

VILLAGES IN THEIR LANDSCAPE SETTING
- models for their future design

Presentation
by
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Abstract

This short paper looks at the setting of villages in their landscape and the relationship of this setting to wider community involvement in planning for their future. It considers landscapes (and their protection) as motors for sustainable development of both villages and their hinterland.

It argues that across Europe no country relies totally on the planning system to plan for their future and presents tools which could be applied in an Irish context to provide for better design and development of those villages. The paper builds on the positive developments which have occurred in Ireland since the introduction of the Planning Act 2000 and will highlight in particular the steps taken by the Heritage Council to work in partnership with local authorities to implement broader policy objectives. These include heritage appraisal of development plans, preparation of village design statements and the establishment of the Heritage Officer Network. The paper considers that some of the tools with which planning authorities have to work are very blunt instruments and points to the fact that Ireland is alone in Europe in not having specific and effective legislation for the management, protection and development of its dynamic landscapes. Examples of such systems in Europe and particularly France will be used to highlight the potential benefits of such provision in the future. In conclusion the presentation suggests that an opportunity exists for Ireland to be proactive rather than reactive in the manner in which it deals with these issues in the future.

Introduction

It is almost a cliché now to talk about people and place. It is certainly not a cliché to talk about villages and landscape. Few people make the connection between the two and yet this connection is one of the most fundamental aspects determining and giving us an understanding of our settlement patterns, where we live, and in particular the location and character of our villages. In short the connection between people and place.

My purpose today is to set our villages firmly in their landscape and to suggest sharper tools which could be used to better shape their future. The fundamental new tool that is required is specific and effective legislation for the planning management and development of our landscapes. This will in turn allow for effective planning, development

and management of our villages, pulling together much of the good work that is being carried out across the country giving it collective meaning and strength.

We are out of step with the rest of Europe in not having such legislation. Travel in Europe whether to the Baltic States, or our western neighbours or to the borders of Slovenia and Hungary, or even in places along the Mediterranean coast in Italy and France and you see the benefits of considering villages fully within their landscapes

It is not reasonable, nor practical to rely solely on the current planning system to achieve this. Nor is it reasonable to suggest that local authorities should just absorb these responsibilities without providing resources for the work. Putting legislation in place, followed by the issuing of good guidance on its implementation, would allow policies and strategies to be developed which would in turn allow resources to be allocated at a national level for achievement of agreed policy objectives and management plans.

My presentation will build on the presentations by earlier speakers who have in turn provided information on economic, social and other factors, including development led planning, which are currently shaping the future of our village

The Context

It is important to begin by understanding the context in which all of this proposal actually sits.

There is a European context including

- the European Landscape Convention,
- the use of specific landscape legislation in Europe as a motor for rural and -
community development and
- the European Council for Villages and Small Towns

There is a national context including

- the NDP and the NSS (although these will have been detailed earlier)
- the contribution of the Planning Act 2000
- the development of heritage appraisal of development plans

There is a local context including

- local heritage plans
- the preparation of village design statements

- participatory village planning (after Greer et al)

It can be argued that if you have all the above elements in place, and you give responsibility to local authorities (which have undergone much change in recent years) for implementing our much improved strategic planning and legislative provision, then all “good things will come to pass”.

Not so.

This is in no way to deny the immense amount of good work that is currently being carried out by planning, landscape and heritage professionals in the local authorities. But they cannot be expected to join up all the dots at national level.

They cannot be expected to continuously look outside the boundaries. They cannot be expected to take on all the shifts and changes in attitudes to landscape as “just another job” and hope to maintain the levels of public service to which we are all committed.

This job of work needs specific legislation, designations with agreed policy and management objectives. It needs resources (both human and financial and other) which are dedicated to the job and above all it needs meaningful and real community participation in the process. Unless we take a lead on this nationally we will continue to rely solely on the dedication and commitment of a small group of professionals to swim against the tide of pressurised and development led proposals, some of which as we have heard earlier make no sense economically, environmentally or socially. (mention our national parks and the lack of legislation)

IRELAND

Lets look first at Ireland.

The Heritage Council has played its part in shifting attitudes and raising awareness of the significance of our national heritage at local and community level as well as making inroads at a strategic and policy level within government. I'll not comment on which I feel is having most impact although the progress at a public level in the 5 years (1999-2004) since the running of our first national heritage awareness survey is very encouraging. A ground swell of support is building

All of the Heritage Council's work unapologetically seeks to push heritage further up the matrix in terms of where decisions are made and resources are allocated.

The local authorities are playing their part in this groundswell too. Look at the success of the heritage officer scheme, the number of heritage appraisals of development plans now being carried out, the village design statements which in some counties are now supplementary planning guidance, the excellent documentation and guidance such as that produced in County Cork. Consider also recent initiatives in the Liffey Valley and the Boora Wetlands. And all of this doesn't touch on the much improved consultation in terms of plan development.

Look at the approach taken on board by N. Tipperary County Council for Newport near to Limerick and recently highlighted in a paper on *Participatory Village Planning* (by Muray Greer and Sterrett 2005). This work clearly shows that "many small towns and villages have had very limited forward planning guidance." It points to the fact that in the 2000 Act section 10 (7) provides for a development plan to indicate that specified development in a particular area will be subject to a local area plan and that populations of over 2000 must have a LAP. Furthermore Section 18(6) allows the Local Authority to enter in to an arrangement with community groups for the preparation of an LAP for any area.

(Of course what is being talked about to-day is about much more than the statutory planning process. It is equally about hearts and minds and sociology and community)

Greer et al point to the fact that local area planning has created a momentum for better shaping the villages of Ireland and that the NSS identified villages as a key component of settlement hierarchy. The strength of this approach is identified on basis of lower costs and quality of life.

"Engaging local communities in a manner which transcends a minimalist statutory consultation" is recognised as a new opportunity for Local Authorities.

However it is recognised that participatory planning is failing to connect fully
(e.g Newport only 14 submissions.)

The well known forward planning adage of survey before plan had at least in this case "hit the buffers" and in many ways acted as a reality

check. The reality of competing values. To overcome this the paper points to the need for

- Much greater assertiveness from local communities
- An external orientation regarding implementation.
- A more strategic approach.
- A sense of ownership and confidence in local groups at an early stage.
- Work to overcome the deep sense of external dependency amongst communities
- A balanced view which prevents manipulation by special interests

There are therefore real limits to participatory planning. There are deficiencies. It can only go so far. Responsibilities have to be understood and taken and ultimately, as it stands at present, the local authorities have to take those decisions.

And this is where the new tools are needed to help local authorities to get them beyond what seems like an impasse. To get them working from the point of view of shared values rather than resolving competing values.

National leadership is required to help this process and yet there seems to be some blockage, some fear of embracing landscape. One might reasonably ask why

- the national landscape character guidelines have been in draft form since 2000,
- landscape provisions such as those to designate landscape conservation areas (planning act 2000) have never been enacted and why our most significant protected landscapes such as national parks exist without legislation and only exist through state acquisition.

Such situations are wholly out of line with modern practice as regards the manner in which we plan for and develop our dynamic European landscapes. In some ways the state in which we find ourselves provides an even better opportunity to do something innovative and constructive. That is the optimist in me.

However have we the will and patience and motivation to take the opportunity?

Can we in fact be proactive rather than reactive in dealing with these issues in the future?

As a group of professional and political people can we influence real and effective change?

Let us look at the European context. And also look at some landscapes
(Refer to slides)

The European Landscape Convention

This is a Council of Europe convention. It extends beyond the boundaries of the EU and came in to force in 2004. Ireland was one of the first three countries to ratify the convention (2002) which has now been ratified by 18 countries and signed by many more. It contains a series of general and specific measures and Ireland **could** draw up an impressive list of measures it has taken in response. Not however the most fundamental one which require instruments to

recognise landscapes in law as an essential component of people's surroundings.

That to me requires specific and effective legislation.
(refer to slides)

Many of the other measures we can "tick" but without the above we can never have true national ownership and accountability. We will continue to rely on the commitment of professionals and consultants to drive the process along but all their good work can effectively be undone at a whim.

What of Europe's protected landscapes. In Europe things have been changing. There is a new paradigm for these landscapes. This sees a much higher level of community involvement, it sees an integration of cultural and natural aspects of our landscape and it sees them as part of the whole landscape, not just islands of conservation. They are viewed as motors for and models of truly sustainable development. The spin offs for local communities are immense. The spin off for small towns and villages equally so.

The French Regional Parks.

I have had a tremendous opportunity over recent years to look across Europe at models for landscape protection which involve local

communities fully in their work, including for many the rural villages in which they live. These might in the best sense of the words be considered normal landscapes, normal countryside, normal people and all I have seen could have beneficial applications “back home”. Many have impressed. One in particular has stood out and that is the Parcs Naturels et Regionaux de France.

These are inhabited landscapes and the 44 parks now cover circa 18% of the French territory.

They are established under national legislation, and funded nationally, regionally and locally. The basis for their establishment is a charter which exists for a ten year re-newable period. The charter has measurable objectives from a social, economic and environmental perspective. Review of the charter and failure to meet standards can effectively mean loss of Parc status. The performance of each community, local authority is measured which can lead to loss of status and revision of boundaries.

In effect the tangible benefits from the local community perspective mean that boundaries are expanding at charter review. Such has been the success that the French Government recently changed their national park legislation to more fully reflect the type of approach advocated in the regional Parks.

Success means the Parks are well resourced, have a dedicated full time staff working on all aspects within the Park, and are seen as complementing the ongoing work of local authorities. The Park Council is made up of politicians and community representatives and chaired by a local mayor. They can develop charters within charters and here we come full circle back to the benefits to villages.

Le Parc Naturel Regional de Briere.

This regional park is situated just north of the mouth of the Loire. It is a part of France which you might just drive through and take for granted. Regionally and locally it has great significance from a cultural and natural heritage perspective.

The Parc recently published a landscape charter (charte paysagere) which ties together many aspects of the heritage of the area. In particular it considers how to best treat the numerous small villages and towns to retain their character whilst at the same time coping with extensive development pressure (urbanization) from Nantes and St. Nazaire.

The quality of the document is comparable to the excellent design guide for Cork.

What is different in the two approaches refers back to my comment that this is of course about much more than the statutory planning process. Both documents go much further than that.

However in France there is a legislated for and resourced structure to make it happen effectively. Not only in France but across Europe having these structures has allowed quick and effective co-operation with initiatives such as leader and leader plus. We have as a country done well from such programmes but as Europe changes we are constantly having to invent structures to gain the benefits. These are not legislated for and are therefore weaker and usually not well resourced. The burren geopark initiative, or the copper coast geopark spring to mind.

This is where the national leadership and guidance, and new legislation is required.

ECOVAST

In closing I want to draw your attention to one last initiative (tool), that could help us in all our endeavors. That is the *European Council for Villages and Small Towns*. Established in 1984 it has 600 members in 36 countries and has significant “clout” in the decision making process at European and national levels. There is according to my information no Irish membership

The objectives of ECOVAST are

- To foster social and cultural vitality and administrative identity of rural communities throughout Europe
- To safeguard and to promote sensitive and imaginative renewal of the built and natural environments of such communities

Perhaps after to-day some of you might join

Conclusion

The connection between the rural communities and their landscape is clear. We can't and shouldn't separate the two. I hope my words to-day

have encouraged you that there is more we can all do to build from the bottom up to achieve better planning and design within our villages in the future.

Calling for specific legislative provision for our cultural and natural landscapes is the least we can do.

Such legislation would allow us to deal with the future of our landscapes and the people and villages they contain in a proactive manner

I leave you with a quote from Fred Aalen, someone for whom we all have the utmost respect and admiration and whose Atlas of the Irish Rural Landscape is one of the definitive texts.

“ The debate makes clear a deep concern that the quality and regional variety of Ireland’s landscapes are being diminished by many forces.

Because of the outstanding quality of our landscapes and their immense cultural and economic significance to the nation, Ireland must take determined action to reverse the ravages of recent decades and set course for the long –term management of change

The landscape must be given prominence in any future policies formulated for our national heritage and for rural development generally

There is real urgency here: serious damage to our landscape and our environment must be anticipated when dynamic economic growth occurs.”

THANK YOU

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Chief Executive

An Chomhairle Oidhreachta

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