

Everyday Geographies and Hidden Memories
Remembering Denis Cosgrove

Edited by
Francesco Vallerani



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8. Shared waterscapes: Meandering along a sentimental waterway

One of the most beautiful objects in nature is a noble river, winding through a country; and discovering its mazy course, sometimes half-concealed by its woody banks; and sometimes displaying its ample folds through the open vale. Francesco Vallerani

(Gilpin, 1808, 69)

It was mid-May in 1987, and the gladdening brightness of a late spring morning in Venice hardly spread into the shady maze of narrow alleys as I walked towards Campo San Polo. Without any problem, I found the sixteenth century building that housed the former Istituto di Geografia of Ca' Foscari University. The palace is located just inside of Campo San Polo, which is perhaps the largest square in the centre of Venice and only a few steps from both the Rialto bridge and the amazing prominence of Frari's Church. I had plans to meet Gabriele Zanetto, a Venetian cultural geographer, to discuss the role of landscape representations within the theoretical approach of humanistic geography. This topic was definitely relevant and would have undoubtedly improved my PhD dissertation on the waterscape evolution of the low plains located eastward of the Venice lagoon from the sixteenth to eighteenth century. My tutor suggested a geo-historical focus, which mostly meant an accurate investigation of archival documents and maps, the majority of which were preserved in the huge repository of Venice's Archivio di Stato. I also tried to take advantage of the great deal of literary texts and pictorial and architectural heritage that I was continuously discovering during my research, as well as of

1. Relph, E. (1976) *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion;
Seamon, D. (1979) *A Geography of the Lifeworld*. New York: St. Martin's; Pocock, D. C. (1981) ed. *Humanistic Geography and Literature*. London: Croom Helm.

2. Cosgrove, D. (1984) *Social formation and symbolic landscape*. London: Croom Helm.

technical reports and direct observations of surviving landscape features.

For sure, Gabriele could have offered me guidance about the developing relevance of representations in the geo-historical discourse. I was in fact aware of Gabriele's scientific curiosity about the relationships between phenomenology, literature and geography, since he was actually among the first Italian geographers to disseminate the foundational contributions of Eduard Relph, David Seamon and Douglas Pocock ¹. At the conclusion of our deep, but enjoyable talk, Gabriele accompanied me to the Institute's library where he shared with me a book that went into greater depth about the topics we had just finished discussing. "As to your goals," he said with his unforgettable sympathetic smile, "this is the most appropriate book. The author is an English cultural geographer, who is on the rise, and you should definitely meet." The title of the book was *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1984), and the author was Denis Cosgrove ². Before leaving the Institute, Gabriele informed me about the forthcoming international meeting on *Les Langages des Représentations Géographiques* that he was organizing for the upcoming September in Venice. He furthermore pointed out that Professor Cosgrove would be among the invited speakers. Fantastic, I thought to myself. I will take advantage of this imminent conference to become acquainted with Professor Cosgrove.

In the meantime, I started reading *Social Formation*. I still remember how my curiosity and interest were so deeply reinforced, since it confirmed for me that most of my uncertainties could be easily overcome, and I also had the chance to learn a few new interpretative tools. The chapters devoted to the two Italian case studies were obviously the most influential in regard to my abilities to effectually manage such an interdisciplinary approach. I cannot forget the emotion that I felt when reading a passage about Jacopo Bassano's landscape paintings. It made me grasp the importance and contributions of

minor artists by disclosing the hidden dynamics behind the evolution of a cultural landscape ³.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

A few days before the Venice conference, I met with Gabriele Zanetto once again, and I expressed my gratefulness to him for his suggestion to read Cosgrove's book. This unexpected encounter in the lagoon city was clearly helpful in order to discover the common cultural ground that really linked Gabriele to Professor Cosgrove. They both were actually involved in the theoretical pathway that concerned the role of symbolic representations and iconographies in the interpretation of the manifold reification of cultural landscapes. On the one hand, Gabriele was mostly captivated by a commitment to decode the symbolic languages of contemporary landscapes; on the other, Denis Cosgrove was clearly caught up by the seduction of the Renaissance legacy and how it had affected the long-term definition of European territorialities. They furthermore shared an acute sensibility in reading and interpreting the entire complexity of everyday landscapes.

Returning to the Venice conference, I was not at that moment aware of how important the two elder geographers would become to me in the very near future. Only thanks to few tiny allusions was I able to catch glimpses of their previous familiarity and the reciprocal esteem that existed between them. After I earned my doctoral degree, I continued to collaborate with both of them, and with such a pair of mentors, I felt decidedly protected and reinforced in the development of my expertise. A few years later, Denis and Gabriele, together with a Danish and Swedish partnership, applied and obtained sufficient financial support from the European community to develop an innovative project that they worked on together entitled "Nature, Environment, Landscape: European Attitudes and Discourses in the Modern Period, 1920-1970." This was absolutely one of the best opportunities that I was given to strengthen my scientific education. It also offered me the chance to build a strong international network. This fruitful col-

4. Soriani, S., Vallerani, F. and Zanetto, G. (1996) *Nature, Environment and Landscape: 1920-1970. The Italian case*. Padova: Dipartimento di Geografia.

laboration started in March of 1993 and ended three years later in 1996 ⁴.

Now, I just need to stop for a moment. As English is not my native language, I am aware that I do not possess the adequate capability to express what I am feeling as I write down these memories. The keyboard is under my fingers, waiting for my uncertain typing, while I stare at the screen lost in thoughts, and all of this is transformed into Times New Roman font written text. The powerful flow of autobiography is now directing my meditations towards the unfortunate destiny that struck both Gabriele and Denis within a few years. Such a sad coincidence still is fresh in the memory of scholars and friends that shared acquaintance with these two notable leaders. It follows that I have decided to remember here the special friendship that existed between Denis and Gabriele and to pay homage to their common kindness for including younger colleagues, as we were at that time, into the intimacies of their harmonious relationships.

Handwritten letters

When I first opened the dusty folder where I filed the letters and other correspondence concerning my post-doctoral activities, a melancholic flood of memories washed over me. Some of the autographed letters that Denis Cosgrove wrote to me starting in 1988 were still inside their yellowed envelopes with one edge brusquely torn open and the mail warranty of the Queen Elisabeth stamp still attached on the right side over my address. The challenge to edit a collection of essays to celebrate Denis, ten years after he left us, is the strong emotional response that musings of this sort elicit. On the other hand, shifting from my feelings of affection to the more mundane practicalities provided me with a good distraction and an opportunity to clean and organize, in a better way, my large personal archive contained within old cardboard folders that had previously been lined up on a dusty wooden

shelf. Their chaotic content of hand-written letters and drafts, typed research proposals, bureaucratic reports, photocopies of application forms, invoices, train tickets, tourist maps, and leaflets from special events was a reminder of earlier days. It is the multifaceted legacy of the pre-digital age, an immense memorial heritage that each scholar used to accumulate during the frenzied years of post-doctoral professional activity. Within this messy paper documents collection, I want now to focus on a letter that Denis wrote to me on February 7th, 1988. This letter provided me with details concerning his forthcoming fieldtrip with a group of students to visit the cultural landscapes of central Veneto.

The letter was a kind reply to my previous request to plan a special meeting in the central square of Cittadella, just in front of the City Hall. As a side note, Cittadella, one of the best preserved medieval, walled towns in Europe, is only ten kilometres from where I currently live. Denis had already established a detailed programme for the field trip, with dates, a defined timetable for each day, and a list of the expected visits that would include highlights of the Palladian landscape. In my letter, I had asked him if it would be possible, one evening during his Italian stay, to dine together, and he suggested that March 30th (Wednesday) would be the best date. On that day, Cittadella was actually a manageable stop on the way back to Vicenza for the bus with the entire group of students and leaders, after a long day of full immersion amongst the unfamiliar features of central Veneto. Since 1985, Vicenza was the perfect location to accommodate a «week's fieldwork during the Easter vacation to Venice and its region as part of a final-year course in cultural geography»⁵.

Today, it probably sounds surprising to plan a meeting in a tiny town via handwritten letters, almost two months in advance—all this done without the handy deftness of mobile phone contacts and even without any landline number at all. In retrospect, we were closer to Renaissance epistolary correspondences than to

5. Cosgrove, D. and Daniels, S. (1989) Fieldwork as theatre: a week's performance in Venice and its region. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 13 (2), p. 169 - 182. (p. 169).

the immensely more effectual and overwhelming flood of present-day emails. Anyway, the stated appointment worked so perfectly (in his previous letter Denis suggested “about six o’clock p.m.”), that I could easily pick up Denis and two of his colleagues, Steve Daniels and another person, whose name I cannot now remember.

Before dinner, we had enough time to walk a few steps from the meeting spot in the central square of Cittadella to the imposing local cathedral on the other side of the square to visit the neglected sacristy, which housed an amazing and secluded vaulted room with a remarkable collection of Venice Renaissance paintings. Thanks to the kind assistance of the sexton, it was possible to switch the lights on, and once we did, this fantastic, small art gallery suddenly radiated upon us the vivid colours of its canvases. Denis and Steve were both astonished by the unexpected abundance of pictorial works ranging from the end of the fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century. When Denis realized that among the paintings, there was Jacopo Bassano’s *Christ at Emmaus* (fig. 8.1), he definitely was amazed by such a welcome surprise. I sympathetically shared his astonishment when faced with the same painting that he had referenced in *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, which illustrated the important role of this minor artist in observing the conditions of rural life. Even though his passages could have only been based on printed reproductions, Denis still managed to capture with only a few words the true value of Jacopo’s iconographic themes and narrative aims:

«In *Christ at Emmaus*, set in a inn, the landlord, to one side, observes with apparent disinterest Christ and his disciples, more concerned about the payment of the bill or clearing the table for the next customers, than he is with the sacred event.»⁶ The painter was actually on the opposite artistic perspective when compared to the classic elegance supporting the complex symbolism of Giorgione and Titian. This was an apropos opportunity to exchange some ideas about the changing vision of

6. See note 3.



the countryside during the Renaissance Venetian *Terzafirma*, which stretched from the role of urban aristocracy in achieving the effectual exploitation of their estates to the slight role of Vergilian references in Jacopo's landscape painting.

The first thing that I did once we arrived at the simple, but imposing, façade of Villa Ramusa (fig. 8.2) was appreciate my guests' astonishment. This early-Renais-

Fig. 1 Jacopo Bassano: *Christ at Emmaus*, oil on canvas, 1537 (courtesy of Cittadella Cathedral)



Fig. 8.2 Gian Battista Ramusio's rural villa main façade, c.1520 (photo: Francesco Vallerani)

sance mansion is in fact my home. I had come across it five years earlier when it was for sale as a ruined and abandoned structure at the core of a former rural estate surrounded by a collection of agricultural and residential buildings. If it was a bargain to buy, it was not the same to restore, but that is another story. Since the Second World War, the former owners had started to divide the rural estate, which thereby resulted in serious alterations to the original structure of the whole nucleated pattern. The new owners, most of them local peasants, were totally unaware of the historical legacy inherent in the villa and the surrounding buildings. As active actors in the post war economic shift from the prevailing agricultural system to the dispersal of small industrial enterprises, they actually introduced new functions that demanded some structural changes that modified the former harmony. Despite such alterations, Denis was able to detect and interpret the historic fea-

tures of the primary authenticity in this pre-Palladian spot. For sure, Denis, at that time, was earnestly working on a study of the Renaissance Veneto landscape, and now, I am shyly wondering if a few years later he could have been reminded of this visit when he described in chapter 4 of his *The Palladian Landscape*, “the architectural origins of the Palladian villa”⁷. I cannot but recognize in the following passage an implicit account of the situation where actually Villa Ramusa stands: «On the estates of the Veneto the farm settlement took the form of a group of buildings collected around a courtyard. Such a nucleated pattern may be seen from the largest monastic estates to the meanest individual peasant farm, although the scale, type and variety of building obviously varied. [...] But we can establish essential elements well enough to demonstrate how the Palladian villa drew upon the pre-existing settlement landscape and re-articulated in the light of Renaissance architectural theory and the economic and cultural demands of patrons.»⁸.

Only now, I can reveal to myself the sound importance of that dinner, which was carefully cooked by my wife with most of the ingredients coming from the surrounding farms, which were at the time still functioning. The large kitchen with the comfort of a crackling fire and the tasteful flavour of Friulian cabernet enhanced the conviviality among people whom, except for Denis, I had never met before. Despite the risk of monopolizing the dinner with a conversation only focussed on scholarly topics, Denis and Steve were so gracious as to involve my wife, Maria Grazia, in our chat. It was anyways unavoidable to dwell on the motivating questions posed by our guests about the name Ramusa. “But ... any connection with Giambattista Ramusio?” Denis asked. My wife replied, “Sure. This was the mansion house in the estate he owned. He was used to spend some summer months here, maybe thinking about the collection of coeval explorers’ travelogues he was going to publish,” she finally added with just a little bit of modest pride.

7. Cosgrove, D. (1993) *The Palladian landscape*. Leicester, London: Leicester University Press.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

9. Ibid, p. 177.

10. Ibid., p. xv

11. Palladio, A. (1570) *I quattro libri dell'architettura*. Venezia: Franceschi. (quotation in the text is in F. Vallerani's translation).

As a humanistic geographer, Denis obviously noted the intriguing coincidence that I, a post-doctoral fellow in historical geography, should inhabit the very rural mansion that Ramusio had lived in just a short five centuries ago. Denis actually mentioned the Venetian humanist in his following published research, emphasizing Ramusio's role in the spread of knowledge about the New World overseas: «In 1553 G.B. Ramusio began his great work on the navigations and voyages of the discoverers. His three volumes were illustrated by maps and pictures of the newly-discovered countries.»⁹ After dinner, we invited the guests to visit the house from the ground floor to the former granary located on the top floor under the steep roof. Since then, the Villa Ramusa has embodied for me a large treasure trove of memories of a sincere and deep friendship between Denis and myself, which also came to include my wife and Denis's second wife, Carmen. Later on, we were deeply honoured when Denis mentioned us in the acknowledgements in *The Palladian Landscape*: «more recently Francesco and Maria Grazia Vallerani, in the delightful comfort of Giambattista Ramusio's former villa, have become valued friends and stimulating colleagues, helping me share their own love of the rivers and fields of the Veneto.»¹⁰

On the wake of watery seductions

Because water is absolutely essential to human life and produces various effects on us depending on what type it is [...] one should make every effort to build next to water that does not smell peculiar or have a strange color but is transparent, clear and pure.

[A. Palladio, 1570, *Book II*, p. 45]¹¹

This quote by Andrea Palladio suggests that hydrography is a special aspect of countryside enchantment. This description is also one of my favourites. During the *pax veneta*, across the entire Venetian inland, the placid flow of rivers, the bubbling spring brooks and the ordered layout of the drainage canals were key elements of the



local watery character (fig. 8.3). The lively daily work of the millers, the waterways and fluvial shipyards, as well as the berthing quays for loading and unloading goods, were all locations in which water offered an essential contribution to the cultural definition of the ‘beautiful landscape’, thus in line with the centuries-long tradition of landscape aesthetics. More precisely, Palladian waterscapes with all their manifold features have always been chosen as a steady subject in landscape painting, surviving the complex succession of art movements, of aesthetic tastes, of social and political attitudes. Here it is worth remembering once again the praise that Palladio offered for the fluvial sites that could be seen as undisputable scenic assets, which encouraged the construction of country villas. Water run-off regulated with basins and canals confined between banks, further bordered by shady rows of trees, facilitated relations between the city and the countryside, and this

Fig.8.3 Brenta River forested corridor north of Padua (photo: Francesco Vallerani)

occurred elsewhere, not only in the flat Venetian terra firma. Such hydrographic networks offered harmonious landscape features with attractive opportunities for leisure, which could enliven the souls of those walking along the banks, but also offered advantages for those sailing through the countryside. Due to such an intriguing cultural heritage, my emotional engagement with waterscapes, as multifaceted opportunities for outdoor recreation, progressively developed. I soon realized the immense cultural and historical significance of the territory surrounding my everyday geographies.

I have thereby tried to match in the most favorable way my own professional tasks as a cultural geographer with my inborne fondness for recreational water mobility. It follows that canoeing and kayaking along the minor rivers allowed me to build a special fluvial sense of place. Such a mundane mobility not only sharpened my scholarly gaze, but it also helped me to nurture a unique appreciation for waterways. The complex network of fluvial itineraries, with its succession of villages, Venetian-aged villas, old bridges, watermills, wooded levees and abandoned traditional boats, actually became an integral part of my personal mental inscape. Through a reflexive investigation, it was possible to combine my individual perceptions with a conceptualized effort to work out written texts on cultural geography. Going over my earlier publications on the Veneto waterscapes, it is self-evident that specific autobiographical circumstances clearly affected what I wrote. Right after my graduation, a local publisher asked me to capitalize on my expertise as a minor rivers' explorer. More precisely, he invited me to work on a special guidebook for the Veneto fluvial network as an attractive opportunity to re-discover the regional cultural heritage from a watery point of view. This was a fundamental experience that allowed me to share my inner affection for "blue space." Quietly paddling along most of the fluvial itineraries flowing down from the Prealps to both the Venice lagoon and the northern Adriatic shoreline, I gathered together the corporality of being an essential part of an

eternal flux and the emotion of appreciating the hidden dimensions of ordinary landscapes¹². At that time, I was totally aware of the potential importance of local waterways as unknown cultural heritage. This heritage, I believed, was worthy of being rediscovered within the framework of a newly emerging popular environmental awareness. Thanks to this approach, I started to equip myself with interpretative tools to better understand the relentless erosion of the Veneto waterscapes.

In the 1980s, Veneto's hydrography was still a neglected network with the unplanned and chaotic bursts that typically characterize urban sprawl. The spread of urbanization seriously affected most of the charming features of Venice inland, not only reducing the aesthetic quality of traditional landscapes, but also dwindling the ecosystem services. Despite such disruptive impacts, river corridors still managed to maintain some of their character. To date, the Veneto mainland is actually among the European regions richest in water memories, if for no other reason than it was, for centuries, dominated by Venice, the amphibian city. The segments making up the hydrographical network of Veneto rivers, precisely because they are distributed within a strongly transformed area, take on even more the aspect of a semi-natural linear oasis in which the relationship between hydrological dynamics and hydraulic management has to adapt to the growing social demand for leisure-time environments. Today, it is impossible to overlook the impressive extent of the hydrographic network in this area, especially when considering its valuable potential for a successful renewal of land development dynamics. Despite the undeniable lack of an effectual urban planning in the Veneto region, there have been significant episodes of conscious and durable recovery of large fluvial stretches to the extent that they are being defined as a "water town," which is now a prestigious award presented by several municipalities. In this respect, I willingly accepted subsequent research proposals involving keen on-site inspections. The condition of river explorer easily fit my expectations and my goals, not only in terms of

12, Vallerani, F. (1983) *Vie d'acqua del Veneto. Itinerari tra natura e arte*. Battaglia Terme (PD): La Galaverna.

13. Wylie, J. (2005) A single day's walking: narrating self and landscape on the South West Coast Path. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30 (2), p. 234-47; Ingold, T. and Vergunst, J. L. eds. (2008) *Ways of walking. Ethnography and practice on foot*. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.

developing expertise in geo-historical waterscapes, but also in terms of achieving an emotional awareness of the aquatic dimension.

As a young PhD student, I cannot help but remember my mother's astonished gaze, as I loaded the canoe on the top of my old car filled with provisions for maybe three or four days of outdoor pursuits. "Are you on leave?", she inquired anxiously. "Why don't you go to the library?" It was pretty hard to explain her, or to my academic tutor, that any efforts to achieve my research goals would entail leisure canoeing. As a matter of fact, the geographer needs to develop a true acquaintance with the materiality of landscape. As with the far more researched experience of walking¹³, leisure canoeing enables a better knowledge about the multifaceted watery features as visible outcomes of the evolving interaction between natural world and social-economic structures.

This is the attitudinal background that affected the choice of my research topics. When I first met Denis Cosgrove, I remember he was very open-minded and patient when dealing with my naïve expertise, which was at that time somewhat deficient. His inborne kindness was an endless source of fruitful advice that helped right away to improve my theoretical approach to cultural geography. On the other hand, he demonstrated a keen interest in fieldtrips. I soon realized his deep affection for rivers, so I did not hesitate to share with him some "secret" spots of mine that I was investigating. We especially shared the emotional enchantment of being solitary hikers along small river corridors (fig.8.4). During our first meeting in Veneto in the early spring of 1988, we visited the beautiful branching of the Muson River at Mirano, a small town whose urban structure is composed of a concentration of several villas with their historical gardens. Denis deeply appreciated a well-preserved garden, including the private one that we shyly visited through an unattended open gate. He hence experienced that «a large, often elaborate en-



trance, sometimes with elaborate wrought iron gates, gave access from the public highway»¹⁴. Despite the structural changes, it was still possible to understand the practical function of such an open space belonging to a villa building, mostly surrounded by walls and hosting «horticultural plots devoted to specialised vine production, orchard fruits or nuts, green vegetable and herbs»¹⁵.

In the following years, thanks to his habit of organizing field trips around Easter time, I had the opportunity to further my friendship with Denis—and our shared love for inland waterscapes. Despite the short distance covered during our trips along the braided landforms of alpine rivers like the Brenta and Piave, I soon realized how strong Denis's geomorphological expertise was. As a matter of fact, he was very efficacious in outlining with only a few sentences, the Venetian hydro-environment in a seminal contribution that he edited a few years later: «The major rivers have their origins in the Alps

Fig. 8.4 Denis and Francesco Vallerani in Veneto riverscape, March 1992 (courtesy of Carmen Mills Cosgrove)

14, See note 7, p. 94.

15, Ibid.

16. Cosgrove, D. and Petts, G. eds. (1990) *Water, Engineering and Landscape*. London, Belhaven Press, p. 37.

and carry large sediment loads. Their velocity slackens with the marked gradient change as they reach the flat Venetian plain, resulting in substantial deposition. The northern lagoon is also fed with fresh, clear water from a dense network of small streams originating in the line of springs (*risorgive*) that crosses the plain parallel with the mountain foothills.»¹⁶ Our travelling recognition of waterways, with a special regard to small-scale rivers, entailed innovative connections between bodies movement and the formation of a well grounded fluvial consciousness. The delight of canoeing lies in a new embodiment through the materiality of the floating hull. It is a sort of rite of passage: a peaceful possibility to cross the boundary between land and water, thereby obtaining new familiarities with your surrounding landscapes. I and Denis furthermore shared the common awareness that silent navigation along minor rivers, without motor propulsion, can be therefore likened to the charm of walking. Both of them give the traveller a special sensibility; they allow the traveller to explore the meaning of the land. We were eventually lingering on the thin line between the ecotourism experience and the reinforcing of a more empathetic scientific expertise, besides involving fluvial aesthetic evaluation, the lure of soft adventure, and the enjoyment of cultural heritage along the untrodden paths of one of marginal European countryside.

Fig. 8.5 Denis in the greenway along the Soar River with Francesco and Maria Grazia Vallerani, August 1990 (courtesy of Carmen Mills Cosgrove)



The lure of waterscapes exploration

In August 1990, my wife and I visited Denis and Carmen at Loughborough in the quaint comfort of their Victorian home at 11 Cumberland Road. This paper is not obviously the right forum to point out the delightful moments that we all shared during that week. If only as a way of protecting and keeping alive the personal intimacy, but I do to share the precious autobiographical repository that concerns the main topic of this contribution, which is our common attraction to blue spaces. I am not sure about the subconscious dynamics that affected our relationship at that time, but I do remember the common interest in local waterscapes. Denis, to some extent, tried to reciprocate for my “fluvial” hospitality when we had visited in Veneto over the previous years. He and Carmen actually introduced us to the biking and walking local itineraries stretching along the Soar River banks, both downstream and upstream (fig. 8.5). One day, peacefully sitting on the grassy left bank facing the sharp spire of the Normanton parish clock tower (fig. 8.6), we all were wondering about the possibility of descending into the Soar and paddling up to its mouth that led into the Trent river to reach the old berths at Nottingham. Maybe the day after, during a daytrip to Nottingham, I had the fortunate luck to find, rummaging through the shelves of a secondhand book



Fig. 8.6 Soar River upstream Normanton, July 1992 (courtesy of Carmen Mills Cosgrove)

17. Vine, P.A. (1983) *Pleasure boating in the Victorian era*. Chichester: Phillimore.

18. *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

seller, a copy of *Pleasure boating in the Victorian era* by Paul Vine¹⁷. What a rewarding case of serendipity! This book helped me to better define the lure of exploring rivers, or I should say the charm of re-discovering the huge amounts of peripheral fluvial corridors. In his anthology of waterlogs, Vine stressed the sense of excitement that came from exploring marginal and “hidden” streams and small rivers. He also devoted his attention «to those who might think small rivers and canals monotonous compared to the Seine or Loire that it was the very tranquility of the little streams and their unknown villages which made a pleasant change from the rush of the great rivers and their big cities.»¹⁸

In the spring of 1992 Denis had been spending about ten days with us in our house in order to complete his inspection of both the archive records and printed sources kept in Vicenza, Padua and Venice libraries. One day I asked him to pause his constant and engaging writing about the Palladian landscape for at least half a day: my suggestion was a canoe trip, maybe a dozen of miles, leisurely navigating a wooded and braided stretch of Brenta river, whose slight descending flow only needed idle paddling. The shadowy and gently sloping riverside, a perfect natural ramp to launch the fiberglass canoe, lay at a very short distance from one of the most impressive Venetian villas whose original central block is accredited among Andrea Palladio’s early projects, most of them related to the spread of land ownership belonging to both Venice and inland nobility since the third decade of sixteenth century. The majestic villa was built in the tiny village of Piazzola sul Brenta and it distinctly epitomized the successful mastery of Venetian engineering on the hydrological governance of its inland territories (fig. 8.7). The access to the middle course of the Brenta river, flowing across the very busy core of Veneto plain, a remarkable and well known case of urban sprawl¹⁹, offers unexpected insights on traditional rural landscapes, so far untouched and set aside precisely along the large fluvial corridor. The canoe trip on the Brenta river was an unexpected proposal, that

19. Cosgrove, D. (2007) From Palladian Landscape to the *Città Diffusa*: the Veneto and Los Angeles. In: Roca, Z., Spek, T. and Terkenli, T., eds. *European landscapes and lifestyles. The Mediterranean and beyond*. Lisboa: Edições Universitárias Lusófonas, p. 33-44.

actually filled a gap in Denis' place perception, thereby integrating his knowledgeable competence about Veneto hydrography.

After that first fluvial navigation, we experienced other rivers in central Veneto and the previous aim to play the role of conscious and trained scholars in the theatre of waterscape heritage progressively merged with the sheer pleasure of moving with the flow. We both realized that the enjoyment of gliding uneventfully through the silent loneliness and the changing features of the variously wooded banks cannot but enhance landscape perceptions and physical well-being. Despite Denis' main interest in the evolution of ideas, «that are important agents in the world even if they cannot be immediately linked to embodied practice». ²⁰, the relevance of geographical fieldwork, as part of his broad passion for outdoor life, was undeniable. The emotional engagement of downstream navigation went soon beyond the

20. Freytag, T. and Jöns, H. (2005) Vision and the 'cultural' in geography: a biographical interview with Denis Cosgrove. *Die Erde*, 136 (3), p. 201 – 216, (p. 209).

Fig. 8.7 Villa Contarini at Piazzola sul Brenta (XVI-XVIII century)



21. Ryan, C. (2010) Ways of conceptualising the tourist experience - a review of literature. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 35(1), p. 37–46.

22. See note 7, pp. 61–62.

materiality of mobile floating as a mundane touristic practice, actually involving other questions that have a lot to do with both personal sensibility and cultural background²¹. Being in the wake of waterscapes not only entails a ravishing interaction of self with visible features, but also a more complex refraction of and attuning with the long time evolution of hydraulic heritage.

Few nights before the above-mentioned canoe trip, after an evocative wandering in the historical centre of Vicenza, immersed in the fascinating Palladian atmosphere, I had suggested to Denis to take a look at the urban hydrography. Maybe thanks to the striking brightness of the twilight, we both were dazzled viewing at the Retrone river from *ponte Furo*, a Roman age stone bridge. Standing in the middle of the bridge, it was possible to appreciate the harmonious fluvial scenography. Two opposing riversides with Renaissance buildings encompassed the river's smooth surface clearly mirroring the extraordinary perfection of the Palladio's Basilica with the civic tower. Both emerged in the background over the thick gathering of coeval vernacular buildings (fig. 8.8). Not far from here, Retrone river flew into the Bacchiglione, one of the most frequented waterways since the Middle Ages, allowing the navigation toward Padua and Venice. A few months later, Denis pointed out the strategic role of hydrography in Vicenza's townscape in his masterly contribution to the Palladian landscape: «The confluence of two rivers forms the site of Vicenza: the Retrone is a small stream emerging from the Berici Hills while the Bacchiglione, collecting waters from the northern plain, was the navigable river flowing via Padua to the Venetian lagoon»²².

Such an apprenticeship with minor rivers navigation probably had an influential impact on Carmen's and Denis' perceptions as well. I do not exactly remember when Denis informed me that he had bought a canoe. However, I was delighted that he had. Since then, I felt an even stronger bond and familiarity, which only fur-



Fig. 8.8 Vicenza, the Bacchiglione River and Palladio's Basilica with the civic tower (photo: Francesco Vallerani)

ther enhanced our common interest and draw towards waterscapes. In March of 1993, the abovementioned European project, directed by Denis, officially began. Taking advantage of the kick-off meeting at the Loughborough University, I visited Denis once again. Despite

our duties, we found the time to enjoy a trip onboard Denis' new fiberglass canoe. We paddled downstream on the Soar River's gentle gradient, enjoying the pleasure of the flowing meander through the green fields and wooded edges with continuous discoveries of "unknown" sceneries bend after bend (fig. 8.9). Our temporary condition as river explorers represented for us not only a chance to indulge our implicit desire for adventure, but also a sort of reenactment of past fluvial navigation. Like old boat people, we moored the canoe at the Rose & Crown Inn to sit outside at a table with a view of the canal to drink some of the most tasteful ales of the county. I realized that Denis and Carmen's sense of place to some extent changed after they began canoeing. Their perceptions of Loughborough's ordinary urban landscape changed once they were able to explore the Soar River as a part of the extraordinary network of waterways vivifying the traditional rural England.

At that time, it was not as typical to come across people kayaking or canoeing along the English minor river networks. Today, there has been a noteworthy increase of passionate paddlers that involves most of the typologies of natural hydrography while artificial canals host a growing traffic of narrow boats. As a matter of fact, just a few minutes of scrolling on the "British Canoeing" website, especially the part devoted to the Soar River, allows one to realize to what extent fluvial navigation has expanded. The recent launch of the "River Soar Canoe Trail" is the most recent step in a growing consciousness about the strategic role that minor rivers can play to create a more effectual commitment among people to defend their everyday environments. It follows that «Canoeing is a great way for people to enjoy our historic waterways, and the River Soar is a great example of this. The route of the trail will provide opportunities for paddlers of all abilities to discover a huge variety of landscapes and heritage attractions.»²³.

After a meeting in Venice in September of 1993 for our shared project, Denis and Carmen stayed with me and

23. British Canoeing, 2015. *River Soar Canoe Trail Launched*, [online]. Available at www.britishcanoeing.org.uk/news/2015/river-soar-canoe-trail-launched [Accessed, 15 March 2018].

my wife for few more days. As is often the case, these days at the end of the summer were hot and sultry. The suffocating humidity was uncomfortable, and whatever choice we made to enjoy this free time was spoiled by an overwhelming sense of tiredness and laziness. Due to her usual vivid spontaneity, Carmen declared that the only escape was to swim, no matter where and how, but to dive into whatever body of water was available. Denis remembered that the Brenta River was not far from the house. That was actually a pretty wonderful idea; swimming in the rippling freshness of the current had the expected beneficial effects. Such a corporal well-being perfectly attunes with Gaston Bachelard's psychoanalytic vision of aquatic spaces: «Our first ardent belief is the well-being of the body. It is in the flesh and organs that the first material images are born.»²⁴ In his dreaming interpretation of the powerful relationships between contemplation and creative action, Bachelard emphasizes the regenerative role of cool waters, especially in spring time: «To the play of clear waters and springtime waters, all shimmering with images, must

24, Bachelard, G. (1983) *Water and Dreams. An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, p. 8.

Fig. 8.9 Denis paddling on Soar River, summer 1997 (courtesy of Carmen Mills Cosgrove)



25. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

26. Deakin, R. (2000) *Waterlog. A Swimmer's Journey Through Britain*. London: Vintage.

be added a component part common to the poetry of both: coolness.»²⁵.

At that time, I was not very accustomed to swimming in rivers. However, watching Denis's great confidence in the cold water and in the small whirlpools changed my attitudes and perceptions. It was self-evident that his enjoyment exceeded a mere physical regeneration after a hot day, and it was more than Bachelard's *coolness*. I could in fact empathize with how Denis experienced the regenerative power of natural water when crossing to the border of the bank of the river. Swimming in nature entails a sense of absolute freedom and improves the unique aquatic empathy that to some extent interacts with the inborn hydrophilia that he clearly demonstrated. The aquatic condition of the swimmer is a complex sensorial experience that, according to the astonishing Roger Deakin's waterlog, could be described as a peculiar floating mobility²⁶.

In the following years, I had additional opportunities to observe and better understand Denis' fondness for swimming. Whenever we shared short vacations, the seduction of waterscapes was constantly affecting our recreational decisions. A good example is the week that we spent together in France. When we first arrived at Ansac-sur-Vienne, Rue des Violettes, in late July 1994, to be hosted in Denis' second fascinating renaissance home, we felt definitely awed by the location. The warm atmosphere of the old building, with the original smoothness of antique tile floors and the irregular structure of the ceiling beams, was strongly enhanced by the backyard vista. This open space was a meadow with a gentle gradient that sloped down to the left bank of the Vienne River where a row of slender poplars flanked the grassy shore. My wife and I were astonished, like daydreamers in front of a breathtaking vision of the ideal landscape. Denis helped us in deconstructing and thence managing our emotional response by evoking the landscape's painting heritage. "Doesn't this place remind you of Claude's pastoral visions?" he quietly pointed

out. That was the ideal start for one of the most agreeable explanations of cultural landscapes that I have ever heard. What an enchanting experience to listen to Denis's intriguing talent for telling stories about rivers and painters: a common source of enchantment! «Thus, water will appear to us as a complete being with body, soul, and voice. Perhaps more than any other element, water is a complete poetic reality»²⁷. All together comfortably sitting in his backyard, only a few meters from the flowing Vienne and sipping a cool glass of Verneuil-sur-Vienne rosé wine, he actually started his open-air talk with an intriguing and dense sequence of suggestions. Among them, he first invited me to consider the relevance of William Gilpin's *Observations*, which included a discussion of English rivers²⁸. This long-standing memory stirs my emotional repository similar to the way in which other common watery experiences that we shared afterward still do.

Now, I am at the end of my autobiographical journey of a friendship that left a lasting impression on me both personally and professionally. I have been at my desk many hours since the beginning of January 2018. It was not obviously a continuous engagement, due to the increasing commitments of everyday academic life, more and more constrained between the iron tongs of bureaucracy matters. I realize that tomorrow will be March 21, exactly ten years after Denis drew his last breath. Life is often made up of unforeseen concurrencies that could drive us to contemplate the uncanny sweetness of melancholy. The more that I remember Denis the more that I miss his companionship. The exercise of writing these few pages was not only a good therapeutic strategy to deal with his loss, but also a motivating opportunity to better define the map of my everyday geographies. From the inside of this very house to the surrounding outside corresponding to the Palladian landscape, with its fascinating network of streams and rivers, up to the daily destination of my office in insular Venice, I realize now how all of these locations are so deeply imbued with hidden traces that are capable

27. See note 24, p. 15.

28. Gilpin, W. (1808) *Observations on Several Parts of England*. London: Cadell and Davies, vol. I.

of refreshing my memories of Denis. I know that such a personal mental map contains so many other people worth remembering. What is there to say? This is the common flaw of people as they get older.

I have to stop writing soon, but I can hear the wind whistling, the “bora” (from boreal). It is a cold wind blowing from Slovenia, pushing a heavy rain against the shutters of my study. It is the vigorous sound of the arrival of spring, whose continuous rain fills the water table that was heavily exhausted last summer. In the distance, northward, the uneven profile of the Pre-alps is whitened by a deep, thick mantle of snow. Rain and snow: Palladian landscape hydrography will benefit from this abundance, once again creating opportunities for the enjoyment of pleasurable navigation, filling the fluvial natural pools with fresh water in which to swim joyfully, greening the fields, making the trees lusher than they were last year during the parched summer. What a perfect natural attunement with whomever feels the magical power of water as a cure for themselves. Rephrasing Denis’ words, if all of the world is a spectacle, a theatre, we can play out our own drama successfully only by sharing memories and thence crafting a new world in the everyday relationships that we build both between friends and with the whole community to which everybody belongs. Such a recovery of the affective dimension is definitely fueled by the silent presence of friends like Denis who inspire us to be better people.