

The avenue as a tool of detecting and understanding the history of the cultural landscape.



Avenue at Maltesholm estate, Scania. Photo: Gunnar och Henning Weimark, 1953, Naturskyddsföreningen i Skåne

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Background

In January 2005, I was accepted at the Nordic Museum school of research. This is a interdisciplinary research school aiming to finance the PhD education for 13 persons working in the cultural heritage sector. From this, you might understand that my workplace is not at an academic department but at the Regional Museum of Scania. During my Ph.D. research, I keep my job at 20% and do my research at 80%. The aim of the Nordic Museum is to improve the education level at the museums in Sweden. This has to do with the fact that today most of the Swedish museums are not connected with the concept of “research” as they used to be in the 1970s and earlier.

I have been working with avenues since 1996 as a part of my work at the regional museum of Kristianstad. The work mainly consisted of giving advice to farmers regarding the maintenance of their avenues. Advice was given via personal visits to their farm or via courses. Everything was done in close collaboration with a biologist and an arborist. This has meant that I have a good knowledge regarding both the biological values of avenue-trees as well as the practical maintenance-side of avenue tree-care. In 2005 a “Handbook of avenues” was produced (“Alléhandboken”). The book (in Swedish) deals with the history of avenues, their biological values and has a chapter of avenue tree-care. It also describes the most common avenue-trees in Scania and has a map-section where historical avenues from three different map-layers (beginning of the 19th century, middle of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century) are shown on today’s map.

The topic, introduction

My aim is to study the cultural landscape *through the avenue*. By focusing on the avenue, I hope to receive information about the structure of the landscape that otherwise could be missed. It is also theoretically interesting as a tool of understanding the symbolic landscape, the “genius loci” of a place. This means that we on one hand have the physical, the tangible, landscape and on the other hand the cognitive, mental landscape (Germundsson, 2001). This further means that people, depending on who they are, understand and interpret the landscape differently. The avenue is a clearly visible object that means a lot to the character of the

landscape, and it is interesting as a cultural heritage, To me, working in a museum, the ability to read history directly in the landscape is vital. For example, if the avenue is not understood in its context, reconstructions of avenues may fail and by mistake making the physical landscape unreadable.

The estate-landscape could be seen as an ideological landscape. Here the avenue represents a continuous powerposition and a maintenance of traditional values, while the adjacent landscape stands for economic rationalism (cf. Germundsson 2001). The avenue is often one of few remnants informing us of how the landscape was formed. It can for example give us a clue to whether land-reforms were carried out in one occasion or at several points in time. It is also a tool for understanding what kind of landscape that was “made” at a certain time. Was it for example a baroque or a romantic landscape that once was created? In Scania these two different styles appeared at almost the same time. The road and avenue give us a hint of which landscape-character that became ideal at a certain estate. When it comes to the romantic landscape I suggest that you can talk about a more intellectual landscape. During the romantic period the entire landscape was shaped to look as natural as possible, and those who could recognize this were other intellectuals, e.g. visiting nobility. This dimension of power differs from the more direct baroque-landscape with huge arable fields, straight creeks, roads and avenues.

The type of tree in an avenue can give us information of how much woodland that existed at the time of the avenue-planting and which variety of trees that existed. It also gives us information regarding the wealth of the owner; if it could be afforded, dutch lime was imported, for example.

My study area is the county of Scania with outlooks on other regions. I believe that my results can be used in other parts of Europe if the definition of the avenue is clear to everyone. I mean that no matter where in Europe you are studying the rural landscape, you must understand the reason for the presence of the avenue in order to fully comprehend the structure of the landscape. The avenue is a tool of detecting events that are important in the landscape history. I will talk more about the definition later on.

My focus is on avenues *along roads*. This means that I will not dig deeply into avenues in cities, churchyards, gardens and parks. Of course I must have a broader knowledge of these,

especially avenues in gardens, as it is not unlikely that the history of the road-avenue starts in our estate-gardens. Instead, I am interested in avenues *leading to* the cities, churchyards etc. I believe they are a piece of a broader structure and in order to understand the entirety of the landscape, you must understand the pieces that form a whole. I mean that the avenue is one of the most important founding stones in the landscape, being not only a tool of understanding the physical landscape but also a tool of understanding the symbolic landscape.

Definition

When I talk about *road-avenues* the definition includes the following important features:

- 1 The avenue has a starting point and a target- or end-point.
- 2 The avenue confirms an event in the process of landscape management. The avenue has a connection to the organisational whole.
- 3 The trees in an avenue are *planted* with a certain distance between the trees.

If these turn to be correct one can easily understand the importance of studying the avenue as a source of landscape knowledge. Today the avenue is often used as a tool to illustrate a fact previously verified. By putting the avenue at the forefront of research regarding the rural landscape, I believe a lot of new knowledge can be gained.

In order to explain the definition better, I would like to present the following examples:

A starting point can be a mill, a border, a church etc. Something that has an important meaning to the targetpoint e.g. the main-building at an estate. Another example is an avenue that has the objective to point out where the domains end. This could be done by planting a onesided avenue along the border. Yet another way of using the avenue is regarding road-maintenance. Prior to 1894 the roads were divided between the landowners and every farmer was responsible to maintain a piece of the road. By planting an avenue, the road-holder had done a permanent marking of the road during flooding, earth- and sandstorms, fog and snowy weather. The road-avenue differs thereby from garden avenues by having a definite start or end. In a park or garden the infinite is sometimes the purpose of an avenue. The double tree-line is also a symbol of the avenue in a garden. This is not compulsory regarding the road-avenue.

The second part-definition is about the avenue as a marker of an important event. It is likely that an avenue is planted when an estate are performing some kind of change e.g. a new main building or an enclosure of the land etc. As mentioned above, it is difficult to understand the objects in the rural landscape unless the organisational whole is understood (Qviström 2003). My point regarding avenues is that if the line of trees lacks connection to the organisational whole, it is *not* an avenue. This also means that one cannot understand the whole if the objects are seen as solitaires (Qviström 2003).

The third part-definiton is obvious. An avenue is a man-made project. This is stated in a delicate way in 1757 by Axel M Arbin. “Knowledge, taste and genius can correct the errors of nature...” (direct translation to english) (Edenheim 2004:55). The intersection between nature and culture is very interesting and despite the quotation above, the landscape of nobility in England was formed with a balance between nature and culture (Cosgrove 1998). I believe this is also the case for Scania.

It seems quite clear that the meaning of the word avenue has changed and developed during history. One may today not think of an avenue in the same way as before for a number of reasons, predominantly that the avenue has evolved from not only being an object in the garden to something that connects and ties up the landscape. I would like to say that one can talk about two different expressions namely:

“This is an avenue” and “This is *like* an avenue”. The latter being said in environments where the avenue originated, namely in the park and garden. This is thus yet another way of talking about the avenue as something in the mind, a symbol. The definition between the two are different. An avenue of the mind consist of objects (not necessarily trees) in two lines and inbetween them a walk. This means that we are back to the original word meaning avenue namely “walk” as it is described by Sarah Crouch (Crouch 1992). A walk is the approach to an estate lined with trees on both sides of the approach. Probably the most famous walk is “the long walk” leading up to Windsor castle, a walk of about five kilometres.

Outlay

Firstly I will discuss *the environment at the estates* which probably is the place where the road-avenue at first appears. It is likely to have its history in the parks and gardens as avenues at Övedskloster and Skeinge are signs of. However, it may also have direct international references, possibly from Italian renaissance and Palladio, who in the 16th century wrote about road-avenues (Olsson 2005). In general, this environment is well-known and a number of research-projects have focused on this landscape. However, I find it valuable to verify this as the avenue has not been at the forefront of earlier research. It has been used more as an object to illustrate an estate-landscape. I see it as a source of knowledge in order to fully understand the history of the estate-landscape.

One interesting feature, that I have previously mentionend, is that of an avenue which is planted to mark e.g. the starting point of the arable land that is going to be enclosed. The road is now often straightened out, as well as the creek and the entire landscape. Often another land reform takes place a number of years later and then the avenue stretches far outside the estatecore.

It is quite clear that the estate-avenue has changed during history, not only spatially but probably also regarding type of trees and - most interestingly connected with my thesis - regarding sub-ordination and the aspect of power. I would like to explain this a little further by drawing to your attention to a few examples. The first is about contrast regarding functionality-aesthetics and nobility-farmer. The nobleman wants to have an aesthetic and a modern avenue. In order to have this the farmer have his cattle grazing the avenue or cut the grass for hay.

A typical example of an estate-avenue is one with only one type of tree close to the main-building and further out an avenue of many species where each tree has been chosen for its function connected with soil quality. The further out, the more "natural". In this case it is length that means power. Distance means power and also time becomes power. The owner has power not only of the domains but also of the traveller. Sometimes power via the avenue can stretch yet another step and that is in the form of selection. By this I mean that not everyone has access to a private approach with an avenue. The wayfarer has only the right to pass the avenue, not to travel in the avenue. In an estate environment with an avenue of many

kilometres in length, such as Markie Hage in southern Scania, the avenue is a clear sign of power and subordination towards the pertaining farmers. In his studies of woodland in 18th century England, Stephen Daniels points out that “planting accentuated the impression of power” (Daniels 1997:45). He also writes about avenues informing the reader that they ..“were arranged to emphasize the apparent as well as the actual extent and unity of an estate”.. (Daniels 1997:45).

Secondly I will study avenues which lead the traveller to a town. The approach-avenue to towns also dates back to the 17th century. Unfortunately, I at this date do not know that much about this phenomenon but I am convinced that they are a vital key in understanding the history of a city. The avenue may reflect an important event and it will have a starting point important for the town, e.g. where the town edge is, not regarding houses but regarding land.

The third place in which avenues have occurred is in the peasant landscape. These also date back to at least the 18th century. By studying these I will be able to receive more information regarding how the farmers co-operated and who did the actual work that was not directly linked to managing land. In this case I refer to planting and maintaining avenues. Closely related to treeplanting along the roads are treelines planted on earthworks (predominantly willow) in order to prevent soilerosion in the 18th century.

I will also discuss the effects of the enclosure reforms and new places to plant avenues, namely to farms which have been moved outside of the village core. Farmers planted avenues which in many ways were look-alikes of the nobility-avenues. One example of this is Alfa-hill farm whose workforce were aloud to take branches for fuel which at the same time gave the owner an avenue expressing the aestheticism of that time.

Another demarcation is time, and I will go back to study the oldest avenues, which probably dates back to the 17th century, possibly the 16th century. On the other side of the time-frame is the beginning of the 20th century.

My sources are to be found in archives consisting of written documents and pictures such as maps, photos, paintings etc. One must, however, not forget that the avenue is a part of our material culture and travel in todays landscape will also be essential. I believe that

iconography will be an important. “Images allow us to imagine the past more vividly” (Burke 2001) which I believe is true.

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