

The Setting of Historic Designed Landscapes

Background

"The setting of a heritage structure, site or area is defined as the immediate and extended environment that is part of, or contributes to, its significance and distinctive character.

Beyond the physical and visual aspects, the setting includes interaction with the natural environment; past or present social or spiritual practices, customs, traditional knowledge, use or activities and other forms of intangible cultural heritage aspects that created and form the space as well as the current and dynamic cultural, social and economic context."

Xi'an Declaration on the Conservation of the Setting of Heritage Structures, Sites and Areas, ICOMOS, 2005

It may seem that the 'setting' of a heritage asset is a rather vague concept. Setting is not in itself a heritage asset, it may have indeterminate boundaries, be difficult to define and may seem in no way as significant as the heritage asset itself. Setting can, however, be incredibly important to the significance of a designed landscape, greatly affecting the way in which we experience that landscape.

Historic England defines setting as 'the surroundings in which a place is experienced, its local context, embracing present and past relationships to the adjacent landscape' (*Conservation Principles, 2008, p72*). The relationship between a heritage asset and its setting can be complex – not just the obvious designed views aimed at a focal point beyond the boundary of the designed landscape. There are many other factors to investigate, such as: land use and character within the setting; designed views from the setting back *into* the landscape; noise and activity in the setting – both of which were sometimes intended elements of the original design.

As you get to know a particular designed landscape, both through research and site visits, the importance of setting to the site will gradually become apparent and you will be able to identify any threats, such as mismanagement or inappropriate development, which could damage that significance. In gaining this kind of understanding of setting, County Gardens Trusts can really make a difference – via research and recording, assessment of significance and responding to planning applications – to the protection and enhancement of this important asset.

Conservation Principles

As the primary importance of setting is its contribution to the significance of the heritage asset, two of Historic England's six 'high-level principles', may be applied:

Principle 3 – Understanding the significance of places is vital.

Principle 4 – Significant places should be managed to sustain their values.

National Planning Policy Framework

- NPPF defines setting as 'The surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve. Elements of a setting may make a positive or negative contribution to the significance of an asset, may affect the ability to appreciate that significance or may be neutral.' Annex 2: Glossary, *National Planning Policy Framework*, Department of Communities and Local Government, 2012
- NPPF 128 – 'In determining applications, local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting.'
- NPPF 137 – 'Local planning authorities should look for opportunities for new development within Conservation Areas and World Heritage Sites and within the setting of heritage assets to enhance or better reveal their significance. Proposals that preserve those elements of the setting that make a positive contribution to or better reveal the significance of the asset should be treated favourably.'

Landscape features and their settings

When considering the setting of designed landscapes, you may also have to take into account the settings of other heritage assets which are part of, or overlap, the designed landscape and its setting. Do, therefore, bear in mind the settings of all of the following, which, even if not designated themselves, may be protected if they are deemed to make a substantial contribution to the significance of the heritage asset:

- Settings of Registered Parks and Gardens – Historic England and the Gardens Trust are statutory consultees on planning proposals which affect Registered sites or their settings (HE for Grade I or II* sites only).
- Important designed views from, to and within historic parks and gardens, identified as part of a development plan, may be protected by local planning policy e.g. those noted during HE's 2001 upgrading of the national Register of Historic Parks and Gardens.
- Settings of Listed buildings – these settings have statutory protection and new development within them may require listed building consent.
- World Heritage Sites may be partially protected by a 'buffer zone', which has mapped boundaries. The setting, however, is likely to be a larger area, with boundaries that will vary over time.
- Conservation Areas have a setting which, though not protected by primary legislation, can contribute to its significance.
- Archaeological sites which are designated Scheduled Monuments require Scheduled Monument Consent before any development or disturbance can take place within their boundaries. Their settings are not protected by SMC but planning authorities are obliged to adopt a positive conservation strategy and give 'great weight' to their conservation in local plans

(Section 12 [132] NPPF). The statutory consultee, Historic England, must be consulted about any development affecting their setting.

The key to protecting settings as well as the heritage asset is, therefore, to establish relationships between the asset and its surroundings - if there is an important relationship, we can use the planning system to try to protect it.

Elements of setting

The most obvious elements of the setting are views (both designed and 'accidental') of, across, or including the heritage asset, and views of the surroundings from or through the asset. These may intersect with and incorporate the settings of many other heritage assets. Views which contribute particularly to the significance of the heritage asset include:

- Those with particularly relevant relationships to the asset.
- Those with historical associations, including viewing points.
- Those where the composition within the view was a fundamental aspect of the design or function of the asset.
- And those between heritage assets and natural or topographic features, or even with phenomena such as solar and lunar events.

Historic parks and gardens often had deliberate links to other designed landscapes, and remote eye-catchers or borrowed landmarks beyond the park boundary. Thus while the park may form the setting of a great house, the park itself may have its own setting that includes designed elements of the wider estate, views to other heritage assets or natural features, or even open views of the surrounding countryside.

Settings can, though, comprise so much more than static views, and can affect our other senses, not just sight:

- Views may also be dynamic, whereby the eye is led towards movement in the landscape – perhaps a busy road, agricultural work in the wider estate, or moving water. The closing off of such views or the loss of such movement would, therefore, have a negative effect on the setting.
- Noise and bustle may be a key part of setting, for example a busy town surrounding a peaceful courtyard garden emphasises the peaceful nature of the garden, in contrast to the hectic streets outside.
- Quiet and tranquillity may be an important attribute of setting, if the landscape was intended to be enjoyed in contemplative silence. At sites like this it may not be desirable to dramatically increase visitor numbers, or to introduce or increase traffic noise.
- Remoteness and challenging terrain on the approach to an asset are often seen as obstacles to be overcome, in order to increase visitor access to a site. If, however, these qualities were a key part of the original design intention, they should probably be conserved, even at the expense of visitor numbers.
- The setting may even comprise elements which cannot be seen or heard: for example, the availability of fresh, unpolluted air when visiting a rural designed landscape is probably not something we would really consider until it is threatened by unpleasant or intrusive odours from industry or agriculture.

Assessing the contribution of setting to the significance of a heritage asset

Historic England has devised a seven step assessment process to assess the contribution of setting to the significance of a heritage asset (Historic England, 2015). The two steps most useful to CGTs, when assessing proposed development are:

Step 2: assess whether, how and to what degree these settings make a contribution to the significance of the heritage asset; and

Step 3: assess the effects of the proposed development, whether beneficial or harmful, on that significance.

Step 2 uses the following check-list of potential key attributes of a setting that should be considered when assessing its contribution to significance.

The asset's physical surroundings

- Topography
- Other heritage assets (including buildings, structures, landscapes, areas or archaeological remains)
- Definition, scale and 'grain' of surrounding streetscape, landscape and spaces
- Formal design
- Historic materials and surfaces
- Land use
- Green space, trees and vegetation
- Openness, enclosure and boundaries
- Functional relationships and communications
- History and degree of change over time
- Integrity
- Issues such as soil chemistry and hydrology

Experience of the asset

- Surrounding landscape or townscape character
- Views from, towards, through, across and including the asset
- Visual dominance, prominence or role as focal point
- Intentional intervisibility with other historic and natural features
- Noise, vibration and other pollutants or nuisances
- Tranquility, remoteness, 'wildness'
- Sense of enclosure, seclusion, intimacy or privacy
- Dynamism and activity
- Accessibility, permeability and patterns of movement
- Degree of interpretation or promotion to the public
- The rarity of comparable survivals of setting

The asset's associative attributes

- Associative relationships between heritage assets
- Celebrated artistic representations
- Traditions.

Assessing the effects of proposed development

Step 3 of HE's assessment process lists the ways in which various attributes of potential development could affect setting and, therefore, the significance of the heritage asset:

Location and siting of a development

- Proximity to asset
- Extent
- Position in relation to landform
- Degree to which location will physically or visually isolate asset
- Position in relation to key views

The form and appearance of the development

- Prominence, dominance, or conspicuousness
- Competition with or distraction from the asset
- Dimensions, scale and massing
- Proportions
- Visual permeability (extent to which it can be seen through)
- Materials (texture, colour, reflectiveness, etc)
- Architectural style or design
- Introduction of movement or activity
- Diurnal or seasonal change

Other effects of the development

- Changes to built surroundings and spaces
- Change to skyline
- Noise, odour, vibration, dust, etc
- Lighting effects and 'light spill'
- Change to general character (eg suburbanising or industrialising)
- Changes to public access, use or amenity
- Changes to land use, land cover, tree cover
- Changes to archaeological context, soil chemistry, or hydrology
- Changes to communications/accessibility/permeability

Permanence of the development

- Anticipated lifetime/temporariness
- Recurrence
- Reversibility

Longer term or consequential effects of the development

- Changes to ownership arrangements
- Economic or social viability
- Communal use and social viability

The understanding of setting gained by completing steps 2 and 3, which can be undertaken by CGTs, is crucial in helping local authorities to make informed decisions about development proposals, in order to 'maximise enhancement and minimise harm' (HE, 2015, p12). You can find the full methodology in *Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning Note 3: The Setting of Heritage Assets*, Historic England, 2015.

Changes over time

Settings of heritage assets *will* change over time. Understanding this history of change will help to determine how further development within the asset's setting is likely to affect the significance of the heritage asset.

Change can be both positive and negative. Settings of heritage assets which closely resemble the setting in which the asset was constructed are likely to contribute to significance but settings which have changed may also themselves enhance significance.

Even if the significance of a heritage asset has been compromised in the past by unsympathetic development affecting its setting, NPPF policies still demand that consideration is given to whether additional change will further detract from, or can enhance, the significance of the asset. Negative change could include severing the last link between an asset and its original setting; positive change could include the restoration of parkland which forms the setting of a garden or the removal of structures or self-set trees impairing views of an eye-catcher building.

Conclusion

The careful management of change within the setting of a heritage asset makes an important contribution to the quality of that asset. We therefore need to pay attention to and protect not only the parts of historic designed landscapes which are within clearly the physical boundaries of the site, but also the views and surrounding area which provide the site's character and context and can be so essential to the way in which we experience the heritage asset.

Further Reading

Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning Note 3: The Setting of Heritage Assets, Historic England, 2015

Seeing History in the View, Historic England, 2011

National Planning Policy Framework, Department for Communities and Local Government, March 2012

[focus on section 12 on Conserving and enhancing the historic environment]

Further copies of this handout, and associated training materials, are available at the Historic Landscape Project's Resource Hub at www.thegardenstrust.org

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