

## BEAUTIFUL CITY: PLANNING FOR TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE URBAN LANDSCAPE (1148)

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**Abstract.** Against the backdrop of increasing needs for compact growth, higher densities, and large-scale energy provisions, planners are challenged with facilitating developments that significantly alter urban and rural landscapes. The level of change is unprecedented (and usually more irreversible) in cities, where major residential and commercial developments, and even renewable energy installations more typically associated with less urban areas, are reshaping the physical character. In rural areas, and despite mounting pressures for major technologies, beauty and the visual components of landscape are still holding substantive weight in planning judgements. The explicit and compelling engagement with landscape significantly weakens as an *urban* discourse, while cities and towns are experiencing levels of change that equate to that of these developments in the countryside. Using cases in Ireland where beauty and the visual landscape were determining factors in planning judgement, this paper teases apart emerging trends in decision-making in both rural and urban areas and raises somewhat ethical questions on accommodating such 'subjective' considerations in the face of global pressures for change.

**Keywords:** Urban Landscape, Beauty Cities, Visual.

### 1. The Ethics of Aesthetics:

#### 1.1. The Case of Ireland's National Paediatric Hospital

In 2012 a media frenzy arose when planning permission for what was to be the biggest project in the Irish state was turned down. Aside from its spiralling costs among other earlier concerns, deciding on the proposed new National Paediatric Hospital (An Bord Pleanála, Case PL29S.PA0024) was, at this point, hinging on one overarching issue – its visual appearance on the city skyline.

Previous delays caused by debates and disputes on location, traffic congestion, and the politics around amalgamating three paediatric hospitals into a single leading centre were severely criticised by paediatricians, the public and the media, who questioned the morality of the delays in the face of urgent national childcare. At this point in the process, the proposed development was to be located at the site of the already established

Mater Misericordia University Hospital within Dublin's north inner city.

The area has quite a blend of physical characteristics, with several residential streets including three-storey dwellings, two-storey Victorian dwellings, four-storey Georgian protected structures, the expansive Mountjoy Prison, a church, commercial and shopping facilities, and a mix of other uses. The area also includes a linear 1930s park along the historical Royal Canal Bank and another small urban park, originally part of the Mater site.

The major proposal, which was to hold 392 inpatient beds and 53 day-care beds, included a range of buildings, facilities, and ancillary developments, with the core linear structure effectively comprising a number of inter-related 'stacked' elements distinguished by a rectangular cuboid form, an eight-storey central podium and a number of glazed 'pavilions' of five to six stories, with one wrapping around the central podium.



Figure 1. A photomontage of the proposed new hospital at the Mater Site, Dublin

Source: An Bord Pleanála, PL29S.PA0024.

After a lengthy oral hearing which included 29 applicant representatives (from architects to health consultants), seven participants from Dublin City Council (planners, architects, traffic and drainage representatives), representatives from four prescribed bodies (National Trust, Heritage Council, Railway Procurement Agency, and the Government), and 23 observers (individuals and representatives from a wider range of bodies), there

were high expectations that this project, marked by a decade of discussions, plans and delays, would finally commence.

Two months later the national planning board delivered what was described in the media as a ‘bombshell’ decision when it refused permission. The recommendation at the end of a substantial report by inspector Una Cross was upheld by the board and noted four reasons; the first three of which centred around landscape/ streetscape character, visual appearance, and visual amenity (the fourth focused on car parking).



Figure 2. A sample ground-level photomontage of the proposed hospital as viewed from the historical streets. In their proposal, the applicants suggested that “there is an inherent conflict of scale which can only be resolved by contrast”, implying that that the development was of a necessary scale and was never going to be sympathetic to its surroundings.

## 1.2. Landscape Versus Medical Care

It was inevitable that the likely wider perception of ‘one versus the other’ (that is to say landscape versus medical priorities) would need substantive addressing by the board. No one was about to deny the critical and urgent need for the development, yet an overly simplified ‘think of the children’ styled narrative was in danger of breaking its way into the media. It was therefore a pressing responsibility of the planning inspector to justify any recommendation to delay further the progression of the development.

The scale of the priorities was also of interest. The sheer nature of the proposal saw it classified as ‘strategic infrastructure’, thereby going straight to the national planning and

appeals board rather than through the local authority. Dublin City Council were nevertheless a key stakeholder and statutory consultee, with a direct involvement in accommodating more incremental alterations to the Mater site over the years. Unlike the board, the Council were more in favour of the proposal in their submission, though noting in their report to the Board a 'key issue is the appearance and impact of the building's form on Dublin's skyline and on its historic setting'. Against national childcare needs, the aesthetics of how something looked on the Dublin skyline could be seen as of less strategic importance. Being the capital, however, the city's landscape has a wider significance and identity, along with having policies on visual character, urban landscape, views and prospects in the area's local development plan and larger city plan. It would be misguided to describe the consideration as 'local', even if the immediate impact would be felt at this level.

In her recommendations, the inspector immediately addressed this dichotomy with conviction, evidently aware of the pressing need to make the position of the board (and her own humanity) very clear in such a sensitive case:

The matter of whether the hospital in principle is necessary is not a matter which I consider is in dispute. I consider it essential that our country's children are provided with a facility of exceptional standard, a centre of excellence. Dublin City Council considered that the compromise necessary to achieve development in inner urban areas is outweighed by the positive contributions which this scheme would make to the city centre. In my opinion, the necessary compromises in this instance should be made on the basis of the achievement of a world class paediatric hospital. However, I do not consider that the compromises necessary would be outweighed by the provision of the subject facility such are their significance. The proposal as it comes before the Board on the subject site would, in my opinion, give rise to a number of residual environmental effects of such significance in respect of their adverse impact that they cannot be reconciled with the need for the proposed facility.

Following the inspector's conclusions and recommendations, the proposal was rejected, with the board deeming "it would have a profound negative impact on the appearance and visual amenity of the city skyline" due to its significant bulk and height.



Figure 3. A sample wider view photomontage depicting the impact of the proposal on the city skyline, as viewed from Blessington Street Park approximately half a kilometre from the site. The original proposal was described as “a cloud form enveloped in a skin of glass . . . chosen because of its soft ethereal shape”. Contrastingly, the board described it as dominant, visually incongruous structure [that] would have a profound negative impact on the appearance and visual amenity of the city skyline”

Despite the controversial nature of the proposal for the hospital, the final decision of the board was supported by the national trust among others who deemed the site highly unsuitable for such a development and that it should never have been pursued. Much has changed since the decision, with the as-yet-unnamed new national children’s hospital under construction at another site, over three kilometres south on the opposite side of the river. The design was completely overhauled, with many of the visual and aesthetic issues resolved.

## **2. ‘Looks’ Versus ‘Serious Matters’**

### **2.1. Relevance of the Case of the Children’s Hospital**

In his text on Irish landscape, retired planning consultant, Brendan McGrath (2013: 76) references an astute insight of a senior inspector in the Irish national planning board who “has observed how ‘landscape’ is often a prominent issue at the start of oral hearings but disappears into the background as *real* reasons come to the fore”. This has certainly been the reality in a large number of cases where landscape ought to have had a greater presence in discussions (another peri-urban case ahead in explores the dismissal of landscape aesthetics as ‘subjective’). Planners are required (by law and in line with the *European Landscape Convention* (ELC) 2000) to include objectives for urban and rural landscapes in development plan policies to accommodate the fair inclusion of landscape as a key consideration (where relevant) in decision-making. While this paper firmly supports these now established European objectives, it also reflects on the statement above 10 years after McGrath’s publication on landscape and planning, and how landscape, especially the visual aesthetic component, should (or should not) trump other ‘serious matters’ in light of pressing societal needs.

The fact that this case saw the landscape argument considered at the same level as urgent national medical care made it a striking example within Irish planning and is quite contrasting to the observation of the senior inspector referenced by McGrath. According to the national trust, the board made “one of the most significant planning decisions in its history in refusing the application by the National Paediatric Hospital” (Archiseek, 2012, p.2).

In an era of mounting pressures to build large developments not only critical for

sustainable development but part of a moral and very human conversation on things like housing needs and climate change, discussing 'looks' might seem, not only trivial and subjective, but inherently wrong. And yet, the case above could not have placed 'looks' against a more sensitive and deeply human need to provide essential childcare to some of the most vulnerable in society.

## **2.2. Back to Basics: Embracing the Visual Aesthetic**

The ELC's interpretation of 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, 2000, p.2) serves as a conscious reminder of landscape as being more value-laden and complex than mere scenery. It has responded to nearly a century of rich literature which advocated the recognition of the deeper cultural associations and hidden values (Ray, 2021); how a landscape's essence is often rooted in the more intangible layers and the experience of the landscape beyond the visual (O'Regan, 2008). This touches on both sensory and cognitive elements of landscape engagement, but it is important to acknowledge that the cognitive in particular is still driven by a visual presence – even if the aesthetic is less in focus.

In more rural locations for instance, developments such as telecommunications masts and major transport infrastructure can come under planning scrutiny when their visual presence (among other concerns) in an unromantic setting causes obtrusion to what Newman describes as 'the archaeological landscape' (2009). Valuing (often subterranean) monuments in terms of their symbolic and holistic relationship with their wider landscape setting was a central theme to Newman's work and the protests on the internationally and historically significant Hill of Tara, County Meath, in 2010. The controversial proposal involved the construction of a new M3 Motorway passing through the archaeologically rich, but visually unassuming, Tara-Skryne Valley. The impact went beyond the visual, to the sensory and the cognitive, with Newman (2015) asserting the intangible layers of the importance associated with history, folklore, myths and legends, identity and spiritual relevance of such landscapes. According to McGrath (2015), had the countryside around the Hill of Tara possessed the physical attributes of more outstanding and romantic scenery like the Killarney Lakelands, it seems doubtful that the decision in 2003 to route motorway through the valley would have been so casually taken.

At the same time, the visual aesthetic remains a critical component of how we engage with landscape. It is the fundamental and original idea to which we attach landscape understanding. Arguably there is an over-emphasis on the non-visual in contemporary discourses and, while this enriches our understanding of the landscape, it can also dilute the impact of a direct discussion about appearances. It is also much more difficult to

make a case for the aesthetic when major and important developments in both urban and rural environments threaten a valued visual character. For this reason, the previous case is of particular interest as an exception, and even more so in the context of the urban environment.

### **2.3. Recognising the 'Urban' Landscape**

Apart from the children's hospital being in the heart of the urban environment, the decision embraced this fundamental interpretation of landscape as predominantly visual. While the role of Dublin's skyline and historical character in the city's identity were key concerns, the discourse strayed very little into the more intangible and cultural layers of landscape. Going back to the basics of landscape meaning, the visual aesthetic held its own.

It is extremely rare to see the visual aesthetic thrust into the epicentre of a deeply sensitive case such as the children's hospital. Yet even within everyday planning practice, it is uncommon for aesthetic landscape considerations to have such a critical role within the decision-making processes for developments in major urban centres. This is despite the spatially inclusive interpretation of the ELC to include urban, peri-urban, and ordinary landscapes as well as the typically rural and scenic. Such an interpretation responds to nearly a century of rich literature on how best to think about, engage with, and manage landscape.

With the acceleration of physical change in our cities, the obliteration of views and prospects with increased densities, tall buildings, and even renewable energy installations, it is somewhat surprising that the case above is again more the exception than the rule when it comes to engaging with the fundamental interpretation of landscape as predominantly visual and with aesthetic appeal. While landscape is much more than this, these components are still at the heart of its sustained meaning. Despite this, the urban landscape remains under-analysed in literature and best practice.

And yet the concept of the urban landscape is not 'new'. In and around the nineteenth century, as landscapes began to experience accelerated change, replacing what was once rural space for more industrial and built-up environments, portrayals of the urban landscape also began their imposition. Art, photography, poetry and literature began to firmly adopt the concept of the urban landscape as a deeply aesthetic and visual entity. Rubin (2008) offers the most highly detailed analysis of the gradual artistic overlay of 'landscape' onto a setting of urbanisation and development. A major body of Impressionist landscape painting, in Rubin's view, represented a new wave of economic and productive activities that began outside the domain of pastoral leisure.

Figures like Monet, Lowry and Constable began to depict the often-harsh reality of

industrial life into their 'landscape paintings' from the second half of the nineteenth century. First, the urban was depicted as truth, as in Monet's *Impression: Sunrise* in 1872, before it came to be depicted in ways which captured and elevated its unique beauty and interest, encouraging a fresh mindset of artistic landscape perspectives, yet which still embraced the fundamental interpretation of landscape as having a visual and aesthetic existence.



Figure 4. Claude Monet's *Impression: Sunrise*, 1873, Musée Marmottan, Paris.  
(Source: Kuhl, 2009: 9).

As the picture that defined the start of the Impressionist movement, it does not represent traditional 'fine art' or traditional landscape depictions. It is, on the contrary, a simple painting, created through a series of quick and careless brush strokes, with the sole purpose of capturing the 'impression' of the landscape at that moment in time (conscious of its changing and dynamic nature) through colour and light, free from ideals and romanticism. Not only was it heavily urban in nature, but traditional aesthetics regarding what was considered beautiful or interesting were challenged, with the landscape presented just as it was. In this way, Monet and the Impressionists brought landscape interpretations out of the rural and sublime and into the urban and ordinary.

### **3. Think Global Act Local? Lessons from Rural Contexts**

Planners have always had to wrestle with how proposals for major developments might significantly alter the visual character and the character of established (and sometimes protected) views and prospects. In most everyday cases, the ethical dimension of what constitutes the more serious matter is less of an issue than that of the financial gain or loss of key stakeholders with an invested interest on the outcome. In more rural locations, if a controversial case is refused on visual grounds, the ‘losers’ are often big developers with a substantial financial cushion to land on. The ethical dimension does not quite come into it, but when it does, it usually relates to cases where much more people are affected, and where two deeply conflicting interests are at play.

Aesthetic landscape concerns in the rural environment have not experienced the same level of ethical dilemmas as that of the children’s hospital proposal. Not only do changes to the countryside affect less people, but resistance to change tends to be driven by an ‘unselfish’ desire to protect the more natural environment, the holistic character of the countryside, the unspoilt ridgelines, picturesque views with water bodies and a charming heritage feature like an old castle ruin. In the not-too-distant past, the dominant discourse emerging from local communities against wind energy development in the countryside was very much about saving beautiful landscapes from these industrial ‘monstrosities’. Communities felt they were doing some good by advocating for the protection of the rural landscape for their and future generations.

And yet the last year has recorded a dramatic change in attitudes towards such developments. The most recent annual survey on public attitudes conducted by Wind Energy Ireland (2022) found that support for wind farms in Ireland is at an all-time high, with four out of five people backing the development. The report noted how Irish people are becoming increasingly aware of the need for greater energy independence and energy security, for which wind energy is critical. The survey found that 80% of people supported wind farms, with opposition falling to just 5%. Most interestingly, 58% of respondents said they would support such development in their local area.

This data can be correlated with the substantial decrease over the last decade (and more notably in the last few years) in the type of headlines that had been dominating the renewable energy discourse (Figure \_\_\_\_\_).



Figure 5. Examples of the typical (often heavily ‘punned’) headlines throughout Irish media sources in the earlier years of the last decade in relation to divergent opinions on some of Ireland’s windfarm proposals

Sources: Clockwise from top left – Martin, 2013: 21; The Irish Times, 2013a: 10; Hickey, 2013:14; Lynott, 2013:10; Finegan, 2013: 10; Carley, 2015:16; O’Regan, 2013:8; O’ Connell, 2013: 30; Clifford, 2013b: 6; Corcoran, 2015: 19; Clifford, 2013a: 11; Carley, 2015:16; The Irish Times, 2013b:15; Doyle, 2013: 16; O’ Brien: 2013: 9; Myers, 2013: 13)

Again this resurrects questions around ethics, this time in relation to local ‘looks’ versus global awareness and the urgent infrastructure needed to secure a sustainable future. While landscape has always been a primary driver of unease around past wind energy proposals, this recent study is a testament to how pioneering planner and conservationist, Sir Patrick Geddes’ ‘Think Global Act Local’ message is more relevant now than it was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Nevertheless, there are still instances where the visual aesthetic holds more weight than the need for critical energy infrastructure.

## 4. Weighing Up Priorities: Beauty and Climate

### 4.1. The Case of Gougane Barra

Hidden in a discreet, rural location within approximately 50 kilometers west of Cork City, the intimate yet striking glaciated wooded cradle valley of Gougane Barra appears almost out of nowhere. On the deep, winding approach road, a sense of visual anticipation is gently prompted by intermittent views of the highest and most rugged slopes, illuminated in any weather by the contrast of light from the darker, enclosed surroundings. The characteristic celestial interplay of atmosphere and terrain, among other things, means that the valley's special qualities go far beyond its visual appeal, and beyond what many would deem its beauty. It is an immersive sensory experience; from the vacuum-like tranquility and distant white noise of numerous waterfalls to the challenging terrain of the upland wooded tracks. Regardless of belief (the area is steeped in religious history), there is a sense of spirituality that generates a restrained behavior among its visitors, who are more likely to whisper than talk.



Figure 6. The view looking northwest across the lake at Gougane Barra, shortly after 'entering' the valley on the main yet modest country approach road. This iconic view is one of the most frequently depicted in artistic representations, most of which are anchored by the presence of the nineteenth century oratory built on a small island and accessed by a stone causeway. The valley sits within a wider Gaeltacht area where Irish is recognised as the main spoken language. It is a deeply rural area, with the valley itself holding almost no contemporary developments beyond a handful of dwellings and a small hotel. It is designated as a landscape of high value, high sensitivity and of national importance.

Source: Ray, 2018.

Like many rural locations, the wider area has been experiencing increased pressure to facilitate wind energy development. This has been reflected in the evolving relaxation of the language of planning policy, where categorisations such as ‘strategically unsuitable’ are no longer used and replaced by principles such as ‘normally discouraged’ or ‘open to consideration’. Understandably it is part of a global necessity to mitigate the worst effects of climate change and increase energy security. It is important to state that the case ahead is not about recycling established and now unoriginal discourses around the impact large scale renewable energy has on the landscape. Instead, the example of a recent high-profile case of a proposed wind farm near Gougane Barra is presented as a lens through which to explore the (ethical) role of old-fashioned landscape beauty within the urgent contemporary need for planners to accommodate green energy infrastructure.

On 26th August 2020, Cork County Council decided to refuse permission to Wingleaf Ltd for a what was to be the biggest wind farm ever proposed in the county, with seven 178.5 metre turbines located between two and three kilometres from the lakeshore of Gougane Barra. It was concluded that the highly scenic area could not absorb the height of the turbines when viewed from the Wild Atlantic Way, from scenic routes and from High Value Landscape areas, with the proposal having the potential to negatively affect tourism. Throughout the case, particular reference was made to the visual and scenic appeal of the Gougane Barra landscape, while policies which explicitly accounted for scenic beauty were frequently drawn upon in the reports (Cork County Council, Case 20350, 2020). In its refusal, the council said the development would materially contravene the objectives of the Cork County Development Plan and “would be excessively domineering from very many vantage points over a wide area” (Planners Report [Primary], p.51).

While the proposal was not within the main valley itself, the visibility of the top of one turbine from the lakeshore and of several other turbines from the adjacent forest park, as well as from the approach routes to Gougane Barra (Figure\_\_\_), became central to the discussions. This visual impact was also the key concern of the local community and many other members of the public who drove a major campaign to protect the beauty spot from such change. An online petition to save the beauty and tranquility of Gougane Barra’ attracted more than 12,000 signatures from forty countries (Ó Liatháin, 2022).

When the decision was appealed to the national planning board, and subsequently granted, it exposed the tensions, not just the familiar tensions between rural landscape and large developments, but between the role of visually sensitive landscapes of local, regional, and even national value and international energy targets, and the accelerating nature of the discourse around how such receiving environments could and should

accommodate these developments. Even more intriguing, was how the board overturned the recommendation of its own inspector to refuse permission on visual landscape grounds. What emerged was the weight of scale in such competing priorities, with the board choosing international energy targets above all else, ruling that the windfarm would “make a positive contribution to the implementation of Ireland’s national strategic policy on renewable energy and its move to a low energy carbon future” (An Bord Pleanála, 308244-20, Board Order, p.7).

However, shortly after the local community secured the right for a judicial review of the board’s decision in the High Court, a dramatic announcement was made by the board’s legal team that the planning body would not be continuing its defence, thereby conceding to the original decision of the local authority, Cork County Council. It was a landmark case for landscape (particularly scenic landscape and beauty) in the context of urgent green energy targets and heightened awareness of global environmental issues.

In a somewhat similar perception to that emerging during the Children’s Hospital case, the campaign’s spokesman made the following statement in the local media:

There are several wind farms in the area. It’s not as if the people in the Lee Valley are opposed to renewable energy – they are not – but in this case it is simply in the wrong place.

(Forsythe, 2022, p.na)

Political discourses inevitably filtered into the campaign, with local councillors condemning the proposal: “We won’t be able to find another Gougane Barra but we will be able to find another location for these wind turbines” (Forsythe, 2022, p.na) – an unfortunate misinterpretation of the spatial flexibility to not only accommodate the volume of turbines needed, but of the close to impossible time frame within which to meet 2030 targets.

Nevertheless, the visual, scenic, landscape argument bookended the decisions in this case, maintaining a solid weight in the face of critical energy infrastructure needs.



Figure 7. Photomontage of the proposed wind farm to the left of the image, with Gougane Barra evident by the topographic hollow to the right. Only the top of one of the turbines would have been visible from the lakeshore, while some of the others from the forest park within the cradle valley. Nevertheless this was enough for visual impact (particularly on the skyline), landscape aesthetics and scenic amenity to have a major bearing on the local planning judgement (Source: Cork County Council, Case 20350, 2020).

## **5. Justifying the Visual Aesthetic: Theoretical Reflections**

Cases like this where landscape arguments triumph over a major development are still predominantly associated with rural areas, renewable energy and telecommunications infrastructure, and very traditional ideas of beauty. The explicit and confident engagement with landscape changes when we turn our focus to the urban environment, even though these landscapes are now experiencing dramatic levels of change that equate to that of major technologies in the countryside. This is most certainly partly because of the differences with how we experience city landscapes; closer horizons, shorter view duration and less visual control over our surroundings mean 'images' can be more fleeting. And yet there are also striking similarities in what we value and why. Protecting views and prospects, character, intimate scales, for instance, has an established history within strategic policy formation for cities as well as rural areas. This largely comes down to an appreciation of the age-old concept of beauty and 'the picturesque', embedded in the roots of city planning and worthy enough to trigger the City Beautiful Movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The case of the children's hospital is a compelling example of how the language of the visual aesthetic can be used to great effect in the urban landscape. Similarly, the case of the wind farm proposal near Gougane Barra is an example of how old-fashioned landscape beauty can be a powerful argument when articulated with conviction and clarity. In both cases, strong local development plan policy also served the planners in their recommendations, but this is not always the case.

While the urban landscape is of most interest here the Gougane Barra case provides an engaging example whereby the preservation of beauty surpassed the need for critical green energy, even though attitudes are shifting towards being more accepting of major changes. This shift suggest that we will begin to see more and more renewable energy developments in urban contexts. Yet just like in the case of the children's hospital, relying on changing attitudes may not be enough for those hoping to secure a positive

outcome for their proposals.

This paper presented a light-touch exploration of cases where the visual aesthetic held up against what were deemed essential developments for very different reasons. Despite their differences, they both prompt questions on the degree to which the visual aesthetic should have a bearing on such decisions. With the stark reality of the accelerating impacts of global warming, the need to provide city homes for a huge proportion of our populations, and the need to provide large developments like critical healthcare facilities to support these populations, is it time to rethink how we really value landscape change?

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