

Digital public participation

Understanding perceptions of landscape in North West Ireland

by Andrew McClelland

It's fifty years since Sherry Arnstein's famous 'ladder of citizen participation' was published in the United States, offering a concise and deliberately provocative guide to power (or lack thereof) within decision-making processes in planning. Public participation in planning and numerous other realms of governance remains an arena of intense interest that is sometimes fraught with tensions on the ground, particularly over development proposals involving highly uneven and contentious local impacts. While the extent of progress made in Ireland in ascending the participatory ladder is open to debate, a growing appetite for meaningful public participation and innovative practices is evident, demonstrated by experimentation with participatory budgeting, increasing emphasis on co-production with communities, and broadly positive attitudes towards citizens' assemblies and other forms of deliberative democracy. While local authorities are at the coalface in experiencing many of these tensions, they are also suitable testing grounds for innovations in public participation, including over cultural landscapes.

This article briefly illuminates two impulses propelling contemporary approaches to public participation that have grown in significance over the past decades, illustrated by the REINVENT Project that the author recently concluded at Maynooth University; focused on the cross-border cultural landscape of North West Ireland. Firstly, the emergence of readily-available and sophisticated digital tools have opened up alternative ways of engaging the public, whether as 'citizen sensors' using GPS-tracked mobile devices, or through online crowdsourcing platforms facilitating proactive 'citizen science' – for instance via the Irish National Biodiversity Data Centre. Of course, paralleling and intersecting these technological advances are critiques of the continued dominance of experts within decision-making over urban and rural landscapes, and hence intensifying scrutiny on the weight afforded to 'citizen expertise'.

Secondly, nuanced contemporary conceptualisations of landscape as more than simply defined by physical form and tangible attributes influence many of those progressing participatory agendas. Indeed, as a values-based phenomenon, with diverse people and groups perceiving the same places differently, landscapes are inherently dynamic in nature and not solely constituted by the physicality of the environment, but also derive their meanings and significance from the relationships developed with, and through, them over time. Therefore, the everyday lived experience of landscape, the activities and practices that people undertake within, and the complex emotional attachments they form are critical to establishing a rounded appreciation, presenting numerous challenges for policymakers and practitioners as to appropriate methods for capturing this dynamic reality. This is even more imperative given the conflicts that sometimes arise from divergent understandings of place.

Crucially, the understanding that landscape is co-constituted between people and place is given expression in international policy documents such as the European Landscape Convention, which broadly defines landscape as 'an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors'. Furthermore, the Convention recognises that landscape does not stop at administrative borders; thereby investing it with added resonance concerning cross-border cooperation on the island of Ireland. Indeed, the most important 'soft' policy guidance concerning strategic collaboration on spatial planning between both jurisdictions, the *Framework*

for Co-operation,¹ echoes such sentiments and talks about 'the conservation and enhancement of shared natural and cultural assets' and 'creation of places valued by people'. Piloting ideas and developing exemplar projects to translate these aspirations practically into action on the ground is a logical follow-on in this emerging policy space, which assumes even greater significance in light of an impending Brexit.

tools, which have generally proven beneficial in exploring development preferences and the diverse values attributed by people to places such as urban green spaces, marine protected areas, and cultural landscapes. Indeed, their advantages are numerous, including bolstering the capacity to capture, overlay, and visualise large amounts of place-based data, while allowing the monitoring of change over time. For decision-makers,

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The two-year REINVENT Project was conceived with this practical intention in mind, with particular emphasis on exploring the application of Geographical Information Systems (GIS) and the participatory mapping of heritage in the North West. One of the cases elaborated, #MyValuedPlaces, centred on the cross-border landscape scale encompassing the Derry City & Strabane District and Donegal County Council areas, and is of primary interest here. In short, the case consisted of an online map-based survey of places valued by the public in the North West. The survey was launched via a Twitter talk during National Heritage Week in August 2017 and was open for public input over an eight-week period. It was predominantly promoted through social media, hence the hashtag naming, with several face-to-face drop-in sessions held in the North West, and both councils emailing survey information and hyperlinks to heritage and community planning contacts. #MyValuedPlaces was enabled by the use of Maptionnaire, a map-based survey tool developed in Finland and since applied in numerous mapping exercises around the world. Maptionnaire is one of the best-known Public Participation GIS (PPGIS)

illuminating the synergies and conflicts in how places are valued by diverse stakeholder groups can be informative regarding competing priorities and aspirations over their use, management, and future development; thus underpinning better, more robust, and sustainable decisions. For the public, online tools typically allow a greater number of people to participate, at their own pace, and at a time and place of their choosing; thereby overcoming some of the pitfalls of traditional face-to-face public meetings.

Central to #MyValuedPlaces was identification of the place(s) within the study area positively perceived by respondents. Once their location was confirmed on the online mapping interface (by dragging and dropping pins using a mouse or touchpad), respondents were then asked via a popup to indicate the ways in which the identified places were valued by ticking those descriptions deemed applicable from a predetermined typology of twelve value-statements adapted from examples elsewhere.² For example, the statement: 'I value this place for its aesthetic qualities, attractive scenery, sights, smells, or sounds', relates to 'aesthetic value', while: 'I value this place because it makes people feel better, physically and/or mentally', refers to 'therapeutic value'. Additionally, respondents were free to articulate in their own words why they valued the selected places in those ways, with the many rich responses received revealing how people developed their sense of place attachment over time.

Over six-hundred visits were made to the #MyValuedPlaces survey web link, from which 348 people proceeded past the informed consent page, with over one-hundred participants identifying 441 positively perceived places distributed throughout both council areas. The types of places identified were interpreted liberally by participants, including those of recognised historic significance, favoured coastal walks and beaches, vernacular landscapes, popular scenic driving routes, and even sporting venues. However,



(previous page)
1. Brooke Park in Derry, facing towards the historic city walls in the distance

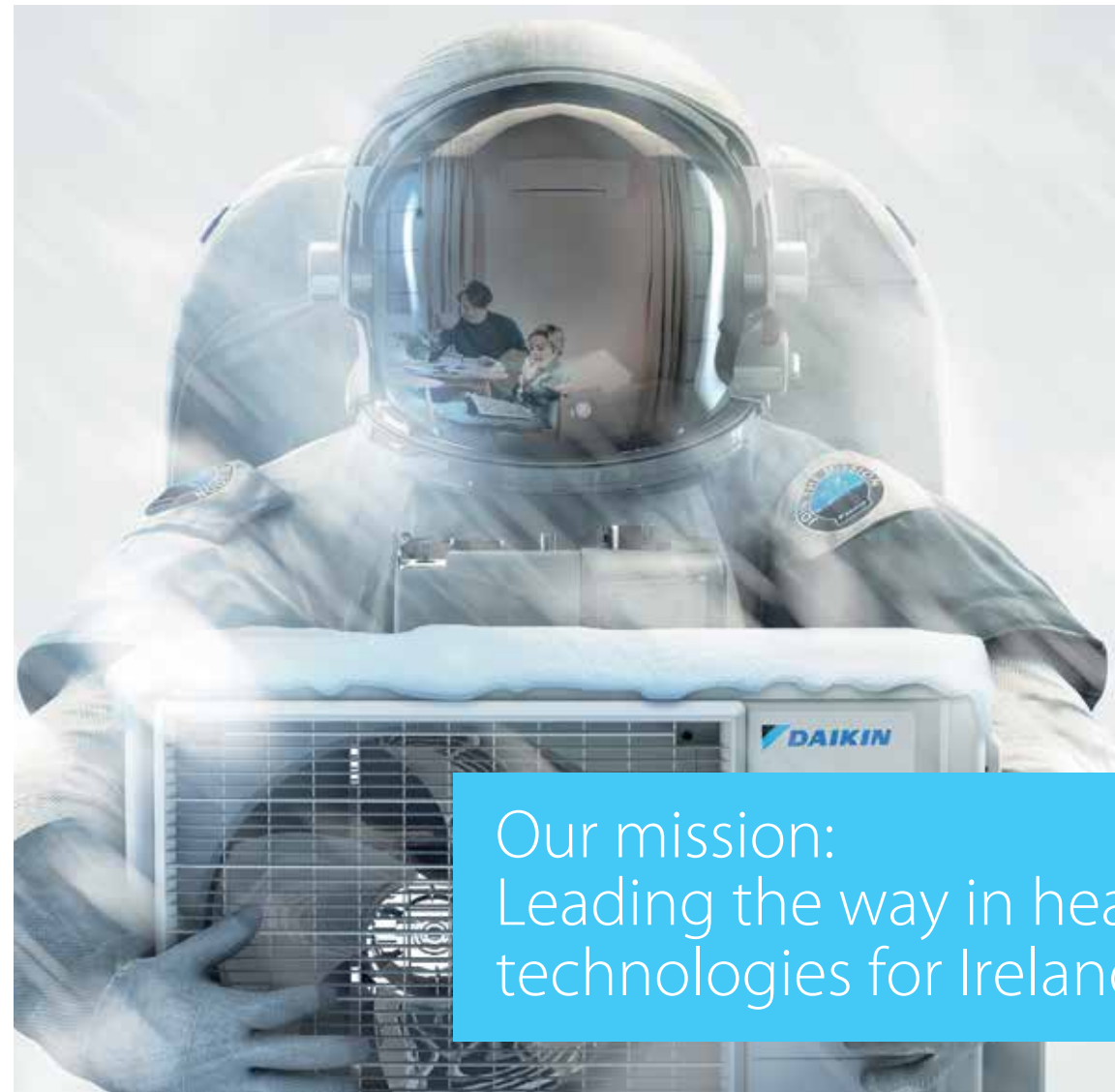
(this page)
2. Glenveagh Castle and National Park in County Donegal



Notes

1. Department for Regional Development and Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, *Framework for Co-operation. Spatial Strategies of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland*, Belfast and Dublin, DRD and DoEHLG, 2013.
2. G. Brown and D. Weber, 'Measuring change in place values using public participation GIS', *Applied Geography*, 34, 2012, pp. 316-324.
3. I. Santé, A. Fernández-Ríos, J. María Tubío, F. García-Fernández, E. Farkova, and D. Miranda, 'The Landscape Inventory of Galicia (NW Spain): GIS-web & public participation for landscape planning', *Landscape Research*, 44, 2019, pp. 212-240.

To explore #MyValuedPlaces in greater depth, see the Place(ing) perceptions in North West Ireland Story Map: <https://arcg.is/XTOGO>.



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value clusters are evident in relation to the Derry city centre urban parks, such as Brooke Park, and Glenveagh National Park in County Donegal, providing a sense of validation as to their special qualities and official conservation designations. In terms of how the identified places are valued, aesthetic quality was the most prevalent value statement selected, followed by recreational, therapeutic, and biological values. The least common values were life sustaining and spiritual.

Ideally, #MyValuedPlaces would have been embedded within an official landscape character assessment or similar process co-produced with government agencies on both sides of the border. An official setting would arguably have engendered a more authoritative purpose for the case in the public mind, thus incentivising higher participation rates, while providing a supportive infrastructure to enable much greater face-to-face engagement. Perhaps more critically, it would have facilitated the orientation of the case towards addressing one of the greatest challenges associated with online participatory mapping methods: meaningfully integrating the local knowledge generated into decision-making processes and published plans. However, real-world examples of integration are emerging, with the Landscape Inventory of Galicia in Spain representing one approach to combining expert and citizen knowledge using PPGIS that actively shaped the characterisation of landscape types.³

Panning out from the #MyValuedPlaces case, despite the myriad advantages offered by emergent technologies, the 'digital divide' ensures that they are not a panacea for all the problems associated with public participation. In short, socio-economic issues prevent some people and groups from readily taking part, whether due to limited skills in the use of the internet (typically associated with older age cohorts), or affordability concerns over computer hardware and software, as well as poor access to broadband. Indeed, the availability of broadband infrastructure at all remains a problem in many parts of rural Ireland. What this underlines is the imperative to entwine online and face-to-face methods during participatory processes to maximise

public involvement and reduce the potential for disenfranchisement, particularly among 'hard to reach' groups.

Technological innovation is already causing difficulties for policymakers and regulators struggling to keep up with the rapid pace of change. Wider adoption of digital participatory methods may have significant resource and other implications for all levels of government, particularly arising from increased public

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expectations of instantaneous and two-way communication. Additionally, integrating the type of local knowledge generated in the Galician Landscape Inventory case also demands reconfiguration in traditional ways and processes of working, including interdisciplinary teams with highly-diverse skillsets, embracing geospatial and data scientists, as well as others perhaps not traditionally associated with landscape character assessments. On the one hand, digital public participation appears to make things simpler and more streamlined, while on the other, also creating new forms of complexity.

This article has introduced one example of involving the public in the process of valuing landscape and the places that are special to them using online participatory mapping. Such methodologies prospectively offer an accessible means of engaging with the public on a plethora of issues that matter to people and places, providing great scope for use in cross-border contexts on the island of Ireland. Their distinctive advantages are tempered by realistic perspectives on the use of digital technologies as complementary to offline participation techniques, rather than rendering them redundant. Nonetheless, digital participatory mapping is readily adaptable by local authorities and other agencies, and will likely see increasing usage in Ireland when progressing landscape character and other place-based assessments.