



## **National Landscape Forum 2015**

Venue: National Botanic Gardens, Glasnevin, Dublin 9

Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> June 2015 (9.00am to 5.00pm)

### **REPORT**

Organised in a short timeframe to promote interest in and energise the implementation process for the recently launched National Landscape Strategy the National Landscape Forum 2015 featured some 20 excellent and pertinent presentations and provided the key decision-makers involved with the strategy with much food for thought.

The theme for the morning sessions was how best to approach the National Landscape Strategy implementation process and Willie Cumming of DAHG opened proceedings with an overview of the content of the strategy noting its relationship to the European Landscape Convention, the objectives and proposed actions scheduled for delivery within a 10 year timeframe. Willie also integrated references through his presentation to the Europa Nostra award-winning project Survey of Historic Gardens & Designed Landscapes which is publicly accessible on the 'buildings of Ireland' website.

Conor Newman of the Heritage Council reflected on the challenges of addressing the issue of landscape as provided for in the legislation establishing the Heritage Council and the in-depth interpretation called for by the European Landscape Convention. He outlined the progressive engagement of Michael Starrett and the Heritage Council with these challenges over the past 20 years and the various initiatives undertaking and in progress. He informed the meeting that the Heritage Council are currently examining how the work of the council might best be integrated with the NLS implementation process now that it has been launched and he noted that further information on these deliberations will emerge over coming months.

Tony Williams of ILI noted that the Landscape Institutes on both sides of the border in Ireland are progressing provisional plans for an independent landscape observatory modelled on the established and respected landscape observatory in Catalonia.

Terry O'Regan, noted that whilst we should not waste time expressing frustration at the 20 year wait for a strategy there is much to be learned from an assessment of the mistakes made as these will have lessons for the process going forward. He stressed the need for the strategy to be actively implemented at all levels from society from government cabinet level down to the smallest community in the state. He called for a dedicated if small landscape unit in the DAHG possibly with a linked unit in DECLG, a research/awareness-raising/training body (observatory or similar), landscape officers at local authority level (possibly linked with responsibility for parks & trees). He stressed that a national if not all-Ireland Landscape Character Map to landscape character type level must be produced within 12 months – this could largely be a GIS exercise. The more detailed characteristics

are best dealt with at local authority level based on the concept of identified landscapes of greater significance – be it because of higher natural/cultural heritage or other sensitivity or higher degradation, noting that the landscape circle approach had proved effective in this regard in his work in Kosovo. A national landscape action plan with landscape objectives and guidelines must be prepared to be followed by similar plans at local authority level. There should be an annual state of our landscape report to monitor and report on progress in implementing the national landscape strategy. He noted that whilst Landscape Alliance Ireland is unlikely to have the resources in the future to continue the national landscape forum in to the future, there is patently a need for such an open forum and a more structured alliance might usefully consider expanding the forum into an annual workshop style event (National Landscape Summer School?) ideally moving to a different venue on the island each year. Finally the openings created by the forum for collaboration with colleagues in Northern Ireland, England, Wales and Scotland should be followed up and a joint working group established as soon as possible.

*It was evident from the foregoing presentations that there is a need to stand back and reflect on how best to ensure that a strategic 'joined-up' framework is put in place within six months and that the appropriate level of resources are made available to achieve a greater degree of progress than that suggested by the 'totally lacking in urgency' 10 year timeframe proposed in the strategy document.*

*Whilst it was acknowledged that there was little point in fighting over past time-wasting and delays with regard to landscape policy and strategy it was essential that we ask questions about the 'whys and wherefores' behind the failure of good governance represented by the lack of commitment and action over the past 20 years.*

The morning sessions continued with Brendan O'Sullivan of the MPlan course in UCC, who reflected on how landscape is challenged on the one hand by the Irish love of one-off houses in the rural landscape and is safeguarded in varying degrees by the planning process. But in a philosophic thought-stream he suggested that there is a need for a much more in-depth approach to landscape management and that the NLS could possibly facilitate same if it is implemented effectively.

Brendan was followed by Linda Maher of the UCD Earth Institute who gave an overview of the different studies in progress on landscape in UCD and specifically her own work-in-progress study on understanding and assessing the landscape setting of historical and landscape sites linking with Willie Cumming's presentation earlier that morning and Christopher Gallagher's presentation in the afternoon. Linda's preliminary conclusion is that the value of many historical properties lie not just in the building/collection of buildings, but rather they derive their unique character from their relation with the wider landscape. To effectively protect and manage these sensitive landscapes requires an interdisciplinary and holistic approach and the challenge will be to balance the management and protection of the landscape with the local community's need for development and change so as to ensure the continuation of a living cultural landscape.

Reflecting on the long-standing record of An Taisce in defending both our heritage and environment, Ian Lumley followed Linda's presentation with a wide-ranging overview on the challenges and threats facing our landscape/environment from both local and global forces for change. Ian saw the NLS as providing one potential framework to address some of those challenges.

Helen Lawless of Mountaineering Ireland then took us to the uplands and peaks of our landscape cogently noting that our upland areas (over 300m contour) only occupy 6% of the nation's land area, with only 0.35% over 600m. As they not alone provide the best vantage points to view our wider landscape, but also are among the last remaining remote areas to where stressed citizens might

escape she advocated that they should have special status within the framework of the NLS implementation process. She noted that the mission of Mountaineering Ireland is to represent and support the walkers and climbers of Ireland and to be a voice for the sustainable use of Ireland's mountains, hills, coastline, crags and forests.

Tony Carey of Crann- Trees for Ireland then posed the question "Could Ireland benefit from a co-ordinated planting programme of selected tree species such that in 10-20 years the autumn colours along our roads and streets would begin to resemble those of New England?" Crann whose mission is to enhance the environment of Ireland through planting, promoting, protecting and increasing awareness about trees and woodlands envisage a north/South Study Group being formed to carry out a feasibility study on the proposal. Tony considered that such a proposal might also fall within the framework of the implementation of the NLS.

Aidan French, Landscape Architect closed the morning sessions by taking us by the hand towards 'A Landscape of Place' as distinct from the treasured iconic scenic landscapes of tourist brochures. To ordinary places with the potential to become equally iconic and treasured if 'designed' for deeper human purpose and need, reminding us in the wise words of the late John O'Donoghue that "When you bring your body out into the landscape, you're bringing it to where it belongs!" Aidan argued that a well-planned and managed landscape is an expression of faith in the future – a pact between generations. He concluded with a telling slide that suggested that we recognise there is more to the soul of our present-day landscape urban and rural than the commodified 'Spirit Of Ultimate Lifestyle!'

The afternoon sessions opened with an address by Jimmy Deenihan, currently Minister for Diaspora Affairs and up to last year Minister for Arts, Heritage & the Gaeltacht. He outlined his long-standing interest in and commitment to landscape policy and the European Landscape Convention inspired to a great degree by the Kerry landscape and engagement with the work of Landscape Alliance Ireland. He spoke of his work in the DAHG to advance the National Landscape Strategy and the importance of progressing the strategy now that it has been launched.

Mansil Miller, of the Northern Ireland Department of Environment then provided us with an overview of the current landscape 'strategy' position in Northern Ireland. As such they do not have a landscape strategy but they already have quite an integrated approach having completed a landscape character assessment some years ago and are now about to update same – interestingly focusing on landscape character types rather than areas. Significantly they have a Landscape Charter which is open to all to commit to. Mansil also briefly in the time available referred to the Seascape Assessment work already in progress in NI.

*From Mansil's presentation it was glaringly obvious that there is an opportunity for mutual co-operation and collaboration between the Republic and NI and that the sooner we in the south get our act together the greater will be the benefits of such co-operation.*

Maggie Roe of Newcastle University and the Landscape Research Group provided the forum with a detailed and wide-reaching overview of landscape strategies and strategic thinking in England, taking us from the ELC to landscape partnership projects in Durham, Teesdale and Northumberland and on to Green Infrastructure Planning.

She noted that recent strategic activity has included a Landscape Advisory Group established by Natural England in association with partners and concluded her presentation by sharing with us the

themes and questions that emerged from a symposium held earlier this year at Newcastle University under the proactive title “Landscape Forward: Policy, Practice & Research”.

Gareth Roberts also of the Landscape Research Group opened (and closed) his presentation landscape strategies in Wales with an evocative poem in Welsh reminding us that there is a landscape of language, just as there is a language of landscape. He then provided the context for the landscape of Wales including the history of the evolution of interest in the Welsh landscape. He outlined recent developments in Wales relating to strategies for landscape and concluded with his personal view of what should be done: integrate policy thinking around landscape, promote ‘landscape’ training and education, make it easier for people to access and enjoy landscape, provide opportunities for people to research and record their landscapes (for example observatories), promote landscape as a nexus for sustainability and establish a National Landscape Forum to champion the European Landscape Convention.

Christopher Gallagher, independent Gardens & Landscape consultant gave us a fascinating overview of the English Heritage ‘Register of Parks & Gardens of Special Historic Interest’ – begun in 1983/4, but accelerated by the destruction that accompanied the ‘Great Storm’ of 1987. 1,600 sites were assessed and graded, but there is no statutory protection unlike listed buildings. Similar registers now exist in Wales, Scotland and NI and Christopher was also very involved with the process for the Survey of Historic Gardens & Designed Landscapes in Ireland referred to earlier.

Christopher note that the oversight of the register is currently in a state of flux in England due to reducing resources and the voluntary sector is playing an increasing role in the process.

Completing the shared outside perspective Terry O’Regan outlined a presentation prepared by John Thomson, former Scottish Natural Heritage director on ‘Landscape Policy & Practice in a devolved Scotland’ – this described the evolution of landscape policy and practice in recent years in Scotland demonstrating clearly the extent by which many landscape issues and challenges are common in varying degrees to both islands. John’s presentation usefully concluded with a scorecard of the positives and negatives of the current situation which could as easily been written for Ireland.

In advance of the final presentations a much-needed if far too short open forum session took place, when issues that had not been aired previously were given voice – issues such as concern re the proliferation of wind turbines on land and offshore, concern at the inadequacy of public consultation and engagement processes, lessons to be learned from more in-depth analysis of landscape issue than is provided for in current planning and development processes and so much more besides.

The final session brought us back to the local landscape with Dorothy Smith’s presentation on her community arts project in association with Phizzfest (Phibsborough Community Arts Festival) where she invited the local community to take photos of themselves in the context of issues in their locality that they would like to see addressed – effectively ‘selfies of people and place’ the response provided an overview of many serious issues regarding citizen safety and security in the public realm – an exercise of engaged democracy that also had an added value of people critically assessing their place and their living role within that place – a very effective landscape awareness raising exercise.

Des Gunning, life-long community activist in a narrative presentation ‘Every journey begins with a single step’ took the forum on an odyssey through a diverse landscape beginning in the disappearing bogs of middle, the tree needy landscapes of Leitrim and Offaly, out to the exposed limestone landscape of the Aran Islands, back to the elevated realms of Belfield’s UCD, to talk of ‘Oak Glens’ and Landscape policies and forums. The odyssey continued in interlocking circles that returned to landscape strategies and forums in 2015.

The final presentation from Jim Cowman, another landscape forum veteran who explored the design and construction conundrums of public seats and other public realm furniture in Ireland, linking nicely back to Dorothy Smith's unhappy citizens negotiating the default design hazards of the public realm. Jim highlighted the reality that in the landscape as in so much of the 'affairs of men and mice' the devil is in the detail or more pertinently in our failure over and over to recognise that managing our landscape requires people who know where they are going, know how they are going to get there and have the necessary knowledge, skills and wherewithal to undertake the journey in a responsible fashion.

Terry O'Regan's reflections on the aftermath of the forum: This landscape forum demonstrated once again the 'breadth and depth' of the topic of landscape and the challenges involved in committing to the realisation of the aims of the European Landscape Convention with regard to "landscape protection, management and planning, and ... European co-operation on landscape issues". The forum in a small way provided some signposts for the way forward and brought together some of the partners, players and stakeholders who must be involved. Ideally the forum should have been held over 2/3 days, speakers should have had more time, above all there should have been more time for discussion and decision. Only so much could be achieved in eight hours, the forum once again might have punched above its weight – but patently there is an urgent body of work involved if the National Landscape Strategy is to deliver on its implied objectives.

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Preliminary Report prepared by Terry O'Regan, Landscape Alliance Ireland

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