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A question of what matters: landscape characterisation as a process of situated, problem-orientated public discourse

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## ABSTRACT

Sustainable development is a principle with the potential to inspire and guide action, but it is also a nebulous idea which is hard to operationalise. The concept of landscape character helps to turn this principle into practical action. Landscape character can be defined as ‘the things that matter’ about a landscape. Landscape characterisation is the process of determining what matters by identifying and assessing the complex interactions and relationships between people and their environment. The central argument of this paper is that existing approaches to characterisation are failing to realise the full potential of the process for the pursuit of more just and sustainable landscapes. A transformed process of characterisation is needed: one which is situated, problem-orientated and rooted in public discourse. This approach is outlined in theoretical terms and its fuller potential is signposted through the particular example of Govan, an urban landscape in Scotland.

## KEY WORDS

Landscape character; sustainable development; landscape justice

## Introduction

What is landscape character? What is the role of characterisation in determining the future of a landscape? What is the future of landscape characterisation? In this paper, we will tackle these questions head on.

Our starting point is the organising principle of sustainable development, which has its origins in the recognition that there are limits to economic growth and natural resource exploitation, but which has come to denote a more complex appreciation of the relationships between culture, society, economy and environment. In 1980, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) argued that the purpose of development is:

“to satisfy human needs and improve the quality of life. For development to be sustainable it must take account of social and ecological factors, as well as economic ones; of the living and non-living resource base; and of the long term as well as the short term advantages and disadvantages of alternative actions.” (IUCN, 1980, p. 2).

The Brandt Commission similarly argued that we “must avoid the persistent confusion of growth with development” (Brandt, 1980, p. 23), prefiguring the Brundtland report’s oft-quoted statement that sustainable development “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, emphasising human needs (especially the needs of the poor) and environmental constraints to meeting these needs (WCED, 1987, p. 43).

Since the 1980s, key policy statements have built upon these foundations. The inter-dependence of society, economy and environment was underlined by the *Agenda 21* action plan (UNCED, 1992) and the 2005 *World Summit Outcome* (United Nations, 2005), for example. Key progressions have been the recognition of ‘culture’ as a fourth pillar of sustainable development (e.g. United Nations, 2010, para. 16) and of the importance of seeing culture, society, economy and environment as mutually reinforcing concerns rather than necessarily conflicting objectives in a zero sum game. There has also been a growing concern for “the genuine involvement of all social groups” in decision-making as a prerequisite for sustainable development (UNCED, 1992, Chapter 23).

Sustainable development has, then, come to be defined by several key ideas: *development should be integrated*, eschewing single interest approaches in favour of the just and sustainable co-development of society, culture, economy and environment; *development is a matter of quality* (of life and environment) not simply quantity (GDP, standard of living); and *development must attend to the long-term as well as the short*, to the needs of present and future generations at one and the same time. Defined in these terms, sustainable development is a principle with much to commend it, but it is a nebulous one which is hard to operationalise. It is in this context that recent developments in the fields of landscape and heritage are important. The *European Landscape Convention* (ELC) (Council of Europe, 2000a) and the *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (Council of Europe, 2005) are both explicitly anchored to sustainable development and they provide us with concepts which help to translate this principle into action in particular situations. Landscape character is one of these concepts.

Inspired by Olwig’s discussion of landscape as “a polity constituted by common *thing* meetings treating substantive *things that matter*” (Olwig, 2013, p. 251; emphasis in original), we see landscape character as a question of the things that matter about a landscape. The character of a landscape resides in the complex interactions and relationships between people and their biotic and abiotic environment (Council of Europe, 2000a, Article 1a). Landscape characterisation is, therefore, the process of people coming together, in a manner analogous to an ancient *thing* gathering, purposefully to identify and assess these social-cultural-economic-environmental interactions and relationships in order to determine what matters in a given case.

Our contention is that landscape characterisation has a potentially important role to play in operationalising sustainable development, but that current approaches to characterisation are not fully realising this potential. We came to this conclusion initially as archaeologists, recognising the importance of the past to people in situating themselves in their own landscape but realising that this dimension was often inadequately or inaccurately reflected in extant characterisation methods, including the historic characterisation methods devised by our discipline.

A transformed practice is needed if we are fully to realise the potential of landscape characterisation for the pursuit of a more just and sustainable society. The characterisation process is important because it directs decision-making by establishing certain issues as legitimate considerations (things that matter) and by marginalising others (things that matter less, if at all). Given this, landscape characterisation has a great potential contribution to make to the implementation of sustainable development and the pursuit of landscape justice (i.e. a fair settlement regarding the many goods deriving from landscape; see Dalglish, 2012). Characterisation processes also have the potential to do harm, hampering or defeating efforts towards these ends.

### **Characterisation in Theory and Practice**

The ELC foregrounds character in defining landscape as “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors” (Council of

Europe, 2000a, Article 1a; emphasis added). This interest in character can be understood in relation to the promotion of sustainable development, and the three ideas – landscape, character and sustainable development – have evolved together in recent decades.

Characterisation practice in the UK is the primary focus of this paper. In that context, there has been a concurrent rise, over several decades, of landscape as a concern in environmental decision-making, of sustainability discourse and of character-based approaches to landscape assessment (Swanwick, 2002a, pp. 1-2). In the 1970s, practice centred on ‘landscape evaluation’, a sought-for objective and quantitative approach to establishing what makes one landscape ‘better’ than another. Growing disillusionment with the failure of such an approach to handle the complexity of landscape led to the emergence in the 1980s of ‘landscape assessment’ (i.e. the assessment of what makes one landscape distinct from, rather than better than, another), soon to be dubbed Landscape *Character* Assessment (LCA). The 1990s saw the further development of character-based approaches with the emergence of methods for assessing the historic roots of landscape character (e.g. Aldred & Fairclough, 2003; Fairclough & Macinnes, 2002).

Landscape character and landscape characterisation are conceptually aligned with sustainable development in that they foreground:

1. *Integration*. Landscapes are complex wholes (Council of Europe, 2000a, Article 1a; 2000b, para. 38) and character emerges from the interactions and relationships between their diverse social, cultural, economic and environmental elements (Swanwick, 2002b, pp. 8-9).
2. *Universality*. The ELC is concerned with all landscapes (Council of Europe, 2000a, Article 2), because people’s lives, everywhere, are affected by the quality of the landscapes they inhabit (Council of Europe, 2000b, para. 45). Character-based approaches do not privilege the ‘special’ landscape; they have universal application and the potential, therefore, to underpin action – wherever it is needed – for landscape quality and landscape justice.
3. *Quality*. The ELC promotes action for landscape quality (Council of Europe, 2000b, para. 40, 42) and the identification of landscape quality objectives which express “the aspirations of the public” with regard to their landscapes (Council of Europe, 2000a, Article 1c). This is because landscape quality is “a precondition for individual and social well-being . . . and for sustainable development” (Council of Europe, 2008, I.2).
4. *Cooperation*. As part of a wider trend towards more inclusive forms of governance (e.g. Council of Europe, 2005; UNCED, 1992; UNECE, 1998), the ELC promotes broad-based participation in landscape protection, management and planning (Council of Europe, 2000a). Participation in characterisation is advocated by the ELC (Article 6C1) and by practice guidance (e.g. Clark, Darlington & Fairclough, 2004, 6; Swanwick, Bingham & Parfitt, 2003). The cooperation of a broad range of people is necessary in order to generate characterisations which satisfactorily assess the complex and multiple nature of the landscape and which have the potential to underpin just decision-making (Butler & Berglund, 2014).

The extent to which characterisation processes can realise their potential for enacting sustainable development depends, of course, on the manner in which characterisation is carried out in practice. We believe that existing processes have gone some way towards meeting the test of universality – most being designed for wide application – but they fall short in relation to the tests of integration, quality and cooperation. This shortfall is evident from the way practice frames character (which characteristics are given legitimacy as things that matter?) and from the range and quality of empowered participation (who decides what matters?)

Broadly speaking, guidance does allow for integrated, qualitative and cooperative approaches to characterisation. International and national guidance frames landscape character in broad, diverse and relational terms and underlines the need to consider public perceptions of the landscape (Council of Europe, 2008, I.1.B; Swanwick, 2002b, p. 2). As the guidance moves into detail, though, and as practitioners interpret and apply it, the frame narrows and the list of participants reduces under the influence of structural conditions and strong disciplinary traditions.

The guidance for England and Scotland does identify a broad range of natural, cultural and perceptual elements, features and qualities which might be considered (Swanwick, 2002b, pp. 2, 8-9). However, LCA is partial in the way it characterises the landscape – a realisation which led to the creation of historic characterisation methods in the 1990s (see Fairclough & Herring, this volume). Historic characterisation methods interpret the ‘time-depth’ of landscapes and document the readily identifiable manifestations of their past development: the form and patterning of fields and settlements, communication and transport networks and human-influenced vegetation patterns, for example (Fairclough & Macinnes, 2002, pp. 2-3).

Structural fragmentation of the characterisation process might be overcome if the different methods could work together, and there have been efforts to develop ‘integrated characterisations’ which synthesise the results of partial methods such as LCA and HLC (Swanwick, 2002a, pp. 7-8). However, such integrated assessments are not common and the fragmentation of the process, and the resulting need for the *post hoc* synthesis of mature results, has the continuing potential to act against integration (Stephenson, 2008, p. 129).

Even when taken together, current methods significantly constrain the range of characteristics which can be considered. While guidance does promote a relatively open-ended and broad definition of character, practitioners have privileged narrower definitions under the influence of their various disciplinary traditions (Stephenson, 2008, pp. 128-129). Assessments by landscape architects – the primary discipline for LCA – are strongly influenced by a disciplinary interest in visual aesthetics and physical geography (Stephenson, 2008, pp. 128). Assessments by archaeologists – the primary discipline for historic characterisation – have privileged certain material manifestations of the landscape’s history (e.g. field form and patterning) and have hardly engaged with the intangible heritage of cultural practices, meanings, associations and memories (Rippon, 2013). Perception is certainly a relevant issue for archaeologists but, in the end, the concern is often for tangible historic features and patterns without a broader consideration of the legacies bequeathed by the landscape’s past (Dalglish, 2012).

Under the influence of such disciplinary dispositions, practice has privileged the material aspects of landscape (natural and anthropogenic) and certain kinds of visual aesthetic and historical understanding (Stephenson, 2008, p. 128). There has been a lack of engagement with the full range of interactions which people have with the landscape as it is lived (Stephenson, 2008, p. 129; Butler & Berglund, 2014, p. 232). This raises the question of power: who is involved in the characterisation process, when and in what capacity?

In its early days, landscape assessment was primarily seen as work to be carried out by professionals, for professionals (Swanwick, 2002a, p. 2). Guidance issued since then has recognised the value of broader participation (Swanwick, 2002a, p. 2; Swanwick, Bingham & Parfitt, 2003, p. 1) but, again, when we look at the detail, the situation becomes complicated. LCA guidance considers that several key steps in the process – desk study, field survey and classification – are matters of expert analysis and professional judgement, to be carried out by disciplinary specialists (Swanwick, 2002b, pp. 21-26, 30, 37-8). Stakeholder participation is recognised to have value (e.g. Swanwick,

2002b, p. 35), not least as a source of information, but the expert remains the dominant party when it comes to judgements about what matters.

Moving to practice, a little over a decade ago Swanwick, Bingham and Parfitt (2003, pp. 7-10) noted that community involvement in characterisation was the exception rather than the rule. More recently, Butler and Berglund (2014) have found that the extent and nature of participation in LCA is variable. Of the 52 assessments they reviewed, only 14 included the public as well as institutional stakeholders. Forms of participation varied, ranging from public consultation through a web portal to workshops designed to capture perceptions of landscape. Of the 14 assessments, only two involved participation at desk-study stage, when the character of the landscape was beginning to be framed; several other assessments involved active participation at later stages, providing opportunities for after-the-fact feedback on professional characterisations. Nine assessments considered public perceptions of landscape to some extent (e.g. stories about the landscape, perceptions of its history), but only one assessment engaged with the lived experience of the landscape more broadly defined.

Characterisation practice remains in thrall to its technocratic roots. It has been argued that the exclusionary effects of this can be mitigated by ensuring that evidence, methods and interpretations are made available in an open and transparent way (Herring, 2013, p. 174). But the problem remains as, despite acknowledgement of their partial nature, officially-sanctioned characterisations do carry particular weight and, as a result, their value-laden assessments of what matters are hard to challenge once adopted as a basis for decision making. As Stephenson (2008, p. 129) has put it: "If those involved in landscape policy, administration or development control are solely reliant on the version of 'landscape' put forward through the lens of the contributing assessment method or discipline, values that are not captured through these typologies fail to be legitimised, and can thus be ignored." Conversely, assessments which involve significant, early-stage participation can frame the question of what matters about a landscape in other ways (Butler & Berglund, 2014, p. 232). None of this is to argue against a role for disciplinary experts in the characterisation process. It is a question, rather, of considering who is included and who is excluded by current practice and of reconsidering the relationships between all those who have a significant interest in decisions concerning a landscape's future.

### **Characterisation as a Situated, Problem-orientated, Public Discourse**

Character is a useful concept in relation to sustainable development, and there are features of existing characterisation practice which are valuable in this context. However, based on the above, we contend that characterisation is not currently realising its full potential. More than that, in its narrow framing of character and its continued denial of broad cooperation, we believe that characterisation is acting to frustrate efforts to secure more just and sustainable landscapes. Here, we wish to argue for a transformed practice which is situated, problem-orientated and rooted in public discourse.

The character of a landscape – its distinctive qualities – emerges from the many interactions and relationships between particular people and a particular environment. Current characterisation practice does engage with specific landscapes, of course, but it does so through the application of a pre-determined and generic approach and, fully to appreciate the social-cultural-economic-environmental interactions and relationships that constitute the landscape, a more situated approach is needed. In this, the questions of what needs to be assessed, how and by whom are answered with fuller reference to the circumstances of the case and the results are "shaped less by legal precedent and accepted evaluation practice, and more by the actual cultural dynamics that exist between communities and their landscapes" (Stephenson, 2008, p. 129).

We agree with the *Guidelines* accompanying the ELC that characterisation should be linked to ‘quality problem identification’ and the definition of ‘landscape quality objectives’ (Council of Europe, 2008, II.2.i). For these quality objectives to be meaningful they, and the characterisations which underpin them, must tie back to particular problems of landscape quality and quality of life. Current practice seeks to characterise landscapes in abstraction from their social, cultural, economic and environmental problems, hampering its ability to contribute to transformational change where it is needed.

In order to achieve a truly situated and problem-orientated practice which is consistent with the principles of sustainable development and landscape justice, the mode of characterisation should change from one of expert study to one of public discourse. Here, characterisation becomes a cooperative endeavour involving the public, governing authorities, NGOs, disciplinary experts and others with a locus. The ‘public’ here means those people “affected or likely to be affected by, or having an interest in, the . . . decision-making” (UNECE, 1998, Article 1.5). Also, it is important to recognise that some will have greater needs than others and/or be more affected by decisions and actions (see Butler & Berglund, 2014, pp. 222, 225). A just and sustainable approach would involve those in society who largely stand outside of existing characterisation procedures, but this does not mean the exclusive transfer of power from one group to another (Dalglish, 2012). Disciplinary specialists, for instance, should continue to play a significant role in the process, using their knowledge and skills to help draw out qualities and problems which would not otherwise be recognised or understood. The point is not to replace one exclusionary approach with another, but to situate those currently in power in a more open and balanced relationship with those who currently are not.

In the public discourse we are advocating, the aim is not necessarily to reach consensus and, in so doing, to flatten out the diversity of perspectives on the landscape. Rather, we might think of the process as an ‘agonistic’ one, where tension can be a great source of creativity when handled fairly and channelled towards a common goal such as future quality of landscape and life (Butler & Berglund, 2014, p. 223, 233). Agonistic characterisation has the potential to disrupt received wisdoms, creating space for other perspectives to enter into the frame and for characterisations which are more relevant to the situation and its problems. This is not a case of ‘anything goes’ where equal weight is accorded to a potentially infinite number of individual perceptions and opinions. The approach we favour allows diverse perspectives to be aired but determines landscape character in a public (not private) and social (not individually subjective) way (see Butler & Berglund, 2014, p. 221). This approach is one of cooperative working predicated upon the concept of dialogic conversation – a discussion which does not necessarily resolve itself by finding common ground (Sennett, 2012, p. 19 & passim). We advocate the fair but critical assessment of landscape characteristics and problems: a locally-democratic process which debates what matters about a landscape and why, and which roots visions for the future, decisions and actions in such public discourse.

This approach has a number of significant practical implications. Characterisation will necessarily be an iterative and ongoing process – a part of the ongoing experience of living the landscape – from which clear but provisional statements of character would need to be extracted from time to time. Characterisation, here, extends beyond, but no doubt draws upon, those time-limited projects which study particular elements, features and patterns within the landscape (e.g. LCA, HLC, HLA). The characterisation process would be embedded in the landscape to which it relates and this implies a greater role for community organisations, NGOs and others, working with disciplinary experts and local, regional and national authorities. It is likely that characterisation would need to be driven

forward by networks of groups and organisations, whether collaborating on an informal basis or formally constituted.

### **Characterising Govan**

We can explore further what this model of characterisation might look like in practice by turning to a particular case. Govan has been part of the City of Glasgow since 1912, but the place and its residents – together, the Govan landscape – retain a distinct identity founded in a long and independent history. Arguably the most famous chapter in Govan's biography relates to its emergence as a world-renowned centre for shipbuilding and heavy industry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is the one context in which Govan is mentioned by name in the LCA report for the wider Glasgow and Clyde Valley area in which it lies (Land Use Consultants & GUARD, 1999, para. 2.47, 16), and then only briefly. Govan's recent historical development demands greater consideration, and Govan also has a deeper history stretching back to the first millennium A.D. when it emerged as a major centre of the early historic Kingdom of Strathclyde (Figure 1).

In common with many other inner-city areas in which communities formed around now dead or dying industrial hubs, Govan has become synonymous with long-term socio-economic problems. As the industries closed down, the population dropped rapidly as the more readily employable and/or mobile moved elsewhere. By the 2000s, 51% of the residents were economically inactive, twice the figure for the rest of Glasgow (Dailly, 2005, p. 5), and Govan Old Church had become redundant as an active place of worship. Govan has become locked into a familiar downward spiral: as unemployment and economic distress strip the landscape of its wealth, its well-being and its diversity, inward investment and migration drops, the physical fabric is neglected, housing and amenities deteriorate, and ill-health, mental illness, poverty, crime, vandalism and anti-social behaviour all rise.

This situation has not been ignored by the governing authorities, including Glasgow City Council. For example, Govan was designated a Core Economic Development Area, acknowledging and seeking to help ameliorate its chronic circumstances. However, for many, this designation amounted to an open door invitation for developers then busy reshaping the wider Clyde riverside frontage to move into the area. There was criticism that planning was prioritising city-scale concerns and that this approach had already failed, leading to or at least allowing the stagnation of land and property (evidenced by numerous large areas of derelict land) and damaging the quality of community life locally:

“The city’s interest is simple: Govan is strategically placed for industrial and warehouse development and has an important river frontage. The community’s case is more complex: Govan is a living community of people; the more industrial development encroaches on living space the less sustainable becomes that community.” (Robertson & Cassidy, 2005, pp. 20-1)

The absence of justice in this case resides in the planning decisions themselves but also in barriers to challenging those decisions. The Govan Community Council – an elected body of local community representatives – has, for instance, found itself unable to exercise its right to appeal planning decisions because of a lack of civil legal aid (Dailly, 2005). Here, access to justice has been denied to a local representative body unable to support itself financially in a battle with its larger, wealthier, city counterpart.

Despite all this, Govan’s community has demonstrated remarkable resilience, sustaining itself through wide-ranging local initiatives including pioneering approaches to urban renewal. In addition to the work of the Community Council, the combined efforts of four other disparate entities has, we

believe, provided the impetus and armature for an increasing body of activity which is slowly lifting the Govan landscape out of the dire circumstances in which it found itself in the post-industrial dystopia of the 1970s and 1980s.

Govan Workspace Ltd ([www.govanworkspace.co.uk](http://www.govanworkspace.co.uk)) is a local economic development agency which supports the creation of employment by providing managed workspaces and support services to small firms. Over the course of four decades, it has sought to relieve poverty and promote education, training, trade, industry and the preservation of buildings of interest. Community regeneration linked to the preservation and use of local heritage assets has been a focus and the vision, leadership and collaborative approach of Govan Workspace and its director Pat Cassidy have been fundamental to a number of successful, transformative projects.

Central Govan Action Plan ([www.getintogovan.com/cgap/](http://www.getintogovan.com/cgap/)) was founded in the early 2000s, when members of the community, frustrated by the decline and stagnation of central Govan, persuaded the City to prepare a regeneration action plan. A steering group including local residents, organisations and elected members managed the production of the plan, which aims to grow the population, improve quality of life and the local environment and involve residents in regeneration planning and progression. CGAP directly manages around £4 million of public funds and has acted as a framework for approaching £100 million of investment. A network of partnerships has developed to implement the plan and the initial grass roots approach marrying local residents' knowledge with professional expertise remains important.

The GalGael Trust was founded by members of the community in the mid-1990s. Born out of environmental activism, the Trust styles itself as "a community of creative people, who come together co-operatively to meet some of our needs" ([www.galgael.org](http://www.galgael.org)). GalGael has become a beacon in Govan, cementing a well-earned reputation for making a difference in the lives of many marginalised, isolated and disenfranchised individuals. Just one of the ways in which this is achieved is through traditional boat building and restoration work which allows those participating to find skills, purpose and inspiration.

The final mainstay of Govan's renaissance has been the Church ([www.govanlinthouseparish.org](http://www.govanlinthouseparish.org)). Continuing a long standing tradition of direct action and recognising the centrality of the Church to the character of Govan, in the 1990s the minister – the Reverend Tom Davidson-Kelly – instigated a series of initiatives intended to improve knowledge of and access to the Church's collection of medieval sculpture. This established an ongoing connection with archaeologist Professor Stephen Driscoll of Glasgow University. Despite the recent loss of an active congregation, collaborative effort over the past 20 years has helped the Church to remain central to the Govan landscape, spiritually, culturally and as a physical symbol.

These many ventures differ in their approach from top-down, City-led initiatives, in that they are long-lived, situated and founded in partnership and cooperation between diverse individuals, groups and organisations. These factors have allowed the cross-transference of knowledge and the building of trust between locals, incomers and outsiders and between the public, private and social sectors, with a focus on improving relationships between people and place – and this is what matters most when it comes to characterising the Govan landscape; the multiple interactions and relationships within a complex community and between that community and its environment.

As well as contributing themselves, these four entities have, by their presence, created an unplanned and unmanaged critical mass which has encouraged numerous satellite initiatives and fostered public discussion of Govan's past, present and future. Much of this has developed in a chaotic way, untrammelled by or in opposition to official plans and reliant on the imagination and

hard work of a heterogeneous community of local residents, local businesses, local government officers, elected representatives, professional experts, artists, students and visitors. The loosely-bound cooperation which has emerged here acts to encourage multi-vocality and action-oriented problem solving. It links diverse interests to a common goal: the autochthonous re-characterisation of Govan and re-visioning of its spirit of place, as a springboard and mechanism for achieving better futures for its residents.

This unmanaged and ongoing process of characterisation has involved a burgeoning of interest in the historical biography of Govan. This has been tied to activity surrounding the issues which matter to people most at the present time, particularly the future of public and 'private' space, of the historic fabric of the landscape and of the wider spatial and social connections which have been damaged in the more recent past. For example, City proposals to turn a large and semi-derelict open space at the centre of Govan into a car park were met with dismay by a wide-ranging group of people within Govan, not least because of the shared recognition that this was historically a significant place of gathering and social interaction, key to Govan's vitality (Figure 2). This was the site of the Doomster Hill – a medieval open-air assembly mound or 'thing' site of the kind referred to at the start of this paper – and more recently of Govan's market. The space also encompasses Water Row, an ancient route way leading down to a former ford which linked the south and north banks of the Clyde, different communities and economic interests (Manley, 2012).

Characterisation of the Govan landscape through situated, problem-orientated, public discourse has underpinned the generation of new ideas for the landscape's future. The purpose here – inspired by, reclaiming and building upon the past – is to envisage a future where the landscape is more connected and where its development is closely tied to the realisation of locally-relevant social, economic and cultural aims. The Govan experience demonstrates that engaging with (and knowing) the past, as part of an integrated characterisation of the present, can be empowering, providing people with the knowledge, understanding and insight to actively engage in the formation of development proposals.

Initiatives which indicate the character of this recent flourish of activity include several which have focused attention on nodal points within the Govan landscape:

*The Govan Stones Project* ([www.thegovanstones.org.uk](http://www.thegovanstones.org.uk)) and *Weaving Truth With Trust* ([www.weavingtruthwithtrust.org.uk](http://www.weavingtruthwithtrust.org.uk)) have redisplayed the sculpture at Govan Old Church and highlighted Govan's rich history of textile manufacture (Figure 3). Through the collaboration of the local congregation, community groups, Govan Workspace, Glasgow University and various artists, archaeologists and external consultants, these projects have celebrated, promoted and helped to sustain the church as a central place.

The site of the Doomster Hill (flattened in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and Water Row has been the focus of several initiatives. *The Ghost of Water Row* ([www.rias.org.uk/awards/rias-awards/rias-awards-2013](http://www.rias.org.uk/awards/rias-awards/rias-awards-2013)) was a site-specific art installation, instigated by architect Andrew McAvoy, which evoked the cottages which once stood here and the weaving industry which was central to Govan's economy before shipbuilding (Figure 4). *Some Thing Is Missing* ([somethingismissinggovan.wordpress.com](http://somethingismissinggovan.wordpress.com)) – a community youth project delivered by volunteers based in Govan and promoted by Fablevision Studios, led by cultural planner Liz Gardiner – responded to the plans to create a car park on the Doomster Hill site, raised awareness about the historical and cultural importance of the site and began a dialogue about ways in which its future use might better represent the community.

Other events and projects have highlighted the importance of wider landscape connections. *Nothing About Us Without Us Is For Us* ([www.aboutuswithoutus.com](http://www.aboutuswithoutus.com)) was a public art project led by

artists Matt Baker and t s Beall. This was the culmination of a series of preceding events including ‘The Govan Raid’ – which involved 120 Govan residents reasserting Govan’s ancient right to land across the river on which Glasgow’s new Riverside Museum has been built – and ‘The Reconvening of the Govan Parliament’, involving a procession to the site of the Doomster Hill. *Nothing About Us* brought together over 1000 people to bridge the River Clyde through a ‘conversation’ carried out through singing, flag signalling, model mail boats and other methods (Figure 5). Subsequently, *Assembly, Waymarkers and Honeycombs* ([mattbaker.org.uk](http://mattbaker.org.uk)) saw the permanent installation of a series of sculptures on the riverside in Govan and the publication of a limited edition collection of artwork and related research, all born of a collaboration between artists, archaeologists and the GalGael Trust, with the support of Glasgow Housing Association and Glasgow City Council (Baker & Shearer, 2012).

And there have been initiatives which have sought to characterise the diversity of Govan’s community, past and present, and promote relationships between its different sections, including:

*Diving for Pearls* ([www.gcin.org.uk/diving-for-pearls.html](http://www.gcin.org.uk/diving-for-pearls.html)), a participatory, multi-media project which the Govan & Craigton Integration Network launched to explore the cultural, social and economic impact of the shipbuilding industry on the community by bringing together local residents with migrant histories: from the descendants of Scottish Highland and Irish settlers, to the more recent arrivals from Europe and asylum seekers and refugees from around the world.

*Govan's Hidden Histories* ([govanshiddenhistories.wordpress.com](http://govanshiddenhistories.wordpress.com)): three creative projects celebrating women’s and other ‘hidden histories’ and highlighting some of the individuals and organisations involved in creating and remembering these histories. The projects were co-ordinated by t s Beall with support from the Riverside Museum and they were designed to be participatory, socially engaged and led by artists and members of Govan’s communities and organisations.

*The Govan Fair* ([thegovanfordfair.org](http://thegovanfordfair.org)), an annual parade held in June, inspired by the medieval fair which appears to have died out before being revived in 1756. In very recent times, fears rose that the Fair would again die out, but the determination and hard work of yet another diverse group of local residents and committed ‘outsiders’, working cooperatively under the chairmanship of local resident Jimmy Stringfellow, has seen its fortunes rally once more to become yet another vector for positive engagement and capacity building in Govan (Figure 6).

This brief survey of recent activity fails to capture the full range and quality of engagement which has been happening in Govan but it does provide a flavour of the lived cycle of knowledge we see there, one which is owned by a diverse body of stakeholders. This process is cooperatively characterising and re-characterising the landscape, generating new visions, objectives and proposals for its future and new levels of engagement in decision-making and action. There is great potential, and increasing evidence, here for advances towards a more just and sustainable landscape.

It is important to acknowledge that a great many important issues affecting Govan remain unresolved and still require urgent attention, not least those of long-term unemployment, economic investment and the amelioration of ongoing social problems. Alongside the successes, there have inevitably been failures, and there have been and are many tensions, disagreements and, at times, direct confrontations between different stakeholders in the landscape. But this reflects the agonistic and dialogic approach outlined earlier, which does not eschew disagreement and debate but manages to achieve in spite of it and through it.

Questions remain about how this situated and problem-orientated, public process of characterisation might best be linked to more formal and time-bound landscape protection,

management and planning processes. Such linkages are essential if the kind of ‘lived’ characterisation we have described is to contribute as fully as it might to the pursuit of sustainability and landscape justice.

## Conclusion

The purpose of development is to satisfy human needs and improve quality of life, with particular attention to those cases where the need is greatest. Just and sustainable development takes an integrated, long (as well as short) term and quality-focused approach. It involves the participation of those who might benefit from or be harmed by development in the generation of visions, the setting of objectives and the taking of decisions.

Returning to the questions posed at the start of this paper, what is landscape character? We have defined character as those ‘things that matter’ about a particular landscape, where landscape is defined in terms of the complex interactions and relationships between people and their biotic and abiotic environment. The landscape character concept is a significant one because it can help us to translate the principle of sustainable development into action in particular localities. Over the past generation, a number of important steps have been made towards the realisation of this potential. The concept itself has been developed, refined and embedded in policy and practice. Characterisation has been established as a process with universal application and, thus, a process capable of underpinning action, wherever it is needed, for quality of landscape and life. Policy and guidance have promoted the idea that landscape character resides in and emerges from the multiple and complex interactions and relationships between people and their biotic and abiotic environment.

What is the role of characterisation in determining the future of a landscape? We see landscape characterisation as the process of determining what matters about a landscape, and why. This is achieved through the purposeful identification and assessment of the landscape’s constituent social-cultural-economic-environmental interactions and relationships. Characterisation identifies certain characteristics as relevant and legitimate considerations and marginalises others and the characterisation process plays an important role by informing, framing and directing planning and decision-making. The processes and practices of characterisation deserve close attention because they have the potential to help put the principle of sustainable development into practice, and they also have the potential to frustrate efforts to that end. Our contention is that existing approaches to landscape characterisation such as LCA, HLC and HLA, especially as they are carried out in practice, fall short because they frame character too narrowly and in an insufficiently integrated and qualitative way, and because they are insufficiently inclusive and cooperative.

What is the future of landscape characterisation? We have argued for an approach which is situated, in that decisions about how landscape character is framed and about who needs to be involved in the process emerge from the circumstances of the case. We have advocated a problem-orientated characterisation process, one made as relevant as possible to the particular quality problems faced in a given situation. We have highlighted agonistic and dialogic public discourse, because this is, we believe, the best way to achieve a truly situated and problem-orientated practice which is consistent with the principles of sustainable development and landscape justice.

The example of Govan is not intended as a model for others to follow – it could hardly be replicated – but as a means of grounding our general argument in a particular reality. In Govan, we see a lived process of characterisation which is particular to the situation, framed in relation to the problems and needs of the landscape and its communities and taken forward through public discourse. This discourse is at times difficult, but it involves a dialogue – not centrally managed and

planned, nor entirely predictable – between diverse individuals, groups and organisations, who share a desire to improve the quality of life of the present generation of Govanites and of generations to come. In Govan, and no doubt in other landscapes too, the kind of characterisation process we have been promoting already exists and resultant character information is already available for translation across to more formal landscape protection, management and planning contexts. This character information has been generated socially, through the interaction and cooperation of a diverse body of local residents, organisations and representatives, together with academic and professional experts and others. It is through further cooperation that the conclusions emerging from the lived characterisation of the Govan landscape can be fed into development planning and decision-making. One path forward here might be seen in the recent work of SURF ([www.scotregen.co.uk](http://www.scotregen.co.uk)), a regeneration network of some 250 private, public and third sector organisations which channels information, consultation and policy proposals to and from local and central government. Other models also exist for networks of groups and organisations which can drive forward characterisation, including certain kinds of landscape observatory (see Gambino, Cassatella, Devecchi & Larcher, 2013) and ecomuseum partnership (e.g. Vjosa/Aoos Ecomuseum, n.d.). Such initiatives provide general models for future cooperation between local groups and organisations (involved in the characterisation process), disciplinary specialists (involved in that process and also able to help translate its results into planning-relevant forms) and wider enabling and channelling networks.

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#### **Figure captions**

Figure 1. Govan Old Parish Church. Archaeological evidence shows that there has been a continuous religious presence on this site for some 1,500 years. A splendid collection of 1,000-year-old sculpture housed in the Church speaks to Govan's early importance as a religious and royal centre (see Dalglish & Driscoll, 2009). Photograph by Ingrid Shearer.

Figure 2. Two sides of a campaign postcard questioning plans for a car park on the site of the Doomster Hill and Water Row and calling for collaboration in the creation of a new vision for the site. Image by Tom Manley.

Figure 3. The redisplayed early medieval sculpture inside Govan Old Parish Church. In the background hangs a silk screen produced by the *Weaving Truth with Trust* project. Photograph by Ingrid Shearer.

Figure 4. The Ghost of Water Row. The Ghost first manifested itself on Water Row in 2012 (the centenary of Govan's annexation by Glasgow), when the illuminated installation provided a focal point for creative activity and community celebrations reflecting on local initiatives, stories, and

aspirations for the future. It has since reappeared several times in different locations and is seen here in front of Govan Old Parish Church. Photograph Julia Bauer.

Figure 5. Participants in *Nothing About Us Without Us Is For Us*. This group, standing on the south bank of the River Clyde in Govan, is attempting to bridge the river by calling to others standing on the north bank. Photograph: Ross Clark.

Figure 6. Govan Fair. Andrew McAvoy's original sketch design for the Ghost of Water Row float, as featured in the Govan Fair procession of 2013. The design features George Wylie inspired stylised birds and the 'sheep's heid' [head], the totem of the Govan Weavers. Image by Andrew McAvoy.