

OPEN STUDIO



Issue of the Month:

PARA 55, buildings and the landscape

The generally quiet and thoughtful atmosphere of The Terra Firma Consultancy's open plan studio is frequently punctuated by periods of intense discussion with flurries of questions, ideas and thoughts flying around. There are some really important issues we grapple with sometimes, and here in this new monthly column, we share our thoughts on a hot issue and encourage wider debate. By **ALISON GALBRAITH**

I recently broke an ingrained habit of responding quickly to queries and being proactive in keeping project communications going. One particular email, I'm sorry to say, sat in my inbox for several days before I eventually responded. My hesitation was partly because our client had already more or less decided to pull the plug on the project so there was little expectation of any response, but mostly because I was really grappling with the issues.

The project had started out full of possibilities and promise. We would be working with an eminent architect and a lovely young family on another 'Para 55' house. Paragraph 55 was introduced to the NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework), and its previous guises of PPS7 and PPG7, to allow new homes to be built in the countryside. As a general rule

this is not permitted in planning policy and Para 55 (as it is lovingly referred to) offers an exciting opportunity to do so, provided certain criteria are met.

Landscape architects and building architects get very excited with the prospect of letting their creative juices flow in the design process where the constraints are very different to a conventional situation, and are positively exultant if their proposals achieve planning approval and get built. Design panel members gleefully rub their hands together and engage in heated debate about the rights and wrongs of the design, striving to impose their own stamp on it.

Sometimes planning officers also rise to the challenge, welcoming involvement in an unusual and potentially high profile application. More often, though, there is fear. Fear of opening the floodgates and setting

a precedent which might be impossible to control.

The criteria set out in Para 55 are, on the face of it, pretty straightforward. Permitting the development of new isolated homes in the countryside should be avoided unless there are special circumstances. These circumstances include the need for rural workers to be close to their work, the need to secure the viability of heritage assets and the re-use of redundant buildings. The clause most relevant to landscape architects is the requirement for exceptional quality or innovative design of the dwelling. If this is the basis on which planning consent is sought, the NPPF requires that the design should:

- Be truly outstanding or innovative, helping to raise standards of design more generally in rural areas;
- Reflect the highest standards in



An 'ordinary' landscape capable of being enhanced?



Some landscapes are perfect as they are.



Quality buildings enhancing the landscape

- architecture;
- Significantly enhance its immediate setting;
- and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area.

Our team had decided not to seek to achieve innovation in our proposals and the highest standards of architectural design would be achievable. This left aspects largely related to landscape and we set about exploring and understanding the immediate setting and the defining characteristics of the local area. Published landscape character assessments at both national and district levels were our starting point, followed by detailed fieldwork and site-level landscape character assessment, along with the commissioning of topographical, ecological and arboricultural surveys.

Based on this in-depth understanding of the site and the surrounding countryside, we worked with the architect and other consultants to sketch out proposals that responded to the landform, reinstated historic field boundaries, introduced woodland, orchards and hedgerows, and created links between existing habitats.

Unfortunately, the council's officers were not convinced. In addition to some disagreements about the architectural design, they had fundamental concerns that the proposals did not significantly enhance the immediate setting and though they acknowledged there would be improvements to the landscape, these were not sufficient to justify a new building. They felt that the existing landscape was not poor quality in the first place and therefore could not be improved in a significant way. The negativity of the response created sufficient uncertainty in the client's mind to put an end to the project.

But the response got me thinking and led to much discussion with my colleagues. Was it right that some landscapes are perfect as they are? In ecosystem terms and for areas untouched by human influence – yes. Indeed any change might be catastrophic to rainforests in Brazil or

remote mountain ranges in New Zealand. In Britain it is more difficult to identify landscapes that are incapable of being improved, but possibly parts of Dartmoor or the Scottish Highlands, some ancient woodlands or river corridors? Even our most valued landscapes, our National Parks, have room for improvement with aims set out in their management plans and landscape character assessments. Management strategies, included now in most landscape character assessments, give helpful clues as to how perfect or damaged a landscape is, with a range of strategies such as conserve, repair, restore, or reconstruct, depending on the condition of the landscape and the strength of its character.

The landscape we were considering was not in a National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, nor was it subject to any designation, landscape or ecological but was gently rolling arable farmland with some woodland blocks and large fields, frequently without hedgerows. Fair to middling, you might say. Not amazing but not greatly degraded. And therein lay the problem. Presumably if the site area had been damaged by irresponsible use of the land or poor land management, the need for improvement would have been more obvious and intervention more acceptable.

Our proposals offered multiple landscape improvements in line with published landscape character assessments. But the new house was incidental and not integral to these improvements and was not in itself supported by published landscape character assessments. The wording of Para 55 requires the design of the dwelling to significantly enhance its immediate setting, so this must include the house, not just the landscape around the building. We knew the house would be of the highest quality but is it then a matter of taste as to whether it enhances views and character and, together with the landscape proposals, would result in significant enhancement?

Our industry guidelines for carrying out

landscape and visual impact assessments is based on the premise that introducing new built form is inherently negative, but some of us believe that a beautiful building sensitively set within the landscape can enhance the views and character. Only in a completely unsettled landscape, like parts of Dartmoor or the Scottish Highlands, might this not be the case. Most of our countryside has been shaped by man over the course of hundreds of years and isolated buildings or hamlets are an integral part of much of the English landscape.

Paragraph 55 will not solve the pressing issue of supplying homes in large quantities and some, no doubt, find the elitist aspects of building large homes in the countryside unsavoury. But the policy is there to allow the tradition of isolated, often grand and beautifully built, houses and gardens to continue. Having just completed a year of celebrations of the works of the great Capability Brown surely we cannot deny that his legacy of landscapes, alongside the grand houses, enrich, enliven and significantly enhance our countryside?

Note: Details of the project are withheld to protect confidentiality and none of the photographs relate to the project but are used for illustrative purposes only. Is.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alison Galbraith is associate director of The Terra Firma Consultancy, a professional landscape architecture practice specialising in all aspects of landscape planning, assessment and design; at all scales, in all sectors, throughout the UK and overseas. Launched by ex-Portsmouth City Chief Landscape Architect John Wigham in May 1985 and since 2000 under the leadership of ex equity partner Lionel Fanshawe, Terra Firma has worked in 30 countries, currently employing over 30 directors and staff across 4 offices in Hampshire, London, Vilnius & Dubai.

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