

Where is the collective landscape?

Landscape character in the public realm is hard to define. *Vanessa Berry, Kim Calio, Megan Lawler and John Mongard* ask how do you plan for a collective character, when it is an amalgam of perceptions, values and feelings carried around by communities of diverse people?

Pine Rivers Shire Council (PRSC) in Queensland, Australia, wants to bring the community's values into landscape character assessments of the Shire's non-urban and rural areas. PRSC commissioned John Mongard Landscape Architects to undertake a Strategic Landscape Character Assessment (SLCA) of the study area and record six visual diaries of significant or potentially vulnerable local character areas. So far, the SLCA has been completed and four of the visual diaries have been started.

This article discusses the innovative approach taken to identifying and planning for communal landscape character using visual diaries in Pine Rivers Shire, Australia.

The visual diary approach, pioneered in Australia by John Mongard Landscape Architects, is a proactive, community-driven process to find shared values about the landscape of a locale, and to use these as a powerful planning and political tool. The approach begins with the premise that each region can be perceived as an entity, a discrete image that has memorable elements. The strong and positive elements of a

region are its major 'image' assets, and usually form a strong factor for the lifestyle quality of the place for its people.

The visual diary is a communication tool and process for identifying local character in an interactive, communal way. A workshop process seeks to unlock both the rational and irrational values and perceptions of a local community, creating, as a result, a visual diary of their visions and desires. This can then be used by planners, developers, agencies and the community to test, gauge and guide future growth and development. The output can be a legal planning tool, a policy and also an educational mechanism.

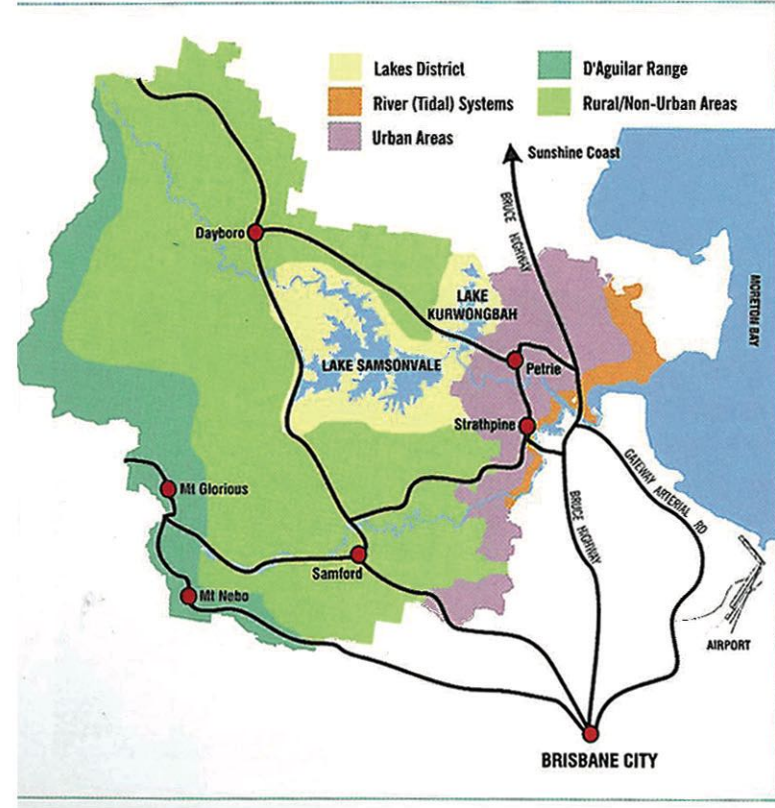
The process has been used in over 20 communities throughout Australia over the past five years. It has proved to be a successful tool, easily understood by the community, and well-accepted due to its open and engaging process.

Why was the project initiated?

The protection of the shire's landscape character is a goal identified in PRSC's Corporate Plan. The project is primarily being undertaken as a background study to support the preparation of a new planning scheme required by the Queensland Integrated Planning Act (IPA).

Planning schemes are required to address core matters such as valuable features, which includes areas contributing significantly to amenity (for example areas of high scenic value, physical features that form significant visual backdrops or that

Map showing the regions of the Pine Rivers Shire (Image: Pine Rivers Shire's Council)



Pine Rivers Shire

Location: (see map left) adjoins the northern boundary of Brisbane, Queensland (Qld), Australia

Area: 767km²

Population: doubled in last 20 years to over 117,000 people — one of fastest growing Qld local authorities with an expected increase of 50 per cent by 2016

Land Use

- Ten per cent of the PRS area comprises of urban corridor accommodating 89 per cent of the population
- 60 per cent of the PRS area comprises non-urban residential, rural and water supply catchments

frame or define places or localities, and attractive built environments).

Preliminary consultation, which was undertaken during the preparation of the new planning scheme indicated a strong concern for the visual quality of the area. The community not only valued the existing character of the PRS but also recognised the elements that make up that character. There was acknowledgment that these landscape values needed to be documented in order to be protected. The need to undertake an assessment of the PRS's landscape character, particularly in the western non-urban and rural areas was also highlighted.

In addition, PRS is recognised by residents and visitors for its accessible, attractive rural and mountain scenic qualities. Residents often cite the rural, country atmosphere as reasons why they choose to live in PRS. Much of the western area remains vegetated and the attractive scenic drives and views are a draw for visitors who also appreciate the diversity of landscapes within relatively close proximity to the urban areas and the city of Brisbane.

The PRSC resolved to undertake a Strategic Rural Landscape Character Strategy of the study area and then based on the findings, focus more detailed assessments on those landscape character areas found to be significant or potentially vulnerable, using the visual diary process. A big picture strategy for the regional image is a cornerstone of developing meaningful landscape character policy. This big picture needs to be incorporated into the legal planning framework so that there is strength to the strategy and so that local policies and visual diaries can have a legal and philosophical context. The local picture approach distinguishes the landscape and built environment qualities of the various visual districts, entities or areas within the region.

Strategic rural landscape character assessment

The main intent of the SLCA is to guide the image of the whole region, identifying, protecting and promoting significant positive character elements. The strategy consists of a set of

- Western boundary is formed by the regionally significant D'Aguiar Range
- North and South Pine Rivers flow east from the D'Aguiar Range to Moreton Bay

Employment/Economy:

- 50 per cent of the workforce is employed in Brisbane
- 25 per cent of the workforce employed in PRS is in industrial, business, commercial activities, farming and rural activities and tourism.

Landscape:

- Vegetated, steep, rugged mountain ranges in the west
- Hills and valleys with river flats and plains
- Coastal lowlands in the east

principles, two strategic maps and supporting text. While the focus of the project has been to recommend measures that may be translated into the new planning scheme, other mechanisms to assist in retaining these landscape values in the rural areas have also been recommended.

→ Process

Through an assessment of the character of the rural areas and a series of interactive workshops between specialists, councillors and council officers who live or work in the area, the study sought to identify the key strategic qualities that make up this landscape. The outcomes of the workshops were used to refine and provide subtle distinctions to the character analysis. There was a high correlation of values between the workshop outcomes and the assessment, forming a for further workshops with local communities.

→ Principles

From the analysis and consultation, the following statements summarise and synthesise the range of issues identified, and form the basis for development of the strategic principles:

→ Retaining rural character and detail

The landscape qualities of the rural parts of the PRS are being strongly impacted by new housing and associated gardens, fences, sheds, driveways and infrastructure. Suburban character is seen as inappropriate for the rural areas, and is the most negative visual characteristic. There are differences between the various areas and townships of the rural parts of the PRS created by landcover, topography, land uses and cultural variations. These local differences should be identified, strengthened and promoted as the rural areas grow.

→ The PRS green backdrop

The forests, trees and vegetated areas are very important in creating a bushland setting and backdrop for the PRS as a whole. These continuous green edges and visual districts act as visual buffers, dividers and breathing spaces between the townships and other rural living places.

→ Valuing scenery and views

The scenic quality of the views from key public viewing points, landmarks and gateways are vital to the Shire's sense of identity and tourism. These views should be protected and retained in a framework of naturalistic landscapes. There is a strong desire to retain and promote the nature and environmental values of the rural landscape. The quality of creeks, waterways, endemic forests and tree-cover is essential to the sense of 'ruralness' that people value and search for in PRS.

→ A continuous rural experience

The rural roads contribute to scenic amenity for both residents and visitors. Day-trippers come to escape from the urban landscape and to experience rural scenery and views. This experience needs to be retained, particularly in the light of the infrastructure improvements that will be required over time.

The sense of a complete rural experience is an important consideration — people value the sense of peace, openness and 'ruralness' evident over sequential experiences formed by day trips. Small pockets of undesirable character can alter this sense of a complete rural landscape.

Strategic plan maps

The strategic plan maps indicate the key visual elements, the relationships of the PRS landscape form and the various landscape character areas. They are conceptual strategies that can be used by planners to guide the future character of the region.

The landscape character areas consisted of seven rural visual character areas and four visual nodes (or major settlement character areas) which are discrete and have differing landscape qualities, values and associated issues. The 11 character areas and nodes were assessed to determine the need for further, more detailed landscape character assessment and strategies, such as through the visual diary process where each local community is involved in establishing local values and priorities. The character areas and visual nodes were prioritised on the basis of vulnerability to changes from housing development, relative importance of visual paths and corridors and the number of character issues identified through the analysis and consultation. The top six priority character areas are Dayboro Village, Dayboro Valley, Mount Glorious, Mount Nebo, Samford Village and Samford Valley. The PRS has allocated resources for visual diaries to be undertaken for these six priority landscape character areas.

Pine Rivers Shire Council Landscape Diaries

Visual diaries are being prepared for the six priority character areas in the Shire. The form of the diaries relates to the particular projects, though the following components are generally included:

- Map of the important local character elements;
- An indication through photographs and text of the character that is desired and not desired;
- Statements regarding the vision, landscape description, issues and desired outcomes.

Two interactive consultation workshops have already taken place, with the communities of Samford Village and Valley and Dayboro Village and Valley. Each with community members and representatives of 40 selected interest groups, and local and State Government agencies. The representatives of groups and agencies were generally invited to the workshop by phone, letter or email, while an advertisement in the local paper invited community members — residents, business operators and landowners. Interested participants were requested to contact the PRS to register their interest. Numbers were limited to 40 people.

The workshops have provided the opportunity for the PRSC to obtain community input into the projects. The community has been able to provide its views on what it considers to be

attractive and valuable and what is unattractive or detracts from the landscape character of the study area. These first two workshops have been positive forums for the discussion of landscape character issues and were well received by the community. A workshop with the Mount Nebo and Mount Glorious communities is to be held in April.

What happened at the workshops?

The consultants from John Mongard Landscape Architects facilitated the workshops with the assistance of PRSC's project manager. The groups were asked to contribute to a number of activities including:

- Brain-storming responses to questions relating to rural character of the study area;
- Community valuing of photographs of the local area. Participants were given five blue dots (desired character elements) and five red dots (undesired character elements) and asked to value the whole or parts of the images. These photographs were placed on sheets under general topic headings relating to character issues such as housing styles and streetscapes and, together with associated issues, were then discussed by the whole group. This process acknowledges that character valuing is a cultural, political and social construct that requires a communal process to negotiate a group view.
- Completion of a survey to obtain feedback on how best to respond to the relevant landscape character issues. The responses will be considered when determining the most appropriate means of facilitating the protection of significant landscape character values (regulation, education or a combination);
- Drawing a mud map for visitors to illustrate how best to experience the rural qualities of the area.

The responses from the community are currently being analysed and evaluated.

It is clear that PRS has some outstanding rural landscapes, some of which are under threat from incremental change. The protection of the PRS's rural landscape character is a matter of concern, particularly the suburbanised character of a new development and the intrusion into green spaces. The new IPA Planning Scheme provides an opportunity to protect and enhance significant landscape character values. It is also evident that it is necessary to implement other measures if these values are to be protected (for example education, streetscape programs, urban design strategies for public places). The challenge ahead is to translate the project outcomes into planning scheme measures and strategies for other operational areas of PRSC.

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