Cultural Landscape in the Czech-Slovak Context: Theory and Practice

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Abstract

The term "cultural landscape" is used in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in a wide range of contexts. The historical development of the concept of cultural landscape in the Czechoslovak academic sphere reflects the nature of landscape studies. The ever-expanding concept began to appear in more and more disciplines; in human, urban and regional geography, geology, landscape ecology, and was also studied from an environmental perspective. This thesis focuses on the analysis of the understanding of this term in the Czechoslovak context and its development in professional discussions. The subject is also how this academic understanding currently influences the setting of spatial planning systems in relation to landscape planning. It seeks to critically evaluate and provoke debate on the notion of cultural landscape and thus contribute to its clarification and rethinking research in contemporary Czechoslovak academic discourse. One of the purposes is also to evaluate the implications of scientific research on cultural landscapes in practice. The aim of the paper is to identify and analyse the main approaches of definitions of cultural landscape within different disciplines and historical periods. To evaluate how this concept has changed over time, what factors have influenced its interpretation and what influences the Czechoslovak scientific environment has had on its formation. In order to achieve the set objectives, a content analysis of scientific publications and scholarly studies from the Czechoslovak academic environment was carried out. A comparative method was used to compare different theoretical approaches to the concept of cultural landscape and their research methods. Also, an important observer was what research methods were used by different scientific disciplines. The understanding of the concept of "cultural landscape" in the Czechoslovak context was influenced by a strong geographical tradition, the historical development of the landscape and the legislative frameworks of nature conservation. In the early stages of research, the term focused mainly on the physical-geographical characteristics and uses of the landscape; in later periods, socio-cultural and historical aspects, in various interpretations, came to the fore. A significant milestone was the integration of ecological principles and the concept of sustainable development. The development of the understanding of the concept of 'cultural landscape' in the Czechoslovak academic environment has undergone significant changes, with its interpretation gradually expanding from a narrowly geographical perspective to multiple conceptions of cultural landscapes. This thesis contributes to a better understanding of the historical development and current perception of cultural landscape in the context of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as this has a significant impact on legislation and practice.

Keywords: *Cultural Landscape, Theoretical approaches, Practice*

1. Introduction

The concept of *cultural landscape* is used in many different disciplines. It is the subject of research in geography, landscape ecology, history, archaeology, and urban planning. This breadth and diversity provide academic depth; however, the specialized findings within individual disciplines are all the more difficult to utilize their results in practice.

In the Czech and Slovak (formerly Czechoslovak) context, this issue is particularly pronounced. What is lacking is a shared conceptual framework and legal grounding for the term *cultural landscape*—a framework that would enable its active use not only as a protective instrument but also as a tool for the restoration of landscapes fragmented by decades of insensitive interventions under the planned economy and 20th-century industrialization

This article therefore aims to examine the conceptualization of the term ***cultural landscape*** within the (Czecho-)Slovak context, with a focus on how its evolving interpretation is reflected in legislation and legally binding documents—that is, how it has been operationalized in practice. It also situates this understanding within the broader framework of current global discourse. Despite a shared historical and political background, diverse approaches and interpretations can be observed within academic discussions on cultural landscape, shaped by the distinct traditions and methodologies of individual expert communities. A further objective of this article is to advocate for the active integration of the cultural landscape concept—understood as a tool for renewal, regeneration, and conservation—into spatial planning practice in the (Czecho-)Slovak setting.

2. Methodology

To address the stated objectives, this study employed content analysis of scientific publications, methodological frameworks, professional reports, academic debates, and legislative documents originating from the Czechoslovak context. A comparative approach was applied to examine the diverse theoretical underpinnings of the cultural landscape concept. For the evaluation of the development and perspectives on Cultural Landscape, key publications from the second half of the 20th century from the Czech [2], [4], [8], [10] and Slovak academic fields [2], [3], [5], [6], [7], [9] were assessed. The majority of relevant publications analysed stem

from the post-2000 period, particularly within the disciplines of geography, human geography, and landscape ecology in Slovakia and Czechia.

The analysis of the concepts of *cultural landscape* and *landscape* was structured into five key areas:

1. Definition of the term and its current understanding.
2. Applied research methods.
3. Application in spatial planning processes.
4. Differences in disciplinary approaches to researching this issue.
5. Legislative anchoring of the concept – i.e. how the term *cultural landscape* (and landscape as such) is embedded in legal frameworks, influencing its practical application in various domains.

3. Results

3.1 Development of the Cultural Landscape concept

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, landscape research in Europe—particularly in France and Germany—began to foreground the dynamic interplay between the natural environment and human activity. In the 1890s, the German geographer Friedrich Ratzel introduced the notion of Kulturlandschaft (cultural landscape), defining it as a landscape shaped and transformed by human intervention [1]. Concurrently in France, Paul Vidal de la Blache was formulating the foundations of French geographical thought, proposing a model that conceptualized geography as the study of reciprocal relationships between human societies and their environments. For Vidal de la Blache, landscape was understood as a territorially embedded expression of social and cultural influence. His introduction of the concepts genre de vie (way of life) and milieu (environment) proved seminal in establishing a framework for analysing the spatial interrelations between geographical settings and societal structures [2].

The first formal definition of cultural landscape is most commonly attributed to the American geographer Carl O. Sauer, who in 1925 articulated landscape as "an area made up of a distinct association of forms, both physical and cultural." He further elaborated that the cultural landscape is "fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape the result" [3]. In 2025, this influential definition will mark its centenary. International recognition of the concept grew significantly in 1992, when cultural landscape was adopted as a category in the UNESCO World Heritage designation system.

The introduction of the cultural landscape concept into the Czechoslovak academic discourse was neither linear nor immediate. Nonetheless, it was significantly shaped by the influence of French regional geography. One of the early proponents of this tradition in Czechoslovakia was Jan Hromádka, who undertook a scholarly residency at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1930, where he engaged with the methodologies of renowned French geographers Albert Demangeon and Emmanuel de Martonne [4]. In 1943, Hromádka published Všeobecný zemepis Slovenska (General Geography of Slovakia), in which he conceptualized the landscape through a tripartite division: Work of Nature, Work of Man, and Result of Human Forces and Work: the Cultural Country [5].

Hromádka was among the foremost Czech geographers to significantly influence the development of Slovak geography during the interwar period of the First Czechoslovak Republic. His work addressed the interdependencies between natural and cultural regional components and framed the cultural landscape as a holistic synthesis of natural substratum, economic orientation, and socio-cultural context. Notably, Hromádka emphasised the formative role of labour, cultural traditions, religion, and everyday practices in shaping regionally distinct landscape types—endeavouring not merely to describe their physical appearance but to apprehend their symbolic and experiential dimensions, or what he termed the 'spirit' of the landscape [4].

Building upon Hromádka's conceptual foundation, Florin Žigrai advanced an understanding of the cultural landscape as a spatio-temporal construct. He defined it as a "hybrid open natural-anthropogenic system, which is the result of the action of man and human society in space and time" [6]. This systemic and relational approach found further resonance in the work of Czech geographer Jaromír Demek, a key figure in promoting comprehensive and integrative approaches to landscape research. His publication Systémová teorie a studium krajiny (Systems Theory and the Study of Landscape, 1974) [7] became one of the foundational texts within the evolving field.

By the 1960s, the scope of what would later be referred to as the cultural landscape had considerably expanded, even if the term itself was not yet explicitly adopted. Nevertheless, the concept came to be implicitly understood in its full multidimensionality—encompassing biophysical, socio-cultural, and symbolic layers of meaning—largely owing to the synthetic and interdisciplinary ethos that characterized landscape scholarship during this period.

Any inquiry into the origins of the term cultural landscape must also examine the evolution of the term landscape itself, as transformations in its meaning and scholarly treatment laid the conceptual groundwork for modern interdisciplinary discourse on the human-environment relationship. A retrospective on landscape science at the Geographical Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences is offered by geographer Milan Urbánek [8], who observed that landscape synthesis had become a unifying principle not only across all of physical geography but also in adjacent disciplines. As he recalled, "the scientific life of our entire institute was, from at least the late 1970s, deeply influenced by the idea of landscape synthesis [8]."

Urbánek in collaboration with other key figures in landscape research—most notably Ján Drdoš and Emil Mazúr— a research direction focused on Krajinné syntézy (Landscape Syntheses, 1983) was developed. This work advanced a holistic and integrated approach to landscape research, one that acknowledged and respected the spatial complexity of the landscape. Its proponents [9] warned that excessively abstract conceptual models threatened to erode the very notion of landscape, severing it from its material and experiential specificity and thereby undermining its coherence and integrity. In their view, the geographer's task moved from analysis through partial syntheses toward a "total" geographical synthesis—an integrative representation that assembled insights from multiple disciplines into a unified and holistic image of the landscape. This model, however, was rejected by the German geographical community at the 1969 Kiel Conference as unscientific [10].

Another significant development of this period was the development of the landscape-ecological perspective.. Landscape ecology introduced a suite of new conceptual tools, including landscape structure, the Territorial System of Ecological Stability (TSES / ÚSES), and landscape character ("krajinný ráz"). The initial formulation of the TSES concept was led by Miroslav Löw in 1986 [11]. TSES provided the conceptual and regulatory basis for systematically incorporating ecological considerations into environmental policy and planning practice, serving as an ecological framework for various types of planning documentation [12]. Although

landscape continued to be viewed holistically during this period, the emphasis shifted more strongly toward environmental and ecological dimensions, often at the expense of social and cultural considerations.

A more pronounced paradigmatic shift occurred in the 1980s and especially after 1989, when landscape research in Czechoslovakia—and later, separately in the Czech Republic and Slovakia—began moving toward specialized and thematically delimited forms of analysis [13]. This transformation opened the field to a broader plurality of scientific approaches. It was driven in part by political changes and democratization, in part by growing demands for the practical applicability of research outputs, and in part by the emergence of new technological tools. However, this evolution also contributed to a gradual weakening of the tradition of holistic landscape synthesis, as research agendas shifted toward narrowly focused, topic-specific studies.

3.2 Current Understanding of the Cultural Landscape

Although Czechia and Slovakia emerged as two independent states in 1993, their shared linguistic and academic heritage continues to shape both research and professional practice across the two countries. As a result, many conceptual and methodological approaches to landscape persist in parallel, rooted in the intellectual traditions of the former Czechoslovak context.

In Czechia, the term landscape is legally defined in Act No. 114/1992 Coll. as "a part of the Earth's surface with characteristic relief, formed by a set of functionally interconnected ecosystems and civilizational elements [14]." Slovakia, by contrast, lacks a formal legal definition, though a temporary one appeared in a 2000 amendment to the Building Act, describing landscape as „the complex system of space, location, georelief and other interconnected functionally interrelated material natural and man-made and man-made elements, in particular geological substrate and soil substrate, water, soil, flora and fauna, artificial objects and land use elements, as well as their links resulting from socio-economic phenomena in the landscape. The landscape is the environment of man and other living organisms [15]."

Both definitions reflect the ecological approach that shaped Czechoslovak landscape thinking in the 20th century. The ratification of the European Landscape Convention (ELC)—by Czechia in 2004 and Slovakia in 2005—renewed attention to landscape protection and planning, complementing the more selective World Heritage Convention (1992), which recognizes only landscapes of exceptional value and clearly defined boundaries.

Unlike the World Heritage model, which emphasises conservation of outstanding sites, the ELC promotes a more inclusive view of landscape, covering all types—urban and rural, pristine and everyday—based on people's perception and the interaction of human and natural factors [16]." This broader understanding resonates with British landscape theory, which sees landscape not as a fixed entity but as an idea shaped by perception, memory, and emotion. These ideas have influenced Czech and Slovak scholars Míchal & Löw [17] and Heinrichová [18], who argue for including intangible values—such as identity and sense of place—in planning and assessment. Yet in both countries, this shift remains largely theoretical: institutions continue to focus on conserving specific, historically valuable landscapes, with limited support for managing the wider, lived landscape as a dynamic cultural and ecological system.

Despite recent conceptual shifts, research in both **Czechia and Slovakia** continues to be strongly anchored in the tradition of physical geography. As Hynek notes: *"Czech geography mostly regards the study of landscape as the domain of physical geography* [19]*,"* despite earlier efforts by J. Demek to advance the study of cultural landscape as a legitimate field of inquiry [20]. This disciplinary orientation was also evident at the 2010 annual conference of the Physical Geography Section of the Czech Geographical Society, where Hynek's observation was reflected in both the composition of participants—approximately 50 Czech and Slovak scholars from universities, the academies of sciences, sectoral institutions, and applied research centres—and in the thematic focus of the contributions presented [21].

In both countries, several respected scholars in the field of landscape ecology—such as J. Kolejka and Z. Lipský in the Czech context—do engage with the topic of cultural landscape [22]. However, their research tends to concentrate on land use and secondary landscape structure, often limiting its scope to the effects of human activity on natural components of ecosystems. This approach typically lacks a more nuanced examination of the spatial organisation of human practices and their socio-cultural dimensions.

Currently, the **concept of cultural landscape** is gaining traction and relevance, not only as a response to growing environmental and climatic challenges, but also due to the increasing recognition of the need to understand human relationships to place and landscape in a more integrative way. In this context, there is a growing opportunity to reconceptualise cultural landscape in both Czechia and Slovakia. A recent contribution to international discourse by Geotcheus [23] captures this evolving understanding, framing cultural landscape as progressing from *place* (a geographically defined site), through *process* (a dynamic socio-ecological system), to *practice* (a set of methods, tools, and approaches for shaping and interpreting landscape.

3.3 Applied Methods in Landscape Research

A fundamental step in developing a nuanced understanding of both landscape and cultural landscape—and in applying these concepts in practice—is the process of analysis followed by synthesis of the information obtained. In many countries, systematic approaches to assessing (cultural) landscapes have been developed and operationalised. While these frameworks often share a foundational emphasis on mapping natural features, they differ notably in how they conceptualise and integrate the dynamic human dimension of landscape. For instance, in Germany, the method of Landschaftsbildbewertung (landscape visual assessment) evaluates visual integrity, character, and the impact of landscape change. In France, the notion of paysage is treated as a multidimensional and evolving phenomenon—a living entity that is simultaneously cultural-historical and ecological in nature. Urban landscapes are also fully recognised as legitimate expressions of paysage. In the United Kingdom, the widely adopted Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) method identifies and describes variation in landscape character, supporting both planning and conservation efforts.

In the Czechoslovak context, a distinctive methodological framework emerged: the concept of landscape structures, rooted in the disciplines of landscape ecology and landscape planning. This concept aims to interpret landscape organisation through the interaction of natural systems and anthropogenic transformations. Developed in Central and Eastern Europe, and especially within Czechoslovakia, it drew conceptual inspiration from Russian geographers and ecologists—most notably L. S. Berg and V. A. Nikolajev—who worked on functional classifications of landscape types. Within Czechoslovakia, this concept was significantly advanced by Czech and Slovak scholars including Miroslav Miklós, Ľudovít Miklós, Ivan Míchal, Jiří Löw, and others. The framework proposes a layered understanding of landscape structure, typically distinguishing between primary, secondary, and tertiary levels [24], with some later approaches suggesting the addition of a quaternary level. The following section outlines these structural levels as they are understood within the Czech and Slovak academic context.

Primary Landscape Structure. The primary landscape structure refers to the set of elements that constitute the original, enduring foundation of the landscape, predating human intervention. Though now altered to varying degrees, this structure continues to represent

the natural base upon which other landscape layers are built [25]. It includes geological substratum, landform (relief), climate, hydrological systems, soil composition, and original vegetation and fauna. This structure reflects the spatial distribution of natural processes and forms the basis for identifying homogeneous natural landscape units, each defined by distinct combinations and interactions of these components [26].

As the fundamental and relatively stable dimension of the landscape, the primary structure is the domain of the natural sciences. It serves as the reference layer for understanding how landscapes function and evolve under the combined effects of natural dynamics and anthropogenic influences. Comprehending the primary landscape structure is therefore essential for evaluating ecological capacity, resilience, and landscape change over time.

Secondary Landscape Structure. The secondary landscape structure consists of elements of land cover that have been directly created, altered, or shaped by human activity [25]. These are the visible, material aspects of the landscape—such as agricultural fields, built environments, infrastructure, or managed vegetation—and can be analysed from multiple perspectives: land use (physiognomic-functional), vegetation and fauna (physiognomic-ecological), and spatial organization (structural-spatial). Functionally, the secondary structure overlays the primary landscape, forming an anthropogenic layer that reflects patterns of land use and the degree of transformation imposed by human activity [26].

Jančura [24] describes the secondary landscape structure as the most visually prominent layer of the landscape surface—corresponding to what is commonly referred to as land cover, epigeosphere, or *summa terra*. He differentiates between *current* and *historical* structures: the current structure reflects the state of land cover within approximately the last five years, including preserved relics from earlier periods, while historical structures represent past configurations that often persist only as fragments or are gradually disintegrating [18]. These temporal layers are principally analysed within biotechnical and technical disciplines.

In both Czechia and Slovakia, landscape research has traditionally focused on the secondary structure, particularly its transformation over time. In Slovakia, Huba et al. [27] provided a comprehensive typology of historical landscape structures, defining them as temporally bound, diminishing expressions of past land uses—remnants that now survive in scattered and often degraded forms. Building on these foundations, Miklós, Izakovičová et. al developed a classification system of **Representative geo-ecosystems of Slovakia**, incorporating both primary and secondary structural analysis [28].

Recent Slovak research, particularly into historical agricultural landscapes such as **Historical structures of the agricultural landscape of Slovakia** [29] has explored Secondary Landscape Structure. Landscape ecologists in Slovakia have also explored aesthetic dimensions and the so-called landscape image. However, the dominant methodological approach remains object-oriented image analysis, especially for producing land cover classifications. To support these efforts, the compendium *Metódy výskumu krajinnej pokrývky* (*Methods of Landscape Cover Research*) was published in 2018 [30].

In Czechia, similar efforts have been made to classify landscapes typologically, typically based on geomorphology, natural features, or land use. To achieve a more balanced assessment framework that also incorporates cultural-historical values, the **Methodology for Typology of Historic Cultural Landscapes of the Czech Republic in** 2020 was developed [31]. This methodology extends beyond the secondary structure, encompassing tertiary and quaternary landscape dimensions as well. Inspired by UNESCO's 1992 classification—designed, organically evolved, and associative landscapes—it seeks to support the implementation of the European Landscape Convention by creating a national typology focused on landscapes with high cultural value. Although the authors acknowledge that the entire national territory may be seen as a historic cultural landscape in a broad sense, the methodology focuses on those areas where cultural significance is particularly prominent.

Tertiary Landscape Structure. The most significant conceptual divergence between Slovak and Czech understandings of landscape structure arises at the tertiary level. In Slovakia, the tertiary structure is defined as a set of socio-economic relations, often conceptualised as intangible elements associated with specific features of the primary and secondary structures [25]. These relations reflect the interests of various sectors in the use of land and natural resources and are expressed through legal, administrative, and regulatory instruments—such as protective zones, conservation areas, forests, and urban functional zones. Administrative boundaries also fall within this level. Although intangible, the tertiary structure is dynamic and subject to change through institutional and legal processes.

In Czechia, a foundational work in this context is Krajinný ráz (Landscape Character) by Löw and Míchal [17].These authors expand the concept of tertiary landscape structure to include aesthetic and compositional aspects of the landscape, along with subjective perceptions of its value. In their interpretation, the tertiary structure encapsulates cultural, historical, and aesthetic dimensions and is deeply influenced by the social and spiritual orientation of a given society. It is at this level that landscape acquires character (krajinný ráz) as a culturally mediated and symbolically rich entity. Consequently, this subsystem is closely linked to the humanities and finds practical application particularly in landscape character protection and spatial planning. Several methodologies have been developed to support this application, notably Péče o krajinný ráz (Care for Landscape Character: Goals and Methods, 1999) [32] and Krajinný ráz: Identifikace a hodnocení (Landscape Character: Identification and Evaluation, 2011) [33] by Vorel and Kupka.

Differences in disciplinary backgrounds among Czech researchers have shaped varied interpretations of landscape character. For instance, architect Václav Vorel emphasises aesthetic value, while ecologist Radim Bukáček focuses on the spatial arrangement of landscape elements. Even Löw and Míchal approach the topic from distinct disciplinary positions—architecture and ecology, respectively—but share a spiritual and philosophical orientation [34].

Quartenary Landscape Structure. Some conceptual frameworks have proposed a quaternary landscape structure, aimed at capturing perceptual, symbolic, and emotional dimensions of the landscape—collectively referred to as genius loci or the "spirit of place." This layer includes social relations, aesthetic values, place identity, and the lived experience of the landscape. In Slovakia, the concept is recognised in the Encyclopaedia Beliana [26], which defines it as a symbolic spatial projection of a personal or collective relationship to the land. Andraško describes it as a spiritual or perceptual structure shaped by factors such as culture, religion, tradition, health, aesthetics, or safety [35].

Heinrichová has further advanced this line of inquiry in the Slovak context by mapping social values associated with the landscape—such as identity, landscape character, and genius loci—with an emphasis on their role in planning and protection [18]. However, the division of landscape into four structural levels has not gained broad traction in mainstream scientific practice and remains a relatively marginal concept. In both Czechia and Slovakia, research still primarily focuses on the first three levels, and engagement from the humanities and social sciences remains limited. While human experience is central to the cultural dimension of landscape, its treatment in landscape research is often peripheral.

Towards a Holistic Approach. The **quaternary structure**, which integrates perception, symbolism, and meaning, remains the least explored dimension of cultural landscape studies in Czechia and Slovakia. Although it plays a crucial role in shaping how people relate to landscape, it is still underrepresented in both academic research and planning practice. Much of the existing research tends to prioritise detailed analysis of **secondary landscape structures**, especially historical or current land use, often at the expense of broader socio-cultural and experiential dimensions.

While **analytical methods** allow for in-depth study of individual landscape components, they also introduce abstraction that can obscure the landscape's holistic character. It is therefore imperative to complement analysis with **synthesis**—integrating insights from multiple disciplines to understand the landscape as a complex, interrelated system. Past attempts to synthesise primary, secondary, and tertiary structures have frequently overlooked the role of interpersonal and cultural relationships in shaping landscape identity. This gap must be addressed to ensure that cultural landscapes are not only understood in terms of form and function, but also in terms of meaning and lived experience.

The **layered nature of landscape structures** and the disciplinary diversity required to investigate them underscore the complexity of the cultural landscape as a research object. Narrowly focused studies, though valuable, risk missing the broader picture. As with many complex systems, the value of the landscape lies not in the sum of its parts, but in their interconnections—demanding a genuinely interdisciplinary and integrated approach to both research and planning.

3.4 Application in Spatial Planning

The concept of the cultural landscape offers valuable potential for applying a holistic and integrated approach in spatial planning, enabling the consideration of ecological, cultural, socio-economic, and aesthetic values in decision-making. In principle, spatial (land-use) planning provides a platform for coordinating multiple sectoral interests within the landscape, and for ensuring sustainable development and territorial identity. However, in current Slovak legislation, the term *cultural landscape* does not appear explicitly in spatial planning laws.

Slovak Republic: Institutional Fragmentation and the Absence of Legal Anchoring. In Slovakia, although the concept of the cultural landscape is well-established in academic and professional discourse, it remains weakly embedded in the country's spatial planning legislation. The term cultural landscape is absent from legally binding planning acts, and its operationalisation depends on auxiliary tools and methodologies rather than enforceable legal provisions.

The first attempt at systematic integration of landscape into spatial planning came with the introduction of the landscape-ecological plan (krajinnoekologický plán) through the amendment of the Building Act (No. 50/1976 Coll.) in 2000. This plan was designed as a technical and analytical document reflecting the ecological, functional, and visual qualities of landscape for use in preparing land-use plans [15]. Despite its potential, the plan had no binding legal status, functioning instead as a set of expert recommendations. It was developed separately from the municipal or regional land-use plans and its conclusions were not required to be incorporated into official planning documents.

In the current system, the landscape-ecological plan has been redefined as a landscape-ecological study (krajinno-ekologická štúdia), maintaining its analytical and non-binding character. It remains outside the legally regulated hierarchy of planning documentation and does not directly influence the regulatory content of spatial plans. Although it is recognised in planning practice, it serves only as a supporting basis during the preparatory stages of spatial development strategies.

Attempts to legislate a separate Landscape Planning Act began as early as 2003, with additional efforts in the 2010s and most recently in 2024. The proposed act aimed to elevate the landscape plan (krajinný plán) to a level of legal parity with land-use plans (územný plán), thereby making it a mandatory basis for regulatory planning. However, these efforts were unsuccessful, largely due to institutional resistance and the prevailing preference to integrate landscape considerations into the newly drafted Act on Spatial Planning No. 200/2022 Coll., which entered into force in April 2024 [36].

This new law introduced the concept of a landscape planning study (krajinno-plánovacia štúdia), defined in Decree No. 392/2023 Coll. as a spatial study intended to assess and propose strategies for the protection, restoration, and creation of landscape structure and green infrastructure [37]. However, this instrument—like its predecessors—remains non-binding. It falls into the category of spatial studies, which serve as optional background documentation and are procured either by planning authorities or by external actors (e.g. landowners, municipalities, or public bodies).

The new law allows the inclusion of cultural and landscape values—such as landscape character (krajinný ráz), historic landscape values, dominant elements, visual axes, and compositional relationships—in the informative and proposal parts of spatial plans at the municipal and micro-regional levels. However, the binding parts of spatial plans, which determine enforceable regulations and land-use limitations, rarely incorporate cultural landscape considerations explicitly. Some optional regulatory instruments (*voliteľné regulatívy)*—such as eco-indexes and urban context —can refer to cultural landscape elements, but these are mainly applied in urban contexts and only in selected planning areas (e.g. Bratislava and Košice). Other regulatory instruments in the context of cultural landscape (urban form controls, visual corridors, roofing form, or coloring) are also optional.

Moreover, Slovakia currently lacks a valid legal definition of landscape. The only attempt—formulated in a 2000 amendment to the former Building Act—was repealed and not replaced in the new legislative framework. Similarly, neither the Nature and Landscape Protection Act (No. 543/2002 Coll.) nor the new planning laws explicitly define key terms such as landscape character or cultural landscape [38]. Although a methodology for assessing the characteristic appearance of the landscape was developed in 2010 [39], it has not been applied in practice, due in part to its complexity and insufficient institutional capacity at the local level.

In summary, despite a rich tradition of landscape planning expertise, Slovakia's current system suffers from a lack of legal clarity, institutional fragmentation, and weak enforcement mechanisms. The integration of the cultural landscape into planning remains largely declarative and limited to non-binding studies and recommendations, without a coherent or enforceable policy framework.

Czech republic: Legal Definitions and Operational Methodologies. In contrast to Slovakia, Czechia has integrated the concept of landscape and landscape character more systematically into its legal and planning framework. The cornerstone is the Act No. 114/1992 Coll. on Nature and Landscape Protection, which explicitly defines landscape as "a part of the Earth's surface with a characteristic relief, formed by a set of functionally interconnected ecosystems and civilizational elements [14] § 3." It also offers a clear and actionable definition of landscape character (krajinný ráz), stating:

"Landscape character, meaning in particular the natural, cultural and historical characteristics of a certain place or area, is protected against activities that diminish its aesthetic or natural value. Interventions in the landscape character may only be carried

out with regard to preserving significant landscape elements, specially protected areas, cultural dominants of the landscape, and harmonious scale and relationships in the landscape [14] § 12."

This legal framework enables the evaluation of landscape character to be formally incorporated into planning decisions and environmental impact assessments (EIAs). To support implementation, the Nature Conservation Agency of the Czech Republic (AOPK ČR) has developed a set of expert methodologies for assessing landscape character, determining the limits of acceptable change, and evaluating the impact of development proposals.

Although these methodologies are not legally binding, they are widely used in planning practice and in administrative proceedings related to construction, landscape interventions, and spatial development. As such, Czechia benefits from a de facto operational system, even in the absence of a unified binding national methodology. The Ministry of the Environment retains the legal authority to codify such a method by decree, but has yet to do so.

Despite this progress, landscape planning as a comprehensive, cross-sectoral instrument remains uncodified in Czech legislation. There is no stand-alone landscape plan (as exists in some other European countries), nor is there a specific law dedicated to landscape planning. In response to this gap, the Czech government is currently developing a national Landscape Policy, intended as a strategic umbrella document that would unify the fragmented sectoral strategies of various ministries (e.g. transport, agriculture, environment, regional development). The policy is being developed through six thematic expert working groups: biodiversity, water, infrastructure, settlements and culture, agricultural landscape, and forestry.

Among the most promising instruments in Czech practice are land consolidations, which involve the comprehensive management and ecological restoration of agricultural landscapes. These projects typically aim to enhance landscape connectivity, introduce ecological elements such as hedgerows or wetlands, and restore the visual and functional integrity of rural space. However, the practical implementation of such projects is hindered by the insufficient spatial resolution of land-use plans, which are often too coarse to guide detailed landscape interventions. The ongoing debate centres on whether landscape planning should be institutionalised through a separate legal framework or embedded more explicitly in existing land-use planning systems.

4. Discussion

Over the past few decades, international research on cultural landscapes has increasingly embraced a holistic perspective, viewing the landscape not merely as a set of physical components, but as a dynamic and relational system. This shift marks a move away from earlier paradigms that focused primarily on topography, vegetation, and settlement forms, toward a more integrated understanding of how people inhabit, perceive, and attribute meaning to space. Cultural landscapes are now more often understood as lived and experienced environments shaped by both natural processes and human values, practices, and memories.

In theoretical discourse, the cultural landscape is commonly defined as the interplay between natural and human elements. However, in legislative and planning practice—particularly in Czechia and Slovakia—this concept is still often interpreted through a narrower, more conservation-oriented lens. Cultural landscape is frequently equated with physical heritage or historical structures, and its broader relevance for contemporary spatial planning and everyday life remains underexploited. Yet the cultural landscape is not merely a remnant of the past; it is an evolving spatial context where individuals and communities continuously act, remember, and create meaning.

Both countries have made important strides in incorporating landscape-related concerns into spatial planning. Czechia benefits from a clearly defined legal framework for landscape and landscape character, supported by methodological tools that are widely used in practice. Slovakia, meanwhile, has developed a long-standing tradition of expert-based landscape-ecological studies. However, in both contexts, there remain opportunities for deeper integration of cultural landscape values—particularly in the binding regulatory components of spatial plans, where such values are not yet fully reflected.

A further area for development lies in the participatory dimension of landscape planning. Although methodologies exist, the involvement of local communities, stakeholders, and municipalities is often limited. Strengthening these participatory processes could enhance the relevance and effectiveness of planning by incorporating diverse perceptions, values, and knowledge into decision-making.

Advancing the application of the cultural landscape concept in spatial planning will benefit from a more interdisciplinary and inclusive approach, combining ecological knowledge with cultural, psychological, and social perspectives. Understanding how people relate to landscapes—what meanings they ascribe to them, what behaviours and attachments they develop—is essential for shaping planning tools that are not only technically sound but also socially responsive.

As Josef Vavroušek insightfully argued, sustainability depends not only on recognising ecological limits but also on understanding the cultural, ethical, and symbolic dimensions of how we act in space. Reframing the cultural landscape in this way—as a living and co-created environment—can help bridge the gap between analysis and experience, between professional planning and everyday life. In doing so, Czechia and Slovakia are well-positioned to continue building on their strong traditions in landscape research and contribute to a more integrated, meaningful and sustainable approach to landscape management.

5. Conclusion

The long-standing research tradition in Czechia and Slovakia, with its emphasis on the physical landscape and secondary structures, has contributed to a segmented understanding of landscape as a series of analytically isolated layers. While this approach has scientific merit, it often distances us from the lived, dynamic reality of the landscape. A more meaningful understanding arises only when the landscape is approached synthetically—connecting ecological, socio-economic, cultural, and perceptual dimensions across all structural levels: primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary.

A comprehensive view of the landscape must include not only its physical form and ecological function, but also people's attachments, memories, experiences, and identities. Both Czechia and Slovakia ratified the European Landscape Convention—in 2004 and 2005 respectively—which calls precisely for such an integrative perspective. Yet its philosophy has been only partially embedded into planning practice. Landscape continues to be treated more as an object of protection than as a space for active management, dialogue, and co-creation.

Different interpretations of historical landscape structures also reflect varying national approaches. In Slovakia, they are often treated as static relics requiring conservation, while in Czechia they are increasingly understood as multi-layered systems that remain in dialogue with the present. Czechia's recent institutional developments in landscape character assessment mark a shift toward more holistic frameworks. However, in both countries, the human role in shaping, perceiving, and inhabiting landscapes remains underexplored. Participatory methods are rarely applied, and local knowledge is seldom integrated into landscape research and planning—resulting in expert-driven representations that may not align with lived experience.

It is increasingly important to reconsider our relationship with the cultural landscape—not as a fixed legacy, but as a dynamic, evolving system, where ecological, cultural, and social processes converge. Environmental, climatic, and societal pressures call for renewed attention to landscape as a shared framework for resilience and identity. Bridging analytical expertise with synthetic, human-centred perspectives will be essential for ensuring that landscapes continue to carry meaning, value, and quality of life for future generations.

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