

Building on a sense of place

THE ROLE OF LANDSCAPE CHARACTER IN CREATING SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Earlier this year, the Countryside Character Network hosted a workshop to discuss the issues surrounding landscape character and sustainable communities. In this article, Paul Mahony, Creative Director of Countryside, draws on key themes from the workshop to outline current thinking in this area and explores the ways in which approaches to community engagement are evolving.

It's not so long ago that the interrelationships between people and place, between culture and nature, were not so much a planning issue as a simple matter of survival. Throughout history, we have been inextricably linked to the landscape; both as a resource for economic and social expansion, as well as an emotive and experiential setting for our lives. The landscapes in which we all live, work and explore possess their own distinct characteristics, or 'sense of place'. In turn, we interpret the landscape through a combination of our own unique experiences, senses, values and perceptions – both individually and collectively, as communities. It is this complex relationship between people and place that turns 'objective' environments into living landscapes: it can be a source of identity, prosperity and happiness, as well as of exclusion, discontentment and fear. It's also something that each of us knows, feels and understands instinctively.

We all have places that are important to us, places that we value and, in some cases, seek to defend. Yet, while each of us is able to say this place, or that place, is special or unique, there is an increasing need to formally communicate this inherent relationship in a form that can be widely understood by everybody.

Strengthening community involvement is a key part of the Government's programme to reform the planning system. Central to this objective is the concept of 'sustainable communities' – that is, recognising that "communities are more than just housing" and that "the way our communities develop, economically, socially and environmentally, must respect the needs of future generations as well as succeeding now."^[1] The definition of what actually constitutes a sustainable community varies almost as widely as the belief that you can actually 'create' sustainable communities; but what is agreed is that a sense of place is fundamental to achieving this aim.^[2]

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

One of the most successful and workable approaches to understanding sense of place is that of Landscape Character Assessment (LCA). Put simply, LCA is a tool for identifying the features that give a locality its sense of place and pinpointing what makes it different from its neighbouring areas. This information can be used to enhance local distinctiveness and promote sustainable development that meets the needs of local people. It is not an approach designed to resist changes in the landscape, and neither is it solely concerned with aesthetic, or visual perceptions. Rather, it is an aid to decision-making: a tool to help understand what the landscape is like today, how it came to be like that, and how it may change in the future.

The LCA approach builds on many existing data sources - including geology and topography maps, historic landscape characterisation and cultural expression such as art, poetry

and written records. It comprises two distinct components: the characterisation process (involving identifying, mapping, classifying and describing landscape character via desk and field study); and the process of making character-based judgements to inform various decisions. The real value here lies in providing a robust and accessible framework for engaging in the roots of our complex relationship with the landscape. If the approach were to be applied twice to the same area, the results should be the same in both cases – providing an objective and relatively value-free description of that which invokes a sense of place.

PROMOTING A CULTURE OF PARTICIPATION, DIALOGUE AND LOCAL STEWARDSHIP

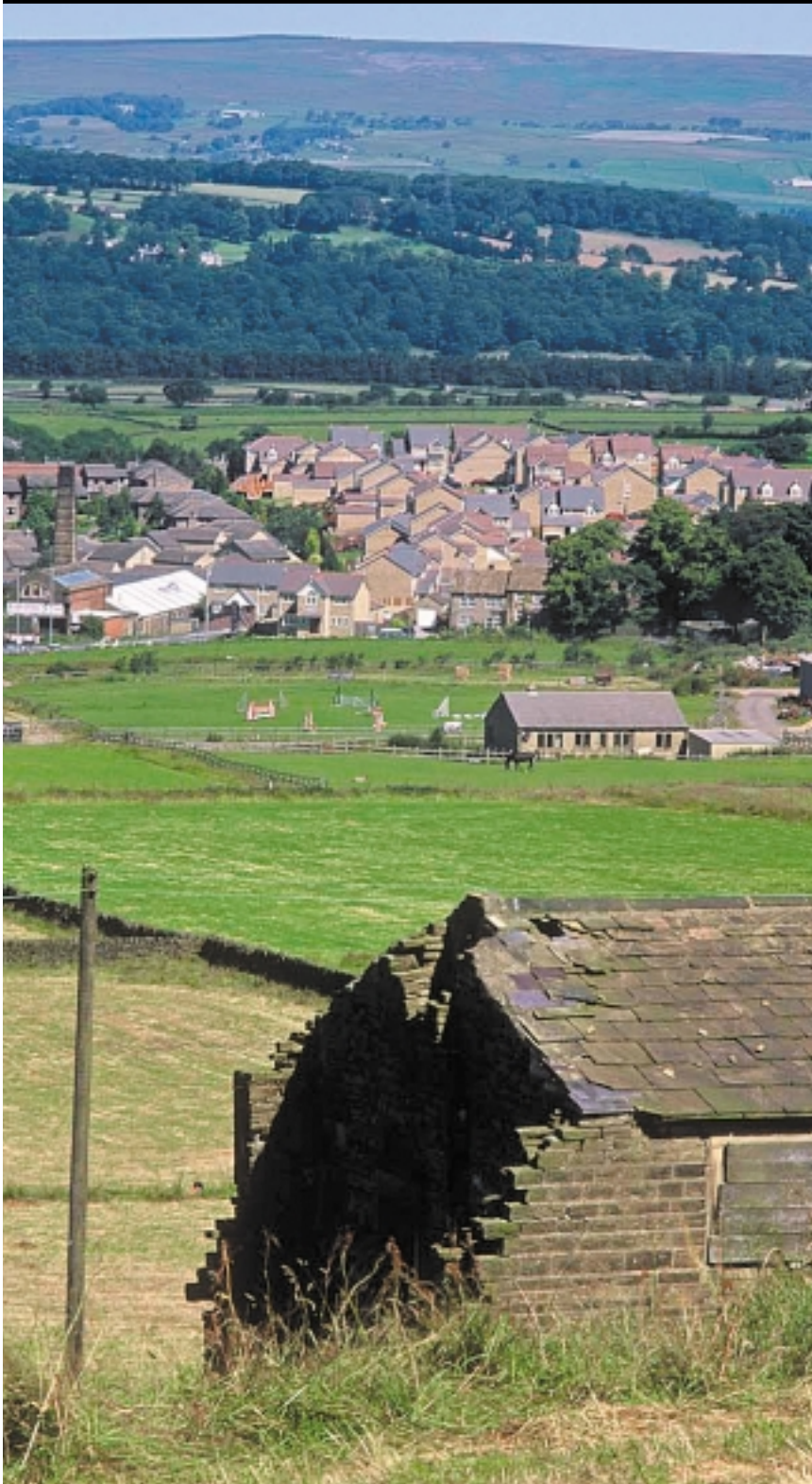
LCA can be used and understood by everybody, and has proved to be a successful tool for supporting community involvement in landscape planning. The Countryside Agency urges everyone involved in LCA to secure opportunities for stakeholder input, promoting a culture of participation, dialogue and local stewardship.

For example, in the parish of Burwardsley, Cheshire, community involvement in LCA has sparked a wealth of interest and enthusiasm among the local people. The project, facilitated by the Cheshire Landscape Trust and the University of Salford, sought to test the application of the Countryside Agency/Scottish Natural Heritage LCA methodology^[3] at local level, by drawing upon the resources and expertise of the community. Most notably, the project resulted in a strong sense of ownership of the work, and a clear realisation that the landscape is by no means a fixed entity – that it must change over time in order to maintain a viable and vibrant village community.

In the case of the Test Valley Community Landscape Project, Hampshire, LCA has been used to address the issue of engaging 'ordinary' members of the public (the community), as opposed to the usual mix of interest groups (stakeholders). The project team, led by Hampshire County Council, developed a methodology for engaging the community across a largely rural borough through facilitated focus groups and workshops. The project was successful in recording the value that local communities attach to the landscape, as well as raising awareness of issues affecting the landscape, and involving the public in strategic decisions. Many of those involved in the project felt that they had learned a great deal from it and would be more actively engaged in planning and rural issues as a result. Interestingly, the project recommendations include allowing for payment of participants in respect of their local knowledge and understanding – essentially recognising the value of the community as 'local experts'.



Landscape is about the inter-relationship between people and place. Image: © Countryside Agency. Photo: John Morrison



CREATIVE THINKING, CAPACITY BUILDING AND NEW WAYS OF COMMUNICATING

While there are many success stories of using LCA in community planning, there is a need to make a greater connection between the Government's objectives for sustainable communities and the concept of landscape in general: both as a resource, and as a holistic and integrating idea. LCA is a tool for understanding this concept, but we also need processes for making the creative leap to how it can be used to inform the success of new communities and enhancing people's quality of life^[4]. Engaging with communities in this 'visionary' step will ultimately require creative thinking, capacity building and new ways of communicating, able to translate people's sense of place into a tool for sustainable development.

One such process is being pioneered by Joanne Tippett of the Centre for Urban and Regional Ecology (CURE). Termed the '*DesignWays*' approach, it offers a toolkit for eliciting active stakeholder involvement in planning and design, using colourful media and creative methods to deliver dialogue that is both animated and engaging. Drawing upon Tippett's experience of community involvement in southern Africa, it is built on a framework for understanding sustainability, which encourages participants to take an holistic view of the landscape. *DesignWays* was first tested at the landscape level of scale in 2003 as part of the Irk Valley Project – a partnership between Manchester City Council, Groundwork, NGOs, residents' associations and local businesses. A total of 15 workshops and site visits allowed community members and partners to brainstorm new ideas for both the Irk Valley Project area in North Manchester and for Moston Vale, a 22ha former landfill site. The results of this process have been enormously positive. The framework developed for the Irk Valley, both as maps and as a database of existing assets and new ideas, will feed into ongoing consultation and regeneration in North Manchester. The vision developed for Moston Vale is being used as the starting point for regenerating the Moston Vale site, as part of Phase One of the Newlands project^[5].

LANGUAGE OF UNDERSTANDING

Clearly, the building blocks to create sustainable communities are at hand. We have methods for identifying and communicating sense of place, coupled with the creativity to engage communities actively in design and decision-making. The challenge is to better unite these understandings, and in this respect, the concept of landscape character as a means of describing sense of place offers a 'language' that we can all readily understand and relate to – professional and local experts alike ■

Further information about landscape character and sustainable communities is available on the Countryside Character Network (CCN) website at: www.ccnetwork.org.uk

The CCN is a free network, open to anyone with an interest in Landscape Character Assessment and its applications.

Countryside is an inter-disciplinary consultancy combining expertise in design and communication, geographical information and landscape planning. Paul Mahony may be contacted by email at: paul@countryside.org

References

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