

# EXCEPTIONAL DESIGN IN AN ICONIC LANDSCAPE? INTERPRETATIONS OF LANDSCAPE AND RESIDENTIAL ARCHITECTURE IN DARTMOOR NATIONAL PARK

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*In England's national parks, architecture represents an important and contested part of landscape planning, inseparable from park conservation ideologies and policies. This paper investigates the competing landscape interpretations surrounding the design and planning of an unrealized dwelling in Dartmoor National Park. In a landscape revered for its 'iconic' status, and on a site constrained by local planning policy, planning permission hinged on satisfying the conditions of a clause in national policy whereby a recognized 'exceptional' new dwelling might be permitted to override local planning restrictions. This article considers how different constructions of landscape identity influenced the conception and regulation of Dartmoor's landscape as a context for new architecture. Discourse analysis of interviews and planning documents examines the range of landscape interpretations and notions of 'appropriate' architecture among key stakeholders, including locals, planners, and architects. Findings reveal significant rifts in aesthetic design discourses, which are influenced by conceptions of site, landscape character, the constructed cultural and historic context, and landscape enhancement. In summary, this paper considers the significance of conflicting landscape interpretations for the accommodation of new architecture in protected landscapes.*

1 Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 4th ed., s.v. "iconic."

England's national parks are often described as iconic landscapes, in the sense of "typifying, illustrating and exemplifying" distinct and valued qualities.<sup>1</sup> Also

called the “jewels in the crown of England’s landscapes”,<sup>2</sup> these areas are considered national assets and are promoted as part of the country’s identity. In planning terms, they have the nation’s highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty, to which all other planning concerns are secondary.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, as International Union for Conservation of Nature Category V protected areas, and home to around 334,000 people, landscape conservation aims must be reconciled with the interests and views of stakeholders, including the demand for new housing.

The extensive literature on constructions of rurality suggests that the development of new houses in rural spaces is highly contested. The reconciliation of conservation and development trade-offs in rural landscape is widely recognized as a problem.<sup>4</sup> As an element of planning, architectural design is itself highly contested.<sup>5</sup> Comprehensive reviews of English national parks in the 1980s by MacEwen and MacEwen (1982, 1987), and Blunden and Curry (1989), reveal a history of complexity and compromise.<sup>6</sup> Research on park planning, however, has been relatively overlooked in the last few decades.<sup>7</sup> The ways in which planning professionals handle landscape values when negotiating landscape change has also been neglected.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, there has 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”.<sup>9</sup>

This article centres on the design and planning of a single, unrealized, new dwelling by David Sheppard Architects in Dartmoor National Park, the largest open space in southern England (953 sq. km). It investigates how different constructions of landscape identity influenced the conception and regulation of Dartmoor’s landscape as a site for new architecture, and the notions of appropriate design that result from these processes. It examines the relationship between physical landscape attributes (‘natural’ landscape character) and cultural-historic traces (in the built environment), the meanings

2 Campaign to Protect Rural England, “National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty: The jewels in the crown of England’s landscapes,” accessed 3 October 2017, <http://www.cpre.org.uk/media-centre/sound-bites/item/3993-national-parks-and-areas-of-outstanding-natural-beauty-the-jewels-in-the-crown-of-england-s-landscapes>.

3 John O’Leary, “Town Planning and Housing Development,” in *Housing: The Essential Foundations*, eds. N. Balchin and M. Rhoden (London: Routledge, 1998), 144.

4 Jeffrey Sayer et al., “Ten principles for a landscape approach to reconciling agriculture, conservation, and other competing land uses,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 110.21 (2016), 8349.

5 John Punter and Matthew Carmona, *The Design Dimension of Planning: Theory, Content and Best Practice for Design Policies* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1997).

6 Nicola Thompson, Guy Garrod, and Marian Raley, “Planning in England’s National Parks,” in *5th Symposium Conference Volume for Research in Protected Areas* (Newcastle University: Mittersill Centre for Rural Economy, School of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development, 2013), 762.

7 Ibid., 6.

8 Andrew Butler, "Dynamics of Integrating Landscape Values in Landscape Character Assessment: The Hidden Dominance of the Objective Outsider," *Landscape Research* 41.2 (2016), 239.

9 Kevin Donovan and Menelaos Gkartzios, "Architecture and Rural Planning: 'Claiming the Vernacular,'" *Land Use Policy* 41 (2014), 334.

10 Derk Jan Stobbelaar and Bas Pedroli, "Perspectives on Landscape Identity: A Conceptual Challenge," *Landscape Research* 36.3 (2011), 322.

11 Marc Antrop, "Landscape Change: Plan or Chaos?" *Landscape and Urban Planning* 41.3-4 (1998), 155-61.

12 National Parks UK, "Special Qualities," accessed 3 October 2017, <http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk/students/whatisanationalpark/specialqualities>.

13 Butler, "Dynamics," 239.

14 Thompson, Garrod, and Raley, "Planning in England's National Parks," 762.

15 Matthew Kelly, *Quartz and Feldspar: Dartmoor – a British Landscape in Modern Times* (London: Vintage Publishing, 2015), 14.

that are attached to them by different actors in the landscape development debate, and how these impact architecture preferences. This research is framed by Stobbelaar and Pedroli's working definition of landscape identity as "the perceived uniqueness of a place", and concentrates on "interpretations of landscape identity itself rather than on its contribution to social or personal identity".<sup>10</sup> In short, it explores comparative "spatial" landscape identities as constructed by key development stakeholders.<sup>11</sup>

Inherent within the designation and protection of national park landscapes is a consensus among planners and the wider public that human interventions should be designed to be visually harmonious with park landscape character. English park planning policy requires new development to respect the parks' special qualities and characteristics, and the National Parks UK website sets out the 'top 10' special qualities for each. Dartmoor's include its unglaciated upland landscape, archaeological features, distinctive geology, industrial history, and unusual ecology.<sup>12</sup> Such formal assessments of landscape character denote a critical point in the legitimization and framing of park landscape values.<sup>13</sup> However, while even the legislative framework reflects the concept that the parks have a set of attributes that makes them special, these same characteristics are "often ill-defined".<sup>14</sup> Dartmoor, for example, is sometimes described as a wilderness, but its history "has been troubled by the discursive tensions between Dartmoor the wilderness and Dartmoor the anthropic landscape of shifting meaning and value".<sup>15</sup> Over time, perceptions have shifted strikingly from a "barren waste", condemned in the nineteenth century by those who sought to improve the productivity of its moorland, to "one of the most valued", and arguably iconic, rural landscapes in the UK.<sup>16</sup>

The dominant landscape values associated with English national park designation and protection are the preservation of scenic landscapes and the facilitation of public understanding and enjoyment of those landscapes. Specifically, it was the preservation of so-called 'natural beauty' that was a key

driver in national park designation and which continues to be enshrined in their first, and primary, statutory purpose.<sup>17</sup> An important consideration for this article is thus the perceived effects of new dwellings in ‘natural’ and ‘beautiful’ landscape contexts, specifically whether and how new buildings could be seen to conserve or enhance such landscapes. To reveal the tensions among different landscape interpretations, this article employs a specific case: that of an unrealized proposal for a new house by architect David Sheppard.<sup>18</sup> The proposed site is situated in an area of the national park revered for its ‘iconic’ and characteristic landscape status. The proposed design, for the architect’s own residence, addressed national policy planning conditions, whereby a recognized ‘exceptional’ design, sensitive to and significantly enhancing its setting, might be permitted to override local planning restrictions, potentially lending the building itself ‘iconic’ status.

In landscape research, however, there is “a growing acknowledgement of the difficulty of applying universal rules of aesthetic appeal in a meaningful way”.<sup>19</sup> In the context of national parks, the concept of ‘natural beauty’ has been shown to be “a dynamic and malleable concept, potentially posing problems for consistency of interpretation”, and one which must inevitably be “related to a prevailing consensus on what people consider to be aesthetic and important to human well-being”.<sup>20</sup> What makes landscapes ‘beautiful’ is “often intimately linked to other intrinsic landscape values such as biodiversity”, and “these other values can shift perceptions of how we perceive and appreciate the beauty of landscapes”.<sup>21</sup>

There is, moreover, a growing body of research, consistent with the information-processing theory developed by Kaplan and Kaplan, which suggests that the understanding of landscape depends, at least in part, on the observer’s previous knowledge or experience.<sup>22</sup> In landscape planning, this understanding is inherently linked to the visual, but people with divergent backgrounds do not necessarily see the same landscape.<sup>23</sup> Different conceptions of landscape mean

16 Ibid., 10.

17 Paul Selman and Carys Swanwick, “On the Meaning of Natural Beauty in Landscape Legislation,” *Landscape Research* 35.1 (2010), 11.

18 David Sheppard Architects, “Sheepstor”, Corner site between Huccaby and Byeways, Yelverton, Devon.

19 Thompson, Garrod, and Raley, “Planning in England’s National Parks,” 13.

20 Selman and Swanwick, “On the Meaning of Natural Beauty,” 7.

21 Anna Jorgensen, “Beyond the View: Future Directions in Landscape Aesthetics Research,” *Landscape and Urban Planning* 100.4 (2011), 353.

22 Rachel Kaplan and Stephen Kaplan, *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

23 Donald Meinig, “The Beholding Eye: Ten Versions of the Same Scene,” in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays*. ed. D. W. Meinig (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 33-48.

24 Simon Bell, "Landscape pattern, perception and visualisation in the visual management of forests," *Landscape and Urban Planning* 54 (2001), 201-11.

25 Lien Dupont, Marc Antrop, and Veerle Van Eetvelde, "Does landscape related expertise influence the visual perception of landscape photographs? Implications for participatory landscape planning and management," *Landscape and Urban Planning* 141 (2015), 68-77.

26 Ibid., 75.

27 Ibid., 74.

28 Karen Foley and Mark Scott, "Accommodating New Housing Development in Rural Areas? Representations of Landscape, Land and Rurality in Ireland," *Landscape Research* 39.4 (2014), 362.

29 David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), 10.

30 Butler, "Dynamics," 239.

31 Emma Waterton, "Whose Sense of Place? Reconciling Archaeological Perspectives with Community Values: Cultural Landscapes in England," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 11.4 (2005), 309.

that judgements and opinions formed on the basis of what is perceived will differ as well.<sup>24</sup> A number of studies have highlighted significant differences in the way landscape professionals and non-professionals perceive landscapes.<sup>25</sup> Pertinent for this study are Dupont, Antrop, and Van Eetvelde, who have found that "while experts explore the landscape as a whole with detailed inspections of its constituting elements, lay people have a much more restricted viewing pattern only focusing on a few elements, mainly buildings".<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in contrast to landscape experts, they found that buildings attracted and held the attention of non-experts, impeding their visual exploration of other elements in the landscape.<sup>27</sup> This paper proposes that, in line with the "wider cultural turn within rural studies to analyse social representations of landscape",<sup>28</sup> a broader understanding of landscape values may encourage the synthesizing of different landscape narratives to facilitate a more positive design and development agenda in contested landscapes.

As Matless has shown, the many possible and coexistent understandings of the rural can lead to tensions of landscape and culture.<sup>29</sup> In England's national parks, architecture represents a significant, yet contested part of landscape planning, inseparable from landscape conservation ideologies and policies. A new building can be celebrated as enhancing the landscape, but also decried for destroying it. Planning interprets and embodies prevailing notions of appropriateness, legitimizing (or marginalizing) types of development, aesthetics, and actions, and in doing so ultimately defines for whom the landscape is planned.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, power struggles over the conservation of natural and cultural heritage regularly divide opinions and communities.<sup>31</sup>

In recent years, with substantial in-migration, housing shortages, and rising house prices, these landscapes have been under specific and increasing pressure as desirable places to live. Indeed, Dartmoor exemplifies Murdoch and Lowe's preservationist paradox, in which the very act of protecting rural areas makes them more attractive to urban migrants, adding to development

pressures at the risk of compromising conservation values.<sup>32</sup> Such migrants, however, arguably represent outsider-based values rather than the intimacy and subjectivity of insiders who have long-held associations with the landscape.<sup>33</sup>

In the case study, four separate phases of development are considered: pre-development conditions, design development, planning application and discussion, and planning refusal. Both the design content, i.e. what is being proposed, and how it is being communicated (drawings, language), are part of this process. Two types of discourse analysis are employed: that of direct accounts (depth interviews with five key informants: the architect David Sheppard, two Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA) planners, a former DNPA heritage officer, and the Chair of the Dartmoor Society), and of written accounts (planning applications, design guides, reports, planning meeting minutes, correspondence). Deming and Swaffield's constructionist approach is applied to these analyses, moving "reflexively between the observed data and the theoretical concepts".<sup>34</sup> Design drawing analysis and site visits also support the conclusions based on these discourse analyses.

Landscape interpretations are analysed according to four key areas: site, 'natural' landscape character, built context, and historical context. These were identified as the key determinants in the construction of landscape identity during the design and planning process. Interpretations of design are analysed according to the planning policy requirements of 'sensitivity to context' and 'landscape enhancement', which are compared, and their implications discussed.

## A NOTE ON NATIONAL PARK PLANNING

In English national parks, development control and strategic planning are the principal regulatory mechanisms in the pursuit of the statutory landscape

32 Jonathan Murdoch and Philip Lowe, "The Preservationist Paradox: Modernism, Environmentalism and the Politics of Spatial Division," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series* 28.3 (2003), 318-32.

33 Butler, "Dynamics," 240.

34 M. Elen Deming and Simon Swaffield, *Landscape Architectural Research: Inquiry, Strategy, Design* (London: Wiley, 2011), 152.

aims. Without a central national parks administration, each park is governed by an independent National Park Authority (NPA), which is responsible for long-term, strategic planning and development control (planning decisions), but remains accountable to the national government. NPAs are formed of professional planners and a committee of members who make decisions in consultation with relevant organizations and stakeholders. Policies in the Local Plan, developed through stakeholder consultations, are the basis for making planning decisions for each NPA. These policies are supported or extended by other local-level documents, including design guides.

A 2001 study of approaches to new architecture in English national parks found that NPAs sought to protect local character by adopting conservative approaches in planning and development control that favoured vernacular design and precluded the introduction of modern architecture.<sup>35</sup> Certainly, Dartmoor's New Development Design Guidance (2008) states that the "successful integration of a new development takes into account the traditional form, design, setting, and materials of buildings in the Dartmoor National Park".<sup>36</sup> This narrow definition harbours the danger that "'regional architecture' will become a dogma, and that for buildings in National Parks, the criteria for acceptability will be any reference to local building forms, materials, and construction details".<sup>37</sup>

Dartmoor's latest *Design Guide* (2011) is more expansive on 'contemporary' design, and devotes a short section to the subject, which explains that it should combine the "distinctiveness of Dartmoor" with sustainability. It also suggests that a topographical feature might be used to "inspire an altogether more contemporary organic built form rather than a traditional rectilinear building". At the same time, however, it stresses the need to reduce the visual impact of a new building, with the caveat that a building should not be "strident or intrusive". It is also noted that it "would not be appropriate to adopt this approach on a widespread basis".<sup>38</sup>

35 Land Use Consultants, "Development Planning Control in National Parks in England and Wales," in Scottish Executive Central Research Unit, accessed 3 October 2017, <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/Doc/156690/0042111.pdf>.

36 Dartmoor National Park Authority (DNPA), "New Development Design Guidance," (Bovey Tracey, Devon: DNPA, 2008).

37 Land Use Consultants, "Development Planning Control," 9.

38 All quotes: DNPA, "Dartmoor National Park Design Guide," (Bovey Tracey, Devon: DNPA, 2011), 36.

In summary, it has been argued that “preserving a particular landscape aesthetic has been so successful that the Parks are being preserved in aspic rather than evolving to reflect changing human/nature interactions”.<sup>39</sup> Critics “highlight this effect in pointing to the lack of innovation in design and the resistance to new development on conservation related grounds”.<sup>40</sup> Architects add their own discourses of rurality to this debate, including the extent to which they might “feel bound by vernacular precedent in terms of their own designs”.<sup>41</sup> More positively, however, in English national parks “the planning system can also be argued to be effective with regard to cultural heritage if this is interpreted to mean the built heritage”.<sup>42</sup> Even so, the very process of planning for landscape conservation is arguably “rooted in restrictions, rather than in opportunity, and creativity” for architecture.<sup>43</sup> Such planning could also be said to restrict landscape identity, i.e. conserving a set identity, in contrast to an identity which is dynamic and changeable, and hence open to enhancement, reinterpretation, and innovation by new, and potentially ‘exceptional’, design.

## PHASE 1: PRE-DEVELOPMENT CONDITIONS

In December 2012, David Sheppard, an award-winning architect, purchased a site on the western side of Dartmoor National Park with the intention of designing and building his own country house. Near the tiny village of Sheepstor on the edge of the high moor, in many ways, this landscape is the quintessential and iconic ‘wild’ Dartmoor, as featured in Steven Spielberg’s film *War Horse* (2012) (Fig. 1).<sup>44</sup> The area is dominated by the prominent granite outcrop of Sheeps Tor (369 m), for which the village is named. This landscape, however, is also one of notable change, as the eponymous Sheep’s Tor was formerly used as a quarry, the adjacent valley was flooded to create a reservoir, and its surrounding hillsides planted with conifers (Fig. 2).

The proposed site is a roughly square, corner plot of open, level grassland,

39 Thompson, Garrod, and Raley, “Planning in England’s National Parks,” 762.

40 Ibid., 762.

41 Dell Upton, “The Power of Things: Recent Studies in American Vernacular Architecture,” *American Quarterly* 35.3 (1983), 263.

42 Thompson, Garrod, and Raley, “Planning in England’s National Parks,” 762.

43 Land Use Consultants, “Development Planning Control,” 7.

44 Steven Spielberg, “War Horse,” (Dream Works Pictures, 2012).



45 DNPA, "Officer Report",  
Application no. 0671/14, 13 January  
2015.

measuring approximately 40 m x 40 m (0.395 acres) (Fig. 3). Although in planning terms it is considered open countryside, the area is one of dispersed settlement, and there are neighbouring dwellings of mixed periods and styles to the north and west. The site is bordered to the east and south by a stone wall and a narrow road, set at a lower level, and is dominated by bracken, hedge banks, and mature trees. Currently grazed by sheep, it was once used as a tree nursery and may have also contained forestry workers' huts, although no evidence of this remains.<sup>45</sup>

Fig. 1

View of Sheepstor, © Copyright  
Martin Bodman and licensed for  
reuse CC BY-SA 2.0  
[http://www.geograph.org.uk/  
photo/2175526](http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/2175526)



Fig. 2

Site location plan. Image courtesy of  
David Sheppard





Fig. 3

View across the proposed site.

Image courtesy of David Sheppard

The DNPA normally applies strict constraints against the development of new dwellings in the open countryside, with a spatial strategy that directs development to designated larger settlements. Beyond these areas, new development is essentially restricted to the needs of rural businesses and farming. This site's classification as open countryside meant any other development would be prohibited. The architect, however, intended to justify his new building through the 'exceptional' planning conditions of Paragraph 55 of England's National Planning Policy Framework (Para 55). Under this policy, an individual new house in open countryside might be allowed to override local planning restrictions on the basis that it was deemed to be "a dwelling of exceptional quality or innovation".<sup>46</sup> According to Para 55:

Such a design should: be truly outstanding or innovative, helping to raise the standards of design more generally in rural areas; reflect the highest standards in architecture; significantly enhance its immediate setting; and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area.<sup>47</sup>

This policy descends from an earlier piece of planning legislation, the Country House Clause, that aimed to maintain the English country house tradition

<sup>46</sup> DCLG, "National Planning Policy Framework," (London, 2012), 12.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

“which has done so much to enhance the English countryside”.<sup>48</sup> As a planning strategy, however, Para 55 is inherently risky, with no successful precedents within Dartmoor and few examples nationally. It also sets a very high standard for architecture, and one which relies entirely on subjective judgements about a design’s quality, sensitivity to context, and whether it is deemed to ‘enhance’ the landscape.

48 ODPM, “Planning Policy Guidance 7: Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development,” (London: 1997), 3.21.

49 David Sheppard Architects, “Design and Access Statement,” DNPA planning application no. 0671/14, 7 November 2014.

50 Ibid.

51 David Sheppard Architects, “Full Statement of Case,” DNPA planning application no. 0671/14, 10 June 2015.

## PHASE 2: DESIGN DEVELOPMENT

The proposed design was a direct response to the architect’s interpretation of the site. In both form and material – a locally-sourced granite aggregate mix – the design was intended to reflect a “sense of permanence and longevity” as if it were “metaphorically hewed” from stone.<sup>49</sup> Referring to Dartmoor’s granite tors, ancient bridges, and burial chambers, the aim was a building that echoed its moorland setting, but also had its own “rugged beauty”.<sup>50</sup> Under a large slab-like roof, three solid bedroom pods were arranged around a central living space with a chimney. As with Dartmoor’s granite, “the building in time will weather; moss and lichen will grow on the roof, blending in with the surroundings as a respected moorland feature” (Figs. 4 and 5).<sup>51</sup>

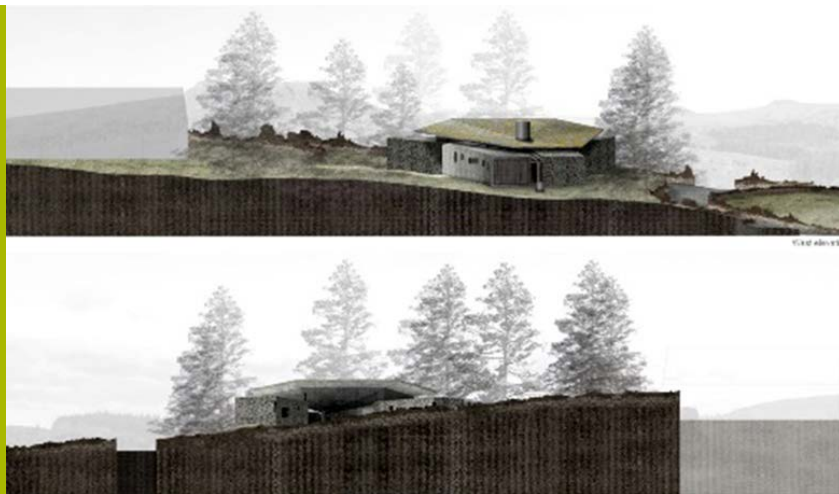


Fig. 4  
East and west elevations. Image  
courtesy of David Sheppard



Fig. 5  
Site plan looking north. Image  
courtesy of David Sheppard

In developing this design, the architect consulted with planners, design professionals on the South West Design Review Panel (SWDRP), and the local community. Throughout, he emphasized the design's natural fit with the landscape. The SWDRP, despite some reservations, agreed that the proposal had the "potential to fit and echo the character of Dartmoor", as well as to meet the criteria required under Para 55.<sup>52</sup> They also commended the architect's "enthusiasm for and knowledge of the site" (Fig. 6).<sup>53</sup>

52 SWDRP, letter to David Sheppard,  
2 December 2013.

53 Ibid.



Fig. 6  
View from 'Sheeps Tor'.  
Image courtesy of David Sheppard

In contrast, the Case Officer was not encouraging. Although he seemed to like the contemporary design, he resisted Para 55 “on principle” because he believed that, in national parks, local policy should prevail.<sup>54</sup> Emphasizing the strict local policy constraints, he told the architect that gaining approval under Para 55 was unlikely.<sup>55</sup>

### PHASE 3: PLANNING APPLICATION AND RESPONSE

A planning application was made to the DNPA, and the case was presented to the Planning Committee for evaluation. Whatever his personal feelings about the design, the Case Officer felt unable to support it and recommended that planning permission be refused.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile the response from preservation groups and the public was overwhelmingly negative, with twenty-three letters of objection sent to the DNPA. Consultations with the Parish Council, the Dartmoor Preservation Association, and the DNPA Trees and Landscape Officer proved similarly unsupportive.

A key issue proved to be the conflicting interpretations of the project’s setting. To many locals, this landscape represented a rural idyll, the “traditional bucolic setting of a countryside village” as one described it.<sup>57</sup> While upland landscape, archaeological features, distinctive geology, and industrial history are all identified by the DNPA as special characteristics of this landscape, planners similarly emphasized the area’s “pastoral character”.<sup>58</sup> They also identified its historic significance as “part of the medieval field system”, with a distinct spatial pattern worthy of conservation.<sup>59</sup> In contrast, the architect promoted the area’s connection with a different history – an industrial, and arguably more architectural, past. In the use of granite forms, his design also looked to the area’s longer-term, prehistoric, and geological conditions.

Judgements about the nature of the site itself were similarly divided. The principal debate was whether the site had been previously developed, while

54 David Sheppard, notes from planning meeting with Senior Planning Officer, 13 March 2014.

55 Ibid.

56 DNPA, “Officer Report.”

57 K. and S. Scrivener, letter to DNPA, 27 November 2014.

58 DNPA, “Officer Report.”

59 DNPA, “Refusal of Planning Permission,” DNPA planning application no. 0671/14, 10 February 2015.



the presence of neighbouring dwellings provoked additional disputes over whether the site was suitable for ‘infill’. For objectors, the development of what was considered a greenfield site was a key issue. In contrast, both the architect and the SWDRP considered the area a ‘site’, and not a ‘field’, because of its proximity to other developments and its historic connection to the reservoir.<sup>60</sup>

Another issue was the different interpretations of the ‘built’ context. During the evaluation process it became clear that, while the design responded to the ‘natural’ qualities of the site at a landscape scale (geology and topography), for both planners and other non-designers, being sensitive to the area’s defining characteristics meant directly referencing local buildings. Because this design was considered out of character with the surrounding dwellings’ “simple, traditional built forms” and “true local materials”, it was deemed unacceptable.<sup>61</sup> In short, as one objector commented, it lacked “the Dartmoor look”.<sup>62</sup> In contrast, a well-known local sculptor, representing a lone voice of support, expressed admiration for the way the “subtle and sympathetic” design “acknowledges the topography”.<sup>63</sup>

60 David Sheppard, interview with the author, 15 April 2016.

61 Ibid.

62 S. Seabrook, letter to DNPA, 23 December 2014.

63 Peter Randall-Page, letter to David Sheppard, 15 January 2015.

64 DNPA, “Officer Report.”



Fig. 7  
The site’s neighbouring dwellings.  
Source Google Earth

It is debatable, however, whether the neighbouring dwellings, built since the 1970s, really do “reflect the typical architectural style in Dartmoor” (Fig. 7).<sup>64</sup> Outside the historic village core, there is a mix of building typologies and

periods, including infrastructural and industrial buildings. The Case Officer's report included buildings associated with the reservoir, but he effectively dismissed these non-residential typologies as a departure from the vernacular norm. Meanwhile, however the neighbouring dwellings were interpreted, the architect did not consider the village as part of his site. In his opinion, he was "just dealing with the immediate vicinity and its impact on the tor", and therefore his proposal would not affect the Sheepstor village.<sup>65</sup>

Even so, the notion of a contemporary approach to design – as the DNPA employ the term – was not entirely unwelcome to planners. This suggests a change from the findings of the 2001 survey, in which park planners resisted the introduction of contemporary architecture. In this case, as has been described, the Case Officer made some positive remarks about the design, and his report also acknowledged the support in local planning policy for "contemporary design in the appropriate location".<sup>66</sup> This comment, however, indicates that while there are some places where contemporary design might be 'appropriate', there are others where it is not. As the Case Officer pointed out, in Dartmoor such buildings were replacements for demolished buildings within open countryside, and, in a village setting, a contemporary approach would be considered "incongruous".<sup>67</sup> Instead he suggested that if there was a place for such developments "it may be where this is better related to a more diverse range of building styles on the edge of larger settlements".<sup>68</sup>

65 David Sheppard, interview with author, 15 April 2016.

66 DNPA, "Officer Report."

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

6 CPRE, email message to DNPA, 8 December 2014.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

Similarly, an environmental group, the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), did not in principle "disagree with the concept that vernacular styles of building can be updated to great effect".<sup>69</sup> They also noted the "difficult balance to be made in the pursuit of maintaining the cultural heritage of the National Park, and merely preserving the whole area in aspic".<sup>70</sup> For them, however, this proposal went too far, and did not resemble a country house, but "a sophisticated, modern and very urban dwelling, which has somehow wandered into a moorland village".<sup>71</sup> Other objectors similarly associated

contemporary architecture with urban environments. One, for example, commented that its “concrete-like slabs and glass will introduce a brutalist, urban structure into a bucolic setting”.<sup>72</sup>

Certainly, the proposed granite aggregate was a major stumbling block for the architect, who believed that using local materials in an innovative and tectonic way was one of the strengths of the design. Therefore, comments suggesting that the design did not reflect the local granite, and more bluntly, that it was an “ultra-modern lump of concrete”,<sup>73</sup> reflect non-designers’ fundamental misunderstanding of the architect’s intentions. In contrast, the SWDRP designers appreciated the materiality of the building, and, echoing the words of the architect, felt it would give the design “its own rugged beauty” (Fig. 8).<sup>74</sup> The sculptor also liked the design’s proposed material and felt that it would “blend into the surrounding landscape beautifully”.<sup>75</sup>

72 M. Traies, email message to DNPA, 24 December 2014.

73 M. and E. Stebbings, email message to DNPA, 24 December 2014.

74 SWDRP, letter.

75 Randall-Page, letter.



Fig. 8  
Detail showing granite aggregate.  
Image courtesy of David Sheppard

Another area of debate, in terms of both Para 55 and in respect to national park purposes, was the notion of landscape enhancement. Within this discussion, issues of scale and visibility were key areas of concern. It was widely felt by planners and objectors that the proposal would have a “significant overbearing



and dominant impact” on the landscape.<sup>76</sup> The planners raised concerns that the building would be very visible from the tor to the north, and from the adjacent road junction. On this latter point, and again in direct contrast to the planners, the SWDRP believed the location on a prominent corner of a public road was positive, as the proposal’s visibility would “help to raise standards of design for the area” (Fig. 9).<sup>77</sup> The suggestion, however, of an inherent need to raise design in rural areas, as implied in Para 55, is perhaps questionable. This notion was certainly not welcome to objectors, and indeed, one warned specifically of the dangers of architects experimenting with design in the landscape. “We cannot”, he wrote, “permit new developments which take green fields and develop them in the pursuit of architectural research”.<sup>78</sup> The promotion of such ‘experiments’ could, however, be interpreted as an unintended consequence of the ‘innovative’ requirements of Para 55. Conversely, although in favour of conserving Dartmoor’s built heritage, the sculptor felt that “Dartmoor should not be allowed to become an outdoor museum”, and should also include the “very best of twenty-first-century architecture alongside ancient farms and barns”.<sup>79</sup>

76 DNPA, “Officer Report.”

77 SWDRP, letter.

78 Traies, email message.

79 Randall-Page, letter.

Fig. 4

View from the road.

Image courtesy of David Sheppard



## PHASE 4: PLANNING REFUSAL

If this proposal was an experiment, it is one that will remain on paper. Unsupported by planners, disliked by locals, and prohibited in local policy, it came as no surprise to the architect when, in accordance with the Case Officer's recommendation, planning consent was refused by the Planning Committee.<sup>80</sup> For the Committee, Para 55 necessitated substantial validation for a site where development was limited to a very narrow set of circumstances.<sup>81</sup> In their opinion, insufficient evidence had been submitted to justify overriding local policy.<sup>82</sup> Other groups felt that Para 55 simply did not apply in national parks. The CPRE for example remarked that, "[i]t may well be that the applicant's design reflects the highest standards in architecture, but [...] this in itself would be insufficient reason for it to be approved".<sup>83</sup> Another objector felt that the national park was protected from the expediciencies allowed under national policy, and that therefore "any attempt by the applicants to win favour for this plan under Section 55 of the NPPF can be ignored".<sup>84</sup> Consistent with the Case Officer's views, many felt that in national parks, local policy must prevail. The dominant view also seemed to be that new, and particularly contemporary, architecture was not welcome in this landscape. Even so, the architect remains optimistic about building a future house on this site and believes that he can still be creative within the framework set by the development conditions under Para 55.<sup>85</sup>

## DISCUSSION

In an interview, the Chair of the Dartmoor Society expressed the view that "the core of good decision-making is to understand the place and its story".<sup>86</sup> The landscape identities underlying landscape development debates, however, are constructed from the perceived character of a place, in which actors play as much of a role as physical landscape attributes. This case study has drawn out numerous conflicts of rurality and landscape that arose during the planning

80 DNPA, "Refusal of Planning Permission."

81 DNPA, "Appeal Statement of Authority", DNPA planning application no. 0671/14, 17 August 2015.

82 DNPA, "Refusal of Planning Permission."

83 CPRE, email message.

84 K. and S. Scrivener, letter.

85 Sheppard, interview.

86 Tom Greeves, interview with the author, 12 July 17.

process, which impacted perceptions of appropriate architectural design and its place within this 'iconic' landscape. A wide spectrum of stakeholder opinion has emerged: from locals resisting new development, planners negotiating conservation values in the interests of a wider public, and design professionals wanting to see more 'contemporary' architecture, to an architect pursuing his building dreams. A summary of the landscape interpretations held by key stakeholders is presented in the top half of Table 1.

In this table, findings are arranged according to the four key areas of landscape interpretations that this research identifies as having informed the construction of landscape identity during the planning process: the site, the 'natural' landscape character, the built context, and the historic context. The bottom half of Table 1 summarizes key stakeholders' responses to the design in respect of the two landscape criteria of Para 55, namely, landscape enhancement and sensitivity to the defining characteristics of the area.

The top and bottom halves of the table reveal a striking similarity of overall landscape and design interpretations among designers (the architect, SWDRP, and the sculptor) and non-designers (the Case Officer, the Planning Committee, and locals), and highlight a significant rift between these different stakeholder groups. The consistency which emerges between these sets of findings reinforces the argument that in this 'iconic' landscape, judgements of appropriate architecture were fundamentally connected to deeper interpretations and understandings of context. In this case study, these interpretations defined stakeholders' conceptions of the conditions which had to be satisfied under Para 55.

The proposed design was a direct response to the architect's interpretation of the site. Whether people supported or opposed the design clearly depended on whether they shared the architect's point of view about landscape context in its widest sense. What emerges from this case study is that two distinct

Landscape interpretations and notions of appropriate residential architecture in Dartmoor National Park, England

Landscape Element	DESIGNERS				NON-DESIGNERS		
	Planning Committee	SWDRP	Architect		DARTMOOR NPA	Case Officer	Locals
Site	Previously developed	Previously developed	No comment		Greenfield	Greenfield	Greenfield
Landscape character	Geological	Geological	Geological		Pastoral	Pastoral	Pastoral
Built environment	Outside village; mixed styles/periods	Outside village; mixed styles/periods	Outside village; mixed styles/periods		In village; traditional vernacular	In village; traditional vernacular	Village
Historic context	Industrial; Infrastructural; Prehistoric	No comment	No comment		Medieval field system	Medieval field system	Not specified
Para 55 Criteria							
Landscape enhancement	Yes	Yes	Yes		No	No	No
Sensitivity to characteristics of area	Complements the landscape	Complements the landscape	Complements the landscape		Design approach not appropriate	Design approach not appropriate	Design approach not appropriate

Table 1  
SWDRP: South West Design Review Panel; NPA: National Park Authority

groups – designers and non-designers – had directly opposing views concerning both the nature of the landscape and how they evaluated proposed change to that landscape. It seems therefore that not only can the same landscape elicit different responses from different stakeholder groups, but that differently constructed landscape identities shape notions of appropriate architecture. Moreover, the very fact that people see landscapes differently increases the

likelihood that they will have different opinions about any proposed landscape change. As such, further research addressing how different stakeholder groups perceive landscape could assist in better understanding disputes over landscape development.

In this case study, the two groups chose different features as defining the character of this landscape. Designers emphasized the area's geological distinctiveness, while non-designers (planners and locals) stressed the area's pastoral character. The architect additionally stressed the area's long and varied history, while planners highlighted the significance of the area's medieval field system. On a local scale, there were other, and equally divisive, debates. Designers interpreted the site as lying outside the environs of the mixed-style village, having been previously developed and therefore potentially ripe for re-development, while non-designers considered the site within the environs of the traditional village, previously undeveloped, and therefore an exception to local development restrictions.

From the outset there was an inherent conflict between local and national planning policies, suggesting two fundamentally different approaches towards 'exceptional' new architecture in 'iconic' rural areas. Park planning policies supported non-development, indicating that in rural Dartmoor new architecture is not welcome, and that the DNPA's landscape management aim is preservation. Such policies reinforce public expectation that national park landscape must be protected from new development. Meanwhile, protectionist agendas, such as the preservationist paradox, are likely to be more prevalent in landscapes of high scenic amenity such as national parks. In contrast, the Para 55 policy suggests that architecture in rural landscapes, albeit in certain circumstances, is welcome, providing that it is deemed to contribute significantly to existing landscape character as accrued over time. This position supports the status of architecture as a potentially positive element in the landscape.

In general, policy makers – in this instance, planners – usually try to limit the impact of landscape change. Urban migrants, however paradoxically, are also likely to resist change. Overall, for non-designers, the issue of visual prominence was a major one, and generally considered undesirable. In contrast, for designers, visibility could be positive, and a new building could enhance even a greenfield site, in the sense of increasing its quality, appearance, and value. Designers also suggested that a building could have its own inherent ‘beauty’, distinct from the visual qualities of the landscape in which it is situated. For designers, too, a building could positively secure the future of a site by protecting it from neglect, with the implication that a ‘natural’ site requires human management. For planners, however, enhancing meant improving a site. This is a subtle but important distinction reflecting fundamental notions about the relationship between landscape and design.

Overall, and in accordance with statutory requirements, the ability of the proposed building to contribute to landscape character was the essential and determining factor in whether planners and locals would accept the design. In this case, clear tensions emerged between planners looking to the built environment for design precedents, specifically a traditional, vernacular typology, and designers taking a wider contextual view, which reflected both man-made and natural features across a range of temporal scales. These findings suggest that the non-designers – including planners – constructed landscapes in ways akin to non-experts found in other landscape research, namely with a relatively restricted perspective that focused on a limited number of elements, particularly buildings. In contrast, the designers’ construction of landscape identities aligned with the behaviour of landscape experts who analysed the landscape in relation to its constituent parts, with less focus on the built environment.

Despite the evidence of substantial landscape changes and identities within and around the site, non-designers (explicitly planners) reinforced an iconic

pastoral landscape and the promotion of an associated design typology (traditional vernacular). Designers, however, wanted – or in the case of the SWDRP, valued – the freedom to break away from such built prescriptions and seek design inspiration from a broader engagement with the landscape, with less focus on an aesthetic ideal.

Within the design debate, the notion of a contemporary building in this landscape proved particularly divisive. Many residents appeared to find a contemporary approach wholly inappropriate and were highly critical of the proposed design. Planners were similarly unwilling to accept contemporary design in what they interpreted as a rural village setting. It appears, however, that if a design fulfilled other criteria, at least some planners were prepared to accept it, albeit conditionally. While designers' preferences towards contemporary design were clearly at odds with the non-design public, this only suggests a further conceptual split between locals, planners, and architects. It seems, for example, that while planners would not accept contemporary design in this rural village setting, it might be acceptable in either an isolated setting – where presumably it would not conflict with other buildings – or, in contrast, in a larger settlement where it could be juxtaposed with different building types. This suggests a clear distinction between landscape character sites in the countryside, and sites with a townscape or village-scape character, as interpreted by planners, in which new architecture must be designed to fit the built environment. Under such conditions, however, there is perhaps an inherent contradiction in creating an 'exceptional' design.

### CONCLUSION

The research has indicated how, in an 'iconic' setting within Dartmoor National Park, and under the conditions of an 'exceptional' planning policy, landscape interpretations influenced the conception of landscape identities as context for new architecture. This case study has drawn out numerous conflicts of

landscape identity arising during the planning process. Constructed landscape identities defined both the characteristics of the local area and the nature of the landscape, which had to be enhanced under the planning conditions of Para 55. Strikingly, designers and non-designers perceived very different landscape identities, which shaped their responses and perceptions of appropriate architectural design, and its regulation within this landscape.

In this case, debate over whether this proposal was to be accommodated or resisted was ultimately determined by the dominance of a conservation-based view among planners and the wider public. The association of this view with a particular design typology, namely vernacular architecture, resulted in a rejection of contemporary residential design. Moving beyond a purely protectionist point of view, park landscape conservation could also be seen as restrictive in terms of identity, promoting a narrow and selective vision of the landscape as a static space, rather than considering the many factors that make this landscape special, which could be interpreted in a more dynamic context.

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