necessary to convince farmers and foresters of applying techniques of sustainable land-use instead of merely profit-orientated ones and also to take care of a diversified and attractive image of the environment.

It must be also noted, however, that apart from programs of biotope protection there do not exist any other directives for the preservation of rural cultural landscapes.

So far landscape planning in the proper sense is not a special topic in the Styrian Regional Planning Act of 1986 but more or less an academic question (cf A. Oswald, 1986). The index of this law in connection with the term "landscape" lists a few topics only: image of landscapes, maintenance of landscapes and landscape protection.

Landscape protection in a (modern) civil society is mainly steered by policy and ideology. Politicians and political interest groups pass the laws, acts, orders, and decrees which not only regulate the functioning of our civil society but also, sometimes in a very strict way, ordain how, when, why, to which extent, and or for whose purpose a certain environment is to be maintained, cared about, utilized, neglected, or transformed.

It, therefore, seems to be appropriate to quote those legal passages from the Styrian Regional Planning Act of 1986 which directly interfere with "landscapes".

Paragraph 3 (3) defines measures of great spatial significance as such that considerably influence the spatial structure, development, or image of a landscape. This implies a clear distinction between the protection of remarkable built environments (historic towns, market places, and villages) and that of "open" landscapes.

Whereas the protection and/or further architectonic development of the built environment -although it may include parks, private gardens, and other green spaces - falls into the competence of the communities, the character and image of landscapes follows other than mainly architectonic principles and, therefore, is assessed according to the regulations of landscape and nature protection on the provincial level. Nevertheless, there exists an interrelation between the images of centralized settlements and those of open landscapes.

Paragraph 23 (4) deals with the itemization of development zones according to the prospected settlement development. Only those areas should be used for building purposes which are not to be preserved on behalf of an outstanding and characteristic image of landscapes or settlements.

Local development plans (§28 (4)) enable the authorities of the provincial government to determine closer regulations concerning development zones and to regard the image of landscapes and settlements considering sight-connections, roofscapes, the usage of special building materials and colours, advertising posters, fences, or typical landforms, land-use, and vegetation patters, outstanding single trees, and even the load of immissions.

The Styrian Regional Planning Act also includes some remarks on landscape conservation and protection (§ 3). It claims a landscape structure which serves public welfare through its unique shaping, conservation, and maintenance. Fragmentation of landscapes has to be prevented.

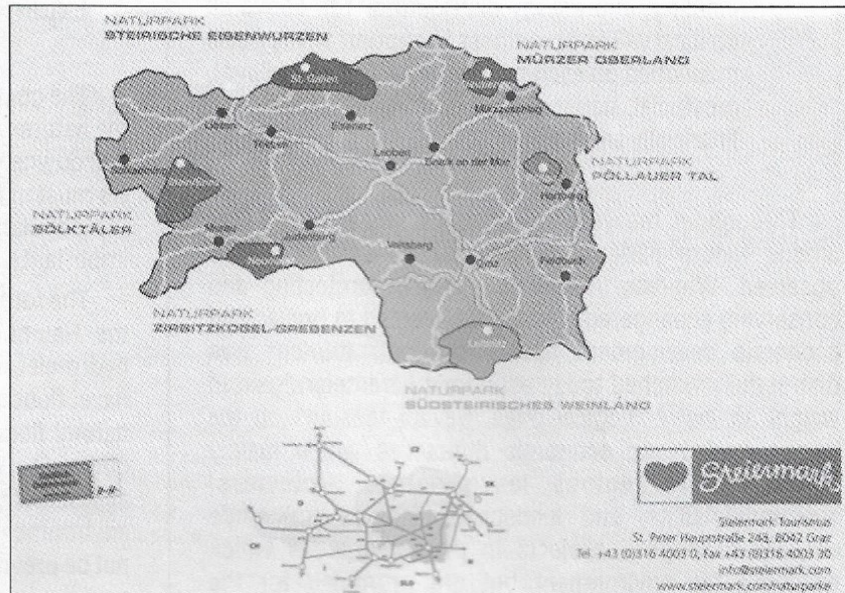


Fig.3:
Nature Parks in Styria (Austria).
Source: ARGE Naturpark und Steiermark
Tourismus, Graz.

Paragraph 25 defines open spaces (Freiland) as those not being used by agriculture and forestry but also not being classified as wasteland. Open spaces are predominantly unbuilt areas, usually with vegetation. They are found above all on the outskirts of settlements (garden centers, tree-nurseries, sports - and playing grounds, private gardens, waste dumping areas, flood or avalanche protection areas, etc.) Very rarely they are viewed at as spaces that deserve special attention or should be integrated into landscape planning measures. Land prices are usually low and therefore even if situated in a red or yellow zone which means absolute building prohibition or severe building restrictions many local authorities notably in small rural communities award building permits to their citizens who they very often know personally, or refrain from bestowing demolition orders on illegal constructions within the above areas.

Communal Zoning plans define actual and possible land uses of all real property units including transport and communication zones. In case of construction activities the developer(s) is/are legally bound to adapt the building(s) to the surrounding natural environment according to the requirements of settlement and landscape protection. However, such conditions imposed are rather rarely followed and controlled.

Nature parks

Already 90 years ago the idea was born to establish protected nature parks in those parts of Austria that comprised of landscapes of outstanding quality. These measures aimed at protecting natural and cultural landscapes from uncontrolled economic development (industrial and mining activities, hard tourism, large-style improvements of transportation facilities, unplanned settlement in the open country, industrial agriculture, etc.).

In 2005 there exist altogether 37 nature parks, in Austria (21 in Lower Austria, 6 in Styria (Fig. 3), 4 in the Burgenland, 2 in Upper Austria, 2 in the Tyrol and 1 each in Carinthia and Salzburg) (Verband der Naturparke Österreichs (ed), 2005, Graz, 54 p, s. also W. Zsilincsar, 20001, 20002, 2001).

Whereas nature parks at the beginning were very critically viewed at because the local population, especially farmers, foresters, and politicians had feared obstacles to regional economic progress, and building restrictions these pessimistic expectations today have been widely replaced by a positive mental attitude. Nature parks now are accepted as a good precondition for economic growth and prosperity but not at the price of losing environmental quality.

Therefore the goals of the Austrian nature parks movement are defined quite clearly:

- protection of the natural environment, and the traditional cultural landscape as it has developed throughout many centuries (e.g. rare orchards, small-scale field patterns)
- securing the function of recreation by offering attractive and well-kept facilities for soft leisure activities (walking-, jogging-, biking- trails; adventure playing grounds for children, special care for the disabled and families, etc.)
- education especially by applying interactive forms of experiencing nature and its forces (thematic parks and paths like forest- trails explaining various tree and plant species or animal habitats, info centers, traditional folklore, seminars, and exhibitions).
- regional development shall be fostered taking impulses from the nature park to increase regional economic growth and rise living quality. This demands willingness to cooperation between nature protectors, cultural activists, tourism, agriculture, regional and supra-regional

industry, and energy distributors. Yet, above all political will and readiness to support all the goals mentioned on each political level - local, regional, provincial, national, and European - legally, and financially are required.

Throughout the years a notable change of attitudes among nature park managers and politicians can be observed. Whereas initially the idea of protecting and conserving endangered landscapes seemed to prevail and economic development apart from soft tourism was distrustfully watched today economic parameters gain in weight against ecological ones. Severe tensions on the labour market and economic difficulties which mainly affect remote regions leave nature protectors, environmentalists, and landscape planners only little chances to oppose projects in protected areas which endanger the environment but are promoted for the creation of new jobs.

Two recent cases, supporting this assumption, can be mentioned for the province of Styria. One was the project of an Austrian international investor (Red Bull) to establish a center of motor sports and technology including aviation in combination with a hotel, a technical high-school, testing tracks, etc. worth some 650 mill. Euro instead of the former A1 formula 1 racing track in Upper Styria in an economically very weak region.

The Styrian provincial government wanted to push that project also for political reasons facing general elections in 2005 and did not pay enough attention to the necessary environmental impact assessment. As a consequence the project could not withstand the objections of adjoining property owners concerning air and noise pollution and thus was repealed by the national ministry of the environment. So the investor withdrew the whole project and the Styrian government, as a reaction, came to a very astonishing decision: "to prevent similar situations in the future" it declared that for future projects of that big a dimension no environmental impact assessments in the present form were necessary.

The second case refers to the construction of a 380 KV high-voltage electric transmission line through a predominantly rural cultural landscape in Eastern Styria. Here also economic arguments claiming supply security seem to get the better of ecological ones. When on Friday, March 11th almost the whole city of Graz was kept off from electricity supply due to a damage of a regional 110 KV-transmission line causing an economic loss of some 300 mill. □ this event gave energy suppliers a very welcome opportunity to stress again the necessity of the 380 KV transmission project in Eastern Styria.

The misuse of environmental arguments to stop a railway tunnel project under the Semmering pass for mere political reasons is being demonstrated by a conflict between the Austrian provinces of Styria and Lower Austria lasting 15 years now.

Experiences and consequences

The goal of nature protection which also had stimulated the nature-park idea in Austria has suffered from many ups and downs. Among the positive experiences of this attitude we must mention the fact that with a growing percentage of the population-environmental consciousness became an important issue.

The formation of the Austrian Green Party in 1986 after the Hainburg demonstrations of 1984 against a huge hydro-electric powerplant on the river Danube which would have flooded the last big Austrian wetland forest and natural flood plain is another consequence as well as the compulsory introduction of environmental impact assessments for all great projects that might affect the environment in the year 1993. Thus many projects could if not be prevented completely at least be mitigated as to their negative impact on landscapes.

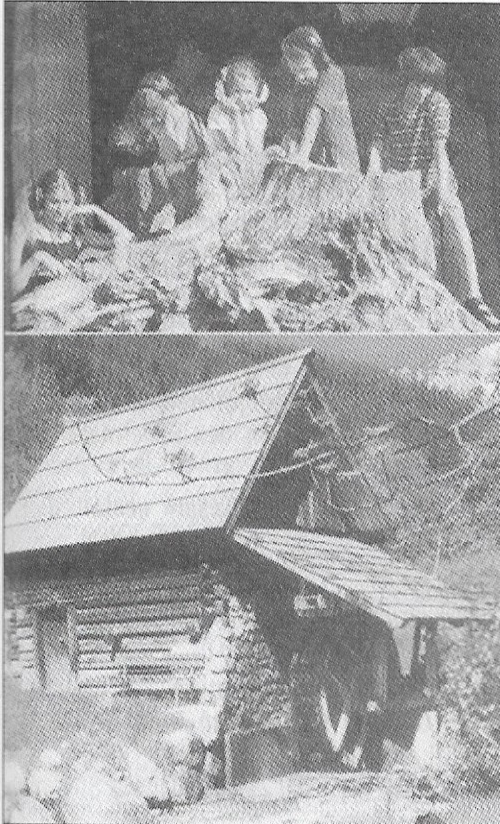
New artificially landscaped industrial parks in the outskirts of big towns and cities took the place of industrial complexes of the past designed for production only. Besides monument protection and the conservation of historic town- and roofscapes the protection of typical cultural landscapes like the Wachau on the river Danube, Lake Neusiedl, the Semmering Pass, etc. attracts increasing attention and approval by the public.

And yet, landscape protection and the nature park idea are not always seen in a positive context only. The main reasons for a critical reevaluation of these concepts may be sought, as paradoxly as it sounds, in men's daily struggle for survival. Open spaces are primarily evaluated as to their function as possible places for living, production in a broadest sense, transportation, and naturally also for recreation provided their equipment satisfies all the demands of modern leisure society.

Thus, nature parks and protected landscapes today function as primary advertising vehicles of local, regional, or national tourist organisations. Styrian nature parks for instance are promoted by slogans like "experience nature, comprehend/touch nature", "here you can experience something", "the source of recreation", "the fruits of nature", or "the pleasure of true life" (s. Fig. 4).

As every thing has got two sides, however, the positive aspects of landscape protection can very soon bring about negative consequences also. Landscape protection per se only functions either in the core zones of national parks, similar areas of restricted human interference, or on private property. The "Naturschutzbund Steiermark", (Styrian Association for Nature Protection) in 2003 has owned 231 private plots where nature can evolve undisturbed (J. Gepp: 2003: 90 Jahre Naturschutzbund Österreich. In: Natur- und Landschaftsschutz in der Steiermark. 199. Naturschutzbrief, 3/2003. Graz, p.4).

The increasing pressure on open spaces and largely unimpaired cultural landscapes makes it more and more difficult to defend them against the inordinate desires of



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Fig. 4:

Nature Parks and Tourism / Source: ARGE Naturpark und Steiermark Tourismus, Graz.

civilisation. It is not very astonishing, therefore, that environmentalists are warning before an inflationary expansion and increase of protected areas since the motives behind are sometimes merely economic ones (to make profit from marketing precious landscapes and thereby consequently destroying them). Sometimes proposals are too restrictive like that for an overall protected cultural landscape as it was propagated in the seventies of the last century in Austria. Such an idea would have made landscape protection totally insipid in the end.

In the above sense the Styrian Provincial Government has decided in 2002 to start a revision of all 49 protected landscapes in the country to verify whether they merited further protection or not. As a provisional result of this investigation 12 landscape protection areas were marked down to be either completely or partially eliminated from the list. This measure was supported by a decision of the Higher Administrative Court who had criticised lacking definitions that would make the reason for protection clear. On the other hand protected landscapes which were to be integrated into the Natura 2000 program as well as RAMSAR protected areas, biogenetic reservoirs or nature parks had not been questioned.

The Natura 2000 network of protected areas within the European Union in 2004 comprise 17% of Austria's surface area and 15,1% of that of Styria. The Natura 2000 regulations are not at all restrictive to economic development in the regions affected as can be seen from

the example of the Styrian nature park Grebenzen. There it was possible to reach an understanding on measures in the fields of nature protection, leisure-activities, education, and regional development that could be utilized as a platform for promoting eco-tourism. In close cooperation with the local population including 70 farmers and 50 commercial enterprises and supported by the target EU 5b-program a broad bundle of measures was elaborated (direct sales of biological products, workshops, regional cuisine, thematic tracks for walking and biking, etc.) which gives the region a chance for a sustainable development (J. Puntigam. 2004. EU-Schutzgebietsnetz Natura 2000. In: Natur- und Landschaftsschutz in der Steiermark, 204. Naturschutzbrief, 4/2004. Graz, p. 2). By the way eco-tourism plays a decisive role in the marketing strategies of international tourism in 2005.

The small West-Styrian community St. Martin im Sulmtal witnesses the successful integration of the inhabitants into the communal planning process for the future. An important role in this process of creatively and jointly shaping ones own environment plays the identification of each single citizen with his/her place of living. In any case it needs politicians ready to cooperate with their population, citizens willing to play an active role in their community, and entrepreneurs who do not only pursue economic goals (H. Römer. 2004. St. Martin gemeinsam gestalten. In: Zukunftswege. Magazin f. nachhaltige Entwicklung. H 2/2004. Hartberg, pp. 4-5).



Conclusion

The goal of landscape protection fortunately is no longer that of only a few environmental activists ignorant of the world. Since "green" parties not merely in Austria and Germany have gained substantial political influence in the recent past environmental topics and concerns have been politically instrumentalized to acquire votes. This can be noted especially in times of economic instability or recession when on the one hand economic pressure on remote valuable cultural landscapes may be lowered whereas it increases on the other hand on those parts of the environment that can be claimed - realistically or not - for economic development and the creation of jobs.

The Austrian province of Styria seems to have found one possible way out of the dilemma to reconcile the conflicting positions of economy and ecology. Through implementing Natura 2000 regulations in the Upper-Styrian nature park Grebenzen it was possible to reach a common understanding on both necessary measures of landscape protection and of regional economic development. Yet nature parks and protected landscapes should not be misused simply to function as mere advertising vehicles for touristic or any other kind of economic exploitation.

Based on eighteen years of active experience in environmental protection as a member of the Styrian Provincial Commission for the Protection of the Built Environment a conclusional remark may be allowed. Successful protective and conservative activity demands an appropriate political environment, legal basis, and, above all, financial support. The results of landscape planning and protection, however, in the first place depend on the willingness and capacity of all persons involved in this process to find a result of general agreement.

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