

Nurturing the Flaxroots

EMPOWERING the CUSTODIANS to NURTURE LOCAL IDENTITY

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A giant fibreglass statement, whether fish, bird, vegetable or fruit,
is one way of stating a place's identity.
Lots of red pavers are another attempt
(although they are usually more about saying the place is "up with it").
When people ponder the places they identify with,
the fibreglass and the pavers do not seem to be what their place is necessarily about.

South Pacific. Aotearoa New Zealand. Te Waipounamu eastern South Island.
High Country. Otago. Central Otago. Upper Clutha. Tarras. Bendigo.
The place to which I whakapapa - a 5th generation pakeha of the Clutha in Otago.

The Clutha is my river - not that it is my property, but that I am of it - and Dunstan my
mountain range. The homeland. The place that nurtured me. The place I am of. Pisa,
Wanaka and Hawea are etched within me, and the Lindis Pass is my paradise.

Schist is my rock
Vast and tree-free space holds no fear or discomfort.
My buildings are thick mud brick, rust-free corrugated iron and generously verandahed.

My flora is tussock, kanuka, kowhai, matagouri - and lucerne.
My animals skink and gecko; hawk and falcon; trout and eel - and merino
With shell and bone abounding in the land, the Moa remains part of my place.
Ancient umu; tailings, water races and derelict mining cottages; taut timber-free fences
drilled in the schist and woolsheds, they all etch stories in the land.
My place. The place that expresses me. My signature. My fingerprint.

Most places have people who are attached to them.
Whether living, living there, or not.
Places that are carried in their people's hearts.

Respect for the specialness of place.
Articulation of the relationship with place.
Sharing of the passions for a place, the concerns, and, the visions
- these all need to come into the planning realm.

Returning from my big OE fired up with enthusiasm for this special and marvelous country, I was quickly disenchanted with the dominant internationalism and pleaded **New Zealand, Where are you?** at the conference of 1981 (at which I appeared quaking on the podium and quickly downed the lights!). My message to this conference is similar. Lets celebrate the specialness and diversity of this place, by helping people articulate and interpret this in their decisions on the land, big or small.

STATUTORY BASIS

The Resource Management Act 1991 has provided a mechanism for recognising, nurturing and celebrating each and every place. Sadly it is still too frequently being crudely used. Sure, it will take decades for the professions and authorities to recognise its potential, not for expensive “war zones”, but as a creative tool to enable acceptable and sustainable futures.

Statutory policies and plans usually appear so sanitised and distant, they appear to conjure up little of the sense of a place. There is little of the identity that sets each place apart. The potential of the legislation and the potential of each place - for both developer and conservator - is being thwarted. A major recognised industry of Aotearoa New Zealand, whether to visitors or purchasers of our exports, is in marketing our special natural and cultural identity. It is not about one image or one place, but a diverse land with diverse features, places and communities.

The distinctiveness of New Zealand is not just about some key or outstanding natural features and landscapes. It is about the whole fabric of this country. The need is to stitch the change in with new, re-used and re-discovered fabric and fibre that complement and don't contradict the place.

Landscape is the link, the integrator - the warp and the weft. To address only outstanding bits, the features - the brooches and embellishments perhaps - is to ignore the fabric that makes a place. It is the fabric that makes for whole series of places that result in this country being special on many levels.

As mentioned on her recent return visit, Scottish Natural Heritage landscape planner, Mary Anne Robinson was most alarmed to see New Zealand statutory planners reducing landscape assessments to the mere encircling of some outstanding bits.

“Like picking out the few bright ones in a class, and ignoring the rest. You can't do that. Landscape isn't just the special bits. Its the whole. New Zealand isn't just special for its spectacular bits shown on the tourist posters. It's all the bits in between too.”

Whilst it may seem sensible to assume that locals will do right by the area in any landscape change, we have all experienced the insensitive development by both outsider and insider. Sometimes outsiders take trouble to read the local cues, the language of the place, and to respond sensitively to that. Sometimes a local tries to make a mark and be different too different ...

To assess the appropriateness of proposed landscape change, requires more than just assessing its visual prominence, or whether it encroaches on an outstanding bit. Assessment requires understanding what the place is about, what it means, and what the change will mean.

Landscape is not just about the visual, the visible. As a profession, we all recognise that the sounds, the smells, the awareness of a past, the general “feel” of a place, all affect our landscape experience. And, the subtle nuances invisible to an outsider. They are all an integral part of the landscape experience of a place. Thus to provide an assessment of appropriate change, we must be able to integrate the “feel” of a place for outsider and insider into our landscape assessments.

The RMA does not confine landscape considerations to the outstanding and visually prominent. This has been a strategic confining of consideration to avoid consideration of the usefulness of the concept of landscape in planning for resource sustainability.

To assess only visual prominence is to deny the fullness of landscape. To restrict landscape assessments to identifying outstanding bits under status quo (perhaps unsustainable) management, is to deny the past and deny the potential in this land.

I am continually heartened at the ability of people to develop shared understandings and visions. To share their passions, their concerns, and together tease out acceptable opportunities for change. The landscape planning profession has a key role in articulating peoples’ landscapes, the values and vulnerability, to help guide sustainable change.

YOUR TYPE OF COUNTRY

In a denuded or homogenised land, addressing the specialness of place requires also that you peer beneath the surface. The underlayers need to be understood. The underlayers of nature and the underlayers of culture.

The need is to ensure every place is not any place. Each place, and the people of each place, have signatures of their place etched in them. Each differently. Each as individual as their fingerprint. Celebrating each place as does the mountain flax (*Phormium cookianum*) with, reportedly, a different flower colour on every range.

With most privately owned lands homogenised under pasture or pines, it is too easy to forget the beech or kahikatea forest, the flaxlands, and the 1000-bird flocks of kereru that flew noisily. Information is a key starting point. To seek to merely conserve degraded lands - albeit perhaps fitting the pastoral aesthetic - is not necessarily an appropriate future. This does not mean “giving it all away”, but looking for futures that recognise the cultural values in a place as well as the past and potential ecological values.

In 1995, the Queenstown Lakes District Council contracted Lucas Associates to develop a new approach involving an ecological planning framework to articulate their types of country. It is too easy to label it all just “rural” or “urban” or “conservation”. It is too simplistic to just circle the special bits, to only delineate the pocket relicts of former extensive forests and wetlands. We modeled the District as a series of land system based ecosystems.

Using a land systems based ecosystems approach that looks at the patterns of ecological history and opportunity, provides a timeless framework. In my view this is preferable to depending on a snap-shot land cover approach, such as forestry, pastoral and urban coverage which fluctuate.

We mapped, modelled and named the country for what nature had, and had intended, in that land. We named it for its past, and for its potential. We drew signatures to depict the underlying nature of the place. Local icons and language was researched. Local names, song, poetry and writings that told of the nature of that place for local and for visitor, for example:

“Wakatipu had lost none of its hold on my sense and imagination. I was struck now by the grand simplicity of the landscape, disposed in the vast masses which are its elements - Cecil, Walter, Bayonet, the Remarkables, huge initial letters of an alphabet of countless signs, or the thundering opening notes of a symphony in which every leaf, grass and stone had its own distinct vibration. Detail was secondary, subdued in the splendour of those ample forms: in England by contrast detail is everything, because the landscape offers few large forms.” (from “Indirections” by Charles Brasch)

*“On the slow wing-beat
of a curious falcon
my wishes belonged.
I rose and spiralled
in thermals
and the mountains smiled
all afternoon.”*

from “Flight” by Brian Turner (1989)

Ecosystem names emerge with the information, to denote the geomorphology, and give some cues to the flora and the fauna that belong. As it is a modelling approach, it is types of country that are being identified. These may be discrete areas and therefore able to have a place name rather than just a type. For example, the specific “REMARKABLES Kea, Skink, Totara, Moth, Craggy Mountain Ecosystem”, or the generic “GLACIAL/FLUVIAL FLOOR Matagouri, Tall Tussock, Crested Grebe, Turfland, Valley Ecosystem”.

This ecosystem approach recognises that we are a changed land, that there is a rich ecological past, and also a future. It differs substantially from many planning approaches in that it addresses all lands. It does not confine to the remnant of nature that has survived a destructive management history. The approach recognises the dynamics in the land. It does not assume the status quo is preferred or is permanent. It does not treat the ecology or the landscape as a museum and try and shut it up.

The framework was developed as a nested hierarchy depicted at a range of scales depending on the scale of interest. The framework seeks to evocatively articulate scientifically robust information on each type of country (“*Indigenous Ecosystems - an ecological framework for the Lakes District*”. Lucas Associates. 1995).

With on-going community input, the land systems/ecosystems framework forms the basis for a landscape character mapping and description of each place, District, Region and Island. I suggest we need a landscape character framework for Aotearoa New Zealand, that articulates in a friendly and recognisable way the diversity of our lands and places, so

that there is a common starting point for landscape discussion and consideration for all landscape management tasks. A nested hierarchy approach enables the data to be provided at as coarse or as fine a scale as is appropriate for the area and scale of interest. A landscape character framework that can be the mechanism for moving forward the recognition of landscape as greater than worries over visual prominence could give the chance to recognise the stories in the land.

SPECIFIC APPLICATION

Following the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (1992) and signing of the Agenda for the next century, a citizens group the Agenda 21 Forum, approached the Community Boards of Christchurch for support to peer into the City's underlayers and articulate the indigenous biodiversity. Four booklets have now been produced mapping and modeling the ecosystems of the city, their stones, soils, their plants and animals. (*The Indigenous Ecosystems of Otautahi Christchurch, Sets 1-4*. 1995-7. Lucas Associates). They make friendly data available to the profession and the public, so that people can know what the place was about, and, if they wish, provide cues to this in the lands of the city, to show what nature intended.

A land system based ecosystem approach has also been used to address natural character in the Marlborough Sounds, revegetation planning for Waitakere City, and, currently for ecological monitoring for Bay of Plenty, as well as on many local projects hither and thither for assessment, for restoration and for development planning.

LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION MECHANISMS

In addition to lacking a landscape character framework for Aotearoa New Zealand, there is also a paucity of landscape protection mechanisms for special lived-in places. The need is for management mechanisms that span areas of different ownership. Whilst policies and plans under RMA span all lands, they are under constant threat of change and will be regularly reviewed. They can provide no certainty.

Queen Elizabeth II National Trust has the statutory mandate for wider landscape management, but this has been little utilised. Instead, individual pocket remnants are protected. The ministerial funds for indigenous ecosystem protection - the Forest Heritage Fund that I chair, and the Nga Whenua Rahui of which I am member - are also rather confined in their kaupapa. There are scant techniques for securing a vision for the lived-in landscape.

I believe there is an urgent need for development of community-based landscape management mechanisms that can assist in achieving a shared vision for a landscape. There is a community search for such a mechanism, and effort is required to explore opportunities.

ACCEPTABLE CHANGE

A decade ago I set out to develop an approach to identifying acceptable change. I continue happily on this path today, for I have found there is huge agreement in the community. Whilst there are definite differences, much of the perceived and projected antagonism (the noise) is merely defense at fears of unwanted change or unwanted barriers to change. It

is over-reaction to try and prevent the unknown, and therefore, the unwanted.

Lucas Associates has been called in numerous times through this decade to facilitate the stakeholders to develop their own plans. For many in planning and design professions, this may seem an abdication, or a less than professional approach. Not adequately displaying our “expert” skills. Not being the explicit outside expert providing overt analyses and solutions. I am far from deterred by such criticism. The encouragement comes from relationship building between different stakeholder “factions”, from stakeholder satisfaction in plan “ownership”, and, in the win-win solutions that emerge.

I have facilitated workshops for site design, school design, town design, central city design, stream planning, city plan submissions on zoning, for developing district-wide tourism strategies, identifying landscape change of concern and where intervention is and is not needed in landscape change, and, in identifying the outstanding landscapes of a district.

In Christchurch we have facilitated development of community-based plans for four different parts of the city - Sumner, Merivale, Central City and Edgware. Each process was requested by local residents and business people, and funded by the Christchurch City Council. All occurred following notification of the Proposed City Plan. Elsewhere? - well, we’ve facilitated and documented plans for Kingston, Arrowtown, Reefton, Waitomo, Peel Forest,...

Each community plan development process involved having a local coordinating committee or group, preferably from diverse interests, with whom I worked to plan a workshop process. Together we set dates, times, venues and publicity that would be the most accessible to the people of that place. The group identified some of the key issues that needed to be addressed. The team got base data together on each place, and assisted in advertising the process.

At the public workshops, the community identified what they valued about the place, what the issues were, and, potential solutions. Having worked with the community through the public process, the Lucas Associates technical/design teams have then documented the workshop data, and explored the suggested solutions.

Friendly documentation styles are used. We seek to retain the language of the people who have contributed. We don’t want to “professionalise” their input. Analysis and technical guidance is provided, but it sits behind. As with the Reefton plan (1996), it was interesting to note the community avoided dependency on the proposed McRae’s mining in their analysis of Reefton’s future. But they allowed for it, with new residential areas,

etc. Discussions were held with McRae's forward planning staff, and in the Community-based plan that resulted "Reefton Revival" the potential role of McRaes is deliberately kept low key, as was sought through community process. Participants recognised the need for a move from a harvest economy to a visitor economy, and did not need to state this baldly. It is the people's recognition of their appropriate future. Professional analysis sometimes seems superfluous or intrusive. The community data can often stand for itself. With subsequent withdrawal of the McRaes proposal, the community decision as expressed through the workshop process was obviously sensible.

Participants have always been invited to check the draft plans. A post-workshop evaluation is often undertaken to assess the satisfaction with the process, and address any perceived weaknesses.

As landscape planners, our profession has an opportunity to assist in the empowerment of those with an interest in a place. I have enjoyed working with several iwi and hapu developing their plans for the restoration and development of their resources - Waipunahau, Ohau, Rapaki plus Waitomo. With many stories etched in their places, it is a humbling but immensely enriching experience to assist in articulating these into management.

It is only if we work with the people and their place in ways that seek to understand and respect the underlayers and patterns of people and of nature that we can work toward sustaining healthy, productive and well-loved landscapes.