



# *A feeling for what's best: Landscape aesthetics and notions of appropriate residential architecture in Dartmoor National Park, England*



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## ABSTRACT

In England's national parks, the design of new dwellings represents a significant and contested part of landscape planning, inseparable from park conservation ideologies and policies. Within public discourse, new housing proposals can be praised for enhancing the landscape or decried for destroying it, while the decisions of planning authorities legitimise or marginalise different points-of-view. Set in Dartmoor National Park, this paper explores the competing aesthetic interpretations of landscape and the rural as represented within the design and planning of two separate residential sites that were redeveloped between 1998 and 2008. Discourse analysis of interviews (with architects, planners and clients), policies, and written accounts (planning applications and associated correspondence) investigates the positions of various stakeholders in response to these housing projects and to their protected rural landscape settings. Results reveal how notions of landscape context and aesthetics vary across different stakeholder groups, with design quality, sympathetic scale and landscape enhancement proving to be key areas of contention. Differing interpretations of national park planning policy, the problematic nature of communicating and judging qualitative aspects of 'contemporary' architecture, and the ongoing emphasis on visual aspects of landscape aesthetics mean that incorporating new housing design within national park landscapes remains challenging.

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## 1. Introduction

As arguably the most valued of the nation's rural landscapes, England's 10 national parks, covering 9.3% of the country, have the 'highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty'.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, as home to around 334,000 people, the design of housing within English national park boundaries represents a significant and contested part of rural landscape planning, inseparable from landscape conservation ideologies and policies. Reviews of English national parks in the 1980's by MacEwen and MacEwen (1987), (1982) and Blunden and Curry (1989) reveal a 'complex history that has involved many compromises' and inherent tensions (Thompson et al., 2014, 6). When new housing is proposed within such a context, notions of landscape, the rural, and "contemporary" architecture are part of public discourse and

decision-making. These notions are important 'as they can legitimise (or marginalise) particular developments, aesthetics and actions in rural settlements, emphasising the power relations of different stakeholders in the rural policy field' (Donovan and Gkartzios, 2014, 335). The existing literature on constructions of rurality suggests that residential development in rural spaces is highly contested (Donovan and Gkartzios, 2014). In this paper, we extend this literature by investigating competing aesthetic interpretations of landscape and the rural, and their relationship to perceptions of contemporary architectural design, as evidenced within the specific context of English national parks.

The dominant landscape values associated with national park designation and protection are preserving scenic landscapes and facilitating public access to those landscapes for recreation. These values are reflected in the two English national park statutory purposes, namely 'to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area' and 'to promote

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<sup>1</sup> National Planning Policy Framework, paragraph 115 (2012).

opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the parks' special qualities by the public'.<sup>2</sup> In practice, however, these values are often in conflict, while management strategies encompassing both preservation and enhancement are likewise not always reconcilable (Carr, 1998; Carr et al., 2013).

Park planning is 'largely concerned with negotiating multiple landscape values though placemaking and conflict management' (Butler, 2016, 239). In defining policy and exercising planning functions, park planners must negotiate among statutory purposes, landscape values and stakeholder aspirations. Park planning is itself a source of tension, imposing a form of cultural authority which allows freeholders to operate, but with development conditions according to notions of what is "appropriate". Tensions arise when efforts by "outsiders" to categorise landscape as a conceptual system of laws and relationships conflict with the 'landscape of custom' as understood by "insiders" (Olwig, 2002). To date, however, there has been a lack of literature which looks at how planning professionals handle landscape values when negotiating landscape change (Butler, 2016, 239). There has similarly been 'very little research on how the rural is constructed in architectural practice as well as how these representations compare with equivalent planning and housing policy discourses' (Donovan and Gkartzios, 2014, 334). In addition, in the last few decades, research on English park planning has itself been 'relatively neglected' (Thompson et al., 2014, 6). (See Fig. 1).

This paper investigates these topics through the planning process (1998–2008) of two single residential sites in Dartmoor National Park. Dartmoor, which was given national park status in 1951, covers 953 sq. km and is the largest open space in southern England. It is also home to around 34,000 people living in towns and villages within its boundaries. An 'exemplar of the contested countryside type' (Lowe et al., 2003, 95), Dartmoor has in recent decades been under specific and increasing pressure as a desirable place to live, with substantial in-migration, housing shortages, and rising house prices (Richards and Satsangi, 2004). Indeed, this landscape exemplifies Murdoch and Lowe's 'preservationist paradox', where the very act of protecting rural areas makes them more attractive to urban migrants (Murdoch and Lowe, 2003, 323). Other issues impacting on Dartmoor's residential development include an ageing population, growing numbers of people working from home, and a high proportion of energy-inefficient buildings.<sup>3</sup>

While landscape protection status in many countries excludes housing altogether, the ongoing presence of residential communities within Dartmoor reflects England's national park history. The English national park system was established under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. Although based on the original American model, in England the national park idea was applied to rural landscapes where there was 'a more evident palimpsest of time-depth and cultural settlements' (Selman, 2010, 384). In such landscapes, 'man made heritage and other cultural qualities', form 'essential elements of their special characteristics' (Selman and Swanwick, 2010, 13). As such, English national parks are classified by the IUCN as protected area management 'Category V: Protected Landscape/Seascape', and not 'Category II: National Parks' (Dudley, 2008). Also different from America, where a near-spiritual "wilderness concept" underlay its national park designations (Leonard, 2007, 25) was the notion in England of landscape as "scenery", reflecting a 'somewhat escapist emphasis on aesthetics, picturesque views and a Romantic construction of nature' (Selman and Swanwick, 2010, 8).



Fig. 1. "Hanging Stone Hill", Dartmoor, by Paul Moody Photography, reproduced courtesy of Paul Moody.

The 1949 Act reflected the need to reconcile conservation aims with the interests and views of national park stakeholders, but in practice conservation imperatives of "keeping up appearances" (i.e. maintaining the scenery) often fell short of the requirement to sustain the changing demands of the "living landscape" (MacEwen and MacEwen, 1987). In 1995, in response to criticisms that national park authorities were 'slavishly adhering' to their 'conservation remit',<sup>4</sup> a secondary duty 'to foster the economic and social well-being of local communities' was added under the Environment Act. Significantly, however, this duty was not given the status of the two park purposes, while previously, a National Parks Policy Review Committee (1974) had confirmed the primacy of the first park purpose, to conserve and enhance the landscape, over the second, recreation, in the event that the park purposes cannot be reconciled. Referred to as the "Sandford Principle", this management concept was later affirmed in a National Parks Circular (2010), which set out 'a joint 2030 vision for the English National Parks'.

In landscape planning, 'character is emerging clearly as the basis for describing the special qualities of individual landscapes' (Selman and Swanwick, 2010, 14). In England, park planning policy requires new development to respect the 'special qualities and characteristics of the parks', and the UK National Parks website sets out the "top 10" special qualities for each: Dartmoor's include its unglaciated upland landscape, archaeological features, distinctive geology and industrial history. It has been observed, however, that although the 'concept that the parks have a set of attributes that make them special is even reflected in the legislative framework', these same characteristics which must be respected are 'often ill-defined' (Thompson et al., 2014, 762).

In recent years, more formal assessments of landscape character in the shape of Landscape Character Assessments (LCA) have been employed to inform landscape plans and strategies (Tudor and Natural England, 2014). LCA guidelines stress that such assessments are 'not just about visual perception', and emphasise the 'relationship between people and place' (Swanwick and Land Use Consultants, 2002, 2–3). Meanwhile, wider landscape theories and policies, most notably the European Landscape Convention 2000, have challenged the 'traditional ways of perceiving landscape as a form of scenery' (Belcher and Douglas Wellman, 1991). Such methods also challenge the authority of the 'committee of experts' which reinforces the visual approach (Olwig, 2007, 582, 590). In a recent study of LCAs, however, it was found that there is still a

<sup>2</sup> Environment Act 1995, Part III National Parks, s 61.

<sup>3</sup> Dartmoor National Park Authority, "Your Dartmoor – Issues and Challenges", <http://www.yourdartmoor.org/developing/evidence/issues> (accessed May 7, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> S Belli [DNPA Director of Planning], second personal interview with authors, February 13, 2017.

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