Lauren Davis explores the current best practice guidance for Townscape (Character) and Visual Assessment within EIA.

Undertaking a Townscape and Visual Assessment (TVA) requires not only a good understanding of townscape, in order to distinguish the different parts of the urban form, but also a recognised and robust approach that assesses the likely significant effects of a project on the environment. This calls for a methodology in accordance with the EIA Directive and UK Regulations.

A dictionary definition given for townscape is 'the visual appearance of a town or urban area; an urban landscape’. Overarching TVA is the European Landscape Convention (ELC) which adopts a broad definition for landscape that encompasses townscape. It states ‘Landscape is an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors’. Therefore the convention’s definition of landscape covers natural, rural, urban and peri-urban areas in a comprehensive way. How comfortable professionals are with this ‘concept of landscape’ as defined in the ELC and how well they consider this definition to be the accepted norm would be an interesting debate.

Certainly the Transport Analysis Guidance (TAG), used to appraise the impact of transport proposals on the built and natural environment, define ‘landscape’ and ‘townscape’ as distinct from one another. TAG states that landscape ‘is both the physical and cultural characteristics of the land itself’, whilst townscape ‘is the physical and social characteristics of the built and non-built urban environment.’ Both topics are discussed separately within the guidance and with a different methodology outlined to assess the character for each. TAG states the landscape features that define character are: pattern; tranquillity; cultural; and land cover. Whilst the townscape features that define character are: layout; density and mix; scale; appearance; human interaction; and cultural.

The Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (GLVIA3), produced by the Landscape Institute in 2013, also outline Townscape Character Assessment (TCA) and Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) as being distinct tools for understanding the landscape baseline. LCA has a widely used methodology whilst TCA has accepted techniques in its preparation, both studies distinct and independent from one another. However GLVIA3 does not specifically refer to Townscape and Visual Assessment (TVA)
as an assessment in its own right, but rather considers townscape to be a sub-set of landscape - bringing us back to the ELC definition of landscape as an all inclusive term.

Pegasus Planning Group recently undertook a Townscape (Character) and Visual Assessment for a key development in the market town of Cirencester as part of an EIA. For this assessment GLVIA3 was used to guide its preparation. This allowed for an approach that accorded with the EIA Directive and UK Regulations. The main differences that occurred between this TVA and a more typical LVIA included:

- a smaller, localised study area;
- an assessment of townscape elements and features - which required a certain level of expertise to assess building styles, materials, building enclosure and scale etc; and,
- the need to assess the existing condition of townscape character when existing baseline information was absent.

Other differences included the need to build an accurate CGI model of the proposed development In order to assess likely significant effects on the townscape resource. This required existing building heights to be known to ensure the proposed development was recorded as accurately as possible when rendered into the photoviews.

GLVIA3 states that the guidance it provides is 'equally applicable to all forms of landscape and does not separate townscape out for special treatment.' Although GLVIA3 clarifies this by saying 'townscape refers to areas where the built environment is dominant' and that 'townscape means the landscape within the built-up area, including the buildings, the relationships between them, (and) the different types of urban open spaces'.

Although the ELC provides a clear definition for 'landscape', I would contend there is residing confusion between professionals as to the accurate terminology of what defines 'townscape' and 'landscape'. In terms of approach, I would consider GLVIA3 to be the most appropriate guidance available in preparing a TVA as part of an EIA. So does this firmly put TVA within the remit of a Landscape Architect? I would say yes. However, whether the prominence of townscape will grow within GLVIA, branch off as a separate topic with its own approach - possibly employing the abilities of other professionals, or continue as a subset to landscape, remains to be seen.

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