

Workshop report

LANDSCAPE CAPACITY AND SENSITIVITY

Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) is a widely used tool for guiding decisions about the allocation and management of land for different types of development in England and Scotland. It inevitably involves consideration of the sensitivity of different types and areas of landscape and their capacity to accommodate change and development.

However, this can be contentious when the terms are hard to define. For this reason, the Countryside Character Network (CCN) – an informal organisation open to anyone interested in LCA – held a workshop on the subject.

The workshop took as its starting point the final draft of topic paper six – *Techniques and criteria for judging capacity and sensitivity* – authored by Carys Swanwick of the University of Sheffield, on behalf of the Countryside Agency and Scottish Natural Heritage. The paper aims to explore current thinking, stimulate debate and encourage common approaches. Many applications of LCA, such as housing and renewable energy, involve judgements about

sensitivity and capacity. Yet there has been considerable debate over the definition of these terms and the different definitions in use.

The topic paper proposes defining overall landscape sensitivity as inherent sensitivity of the landscape, while landscape capacity is the ability of a landscape to accommodate different amounts of change or development of a specific type.

These definitions are fundamental, but debatable. For instance, is it a case of defining overall landscape sensitivity, or can we only define sensitivity in relation to specific types of change?

Judging overall landscape sensitivity means combining landscape character sensitivity (significant elements that contribute to character, their vulnerability to change and aesthetic factors) with visual sensitivity (visibility based mainly on landform and tree cover). The important thing is to achieve transparency of thought so

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that decisions can be followed. Professional judgement should not be obscured behind apparently objective scoring methods, but it can be codified, perhaps using a verbal scale, such as: low, medium, and high.

A cumulative assessment can then be built up using layers of judgements, for example: sensitivity of ecological components; sensitivity of cultural components; and landscape character sensitivity. There is also value in using GIS, not least in helping with the workload.

David Went, of English Heritage (EH), explained how EH uses historic landscape characterisation to understand the legacy of the landscape and to influence future change. Character profiles of an area are created by overlaying different data – historic landscape, built environment and archaeological background.

Further case studies came from landscape consultant Alison Grant,

and Kate Ahern of Land Use Consultants. John Benson, of the University of Newcastle, examined the use of terminology. Does the route to capacity go via sensitivity? Are they the same thing? Does it matter?

Benson concluded that capacity is not a single, fixed, immutable quantity which exists “out there”, and landscapes are not empty receptacles waiting to be filled up. Capacity is value-laden, dynamic, malleable and contested, but never a single number or quantity.

The importance of definition was underlined from the floor by John Campion, of John Campion Associates, who said that landscape architects at a public enquiry had been warned that there was to be no discussing semantics in court: common terms of description and reference were to be agreed beforehand. Further debate is welcomed on the CCN website.

■ Organiser: CCN

■ Date: 27 January

■ Visit: www.ccnetwork.org.uk; www.english-heritage.org.uk; and www.countryside.gov.uk

By Judith Calver

Conference report

STREETSCAPE: Good design and quality in the management of streets in historic towns and cities

The conference set out to challenge conventional thinking in street design and provide guidance and inspiration to delegates concerned with improving urban streetscapes. The recurring themes were integration, de-cluttering, simplicity and local distinctiveness. In the keynote address, English Heritage (EH) and CABE commissioner Les Sparks, decried the traditional focus of the traffic planners on traffic flow, while ignoring the needs of the pedestrian and social and economic usage. Sparks advocated the concept of the ‘sociable street’, and the need to increase ‘dwell time’ and footfall.

The ingredients for this, according to Sparks, are: enough space for the pedestrian, smaller shops, mixed use development and the cultivation of local distinctiveness. Avoiding, however, the use of standard ‘heritage’ street furniture.

Sparks cited three examples of improvements in public realm designed to promote investment and prosperity:

■ Rope Walks, Liverpool (business);

■ Kensington High Street, London, (retailing) – where

political courage is driving the removal of barriers and street clutter to allow the integration, of traffic and pedestrians to create a stronger sense of place;

■ Victoria Square, Birmingham, (tourism) – transformed from a traffic island to a civic piazza, through the reversal of priorities between car and pedestrian.

Ben Hamilton-Baillie, urban designer and traffic specialist, challenged traditional assumptions about road safety based on segregation. He drew a distinction between ‘traffic zones’ – principally corridors of movement between places, and ‘social zones’ – places with a strong social element. He argued, that there should be clear demarcation between the two zones; the old city gateway being an excellent model for this.

This approach is not anti-car, but accepts the car on different terms. It advocates the use of design technique to change culture, perception and priorities. In the social zone, traffic lights and safety barriers are removed, signage minimised, sightlines reduced, and

boundaries between pedestrian and traffic areas blurred. “Signs are not a good way to influence behaviour – but a change in environment is,” he said.

Human behaviour

This approach also draws on research into human physiology. Above 20mph the pedestrian accident rate rises rapidly. Humans are designed to make eye contact at speeds of up to 20mph. Therefore, if the environment is designed to maximise the need for eye contact between driver and pedestrian, safety levels will be improved. This has been proven in The Netherlands and Scandinavia, and had no impact on vehicle journey times.

Andrew Vines, EH, and Richard Guise, University of the West of England, agreed that integrated management between highways and planning departments is a key factor – as is a basic acceptance that nothing should be put in a street unless essential.

Both stressed the need for research and an audit before producing a strategy for a historic streetscape, in order to ensure local

distinctiveness is preserved, and emphasised the use of quality materials. Guise pleaded for recognition of the role of the craftsman – quality paving laid poorly will soon let down the whole scheme – and the urgent necessity for CABE, EH and local authorities to invest in re-building this diminishing skills base.

Urban designer Colin Davis called for a pragmatic approach, advocating working with, and influencing, the system rather than attempting to change it. He encouraged civic societies to ensure they understand the local system and build personal relationships with local authority officers engaged with the streetscape.

Case studies from Edinburgh, Wells, Totnes and Cirencester demonstrated the benefits of sharing experience, while the Bath Preservation Trust showed what role a civic society can play.

■ Organiser: Bath Preservation Trust and Civic Trust

■ Date: 31 January 2004

■ Visit: www.civictrust.org.uk or www.bath-preservation-trust.org.uk
By Emma Way