

VISUAL CHARACTER AND SCENIC RESOURCES (1965, R1991, R2001, R2007, R2019)



Policy Statement

The American Society of Landscape Architects believes the quality of visual character and scenic resources is critical to our landscapes and communities at the local, regional, and national level. The visual environment significantly impacts individual and societal quality of life as well as our economy. From wild, to rural, to urban environments, our natural, historic, and cultural resources are affected by all elements that have a perceptible presence in the landscape. This includes, but is not limited to, natural features, agriculture, built environments, transportation, infrastructure, and signage. Landscape architects protect and enhance the quality of the visual environment through sound planning, design, policy, and management decisions in collaboration with other professionals, the public, and government agencies. To protect and enhance these irreplaceable assets, ASLA supports consideration of visual character and scenic resources for all projects and all users.

Rationale

“Visual character” refers to characteristics and elements that make a specific environment distinctive and cohesive. “Scenic quality” is often used to refer primarily to natural features; however, many definitions include cultural elements, as well as experiences and perceptions of both the individual and the larger community. At the turn of the 20th century, John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, and others campaigned for scenic beauty as part of the growing conservation movement. While they first fought for protection of untouched wilderness and sites of unique scientific conditions, “scenic resources” soon grew to encompass agricultural lands, transportation corridors, cultural landscapes, viewsheds, and many other landscapes, both rural and urban.

The National Environmental Quality Act of 1969 mandated consideration of visual as well as ecological impacts, thus proposed federal projects had to assess potential impacts to historic and scenic properties--and to the experiences of people who view those environments. In the 1994 amendment, this was made clearer, stating the act’s purpose was to “assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings” (National Environmental Policy Act 1994). This federal mandate spurred systematic assessment of landscape visual quality in the latter half of 20th century and was instrumental in development of numerous planning, design, and management strategies at federal, state and local levels, such as Context Sensitive Design for transportation, Bureau of Land Management Visual Resource Management System, scenic easements, scenic highway programs, signage and landscape ordinances, and building codes to protect and enhance visual character.

The definition of “scenic value” continues to change. For example, industrial areas and utilitarian elements are often considered ugly or disruptive; however, many successful renovations of postindustrial sites incorporate remnant elements, structures, and infrastructure for their historic, educational, and aesthetic values. Different user groups have different attitudes towards the same landscape. Discrepancies between expert opinion, based on external criteria, and residents’ perceptions evolving from experience and intimate knowledge illustrate varying perceptions of “visual quality”. Current practice and research give value to both knowledge-based expertise and user perceptions. Responding to the breadth of users successfully fosters inclusivity, community buy-in, economic support, and a stronger sense of place and connection.



Visual character and scenic resources have direct economic impacts. Property values, use of recreation areas, success of revitalization efforts, and tourism are harmed by degradation of visual quality, while cohesive visual character and preservation of regional character have positive economic impacts. The Main Street America program clearly demonstrates links between economic success and visual character.

Visual quality is often tied to perceptions of worth, care, and economic stability. For example, the “broken windows” theory suggests that visible signs of disrepair, misuse, crime, and disorder signal lack of care by residents or administration/law enforcement. Perceived lack of care may encourage crime and inappropriate behaviors as well as dissuade potential investments in the area. Conversely, simple aesthetic upgrades are shown to raise residents’ and business owners’ morale and involvement and often result in ripple effects at the grassroots level.

Research verifies the importance of visual character and scenic resources in daily life and the resulting impacts on physical and mental wellbeing. Therapeutic landscapes, biophilic design, and other efforts improve health through visual as well as physical contact with nature. Research confirms patients’ recovery time in hospitals is reduced when the design prioritizes access to gardens and views of vegetation.

Unnecessary and unintentional threats to the quality of our visual environment come from many sources, often resulting from lack of understanding or not foreseeing ramifications of decisions. Development, infrastructure, and resource extraction do not always consider their impact to the visual environment. Damages include diminished neighborhood quality of life, disproportionate location of landfills and other visual blights in lower income communities, disruption of scenic landscapes and viewsheds, and destruction of cultural/historic resources. Landscape architects continue to be leaders in assessing and enhancing visual resources, mitigating negative impacts of development, and creating management plans for long-term protection of visual quality.

The following actions work to ensure visual quality in our environments:

1. Evaluate, maintain, and enhance existing visual quality of public and private lands
2. Assess and evaluate potential impacts to visual character and scenic resources early in the planning and design processes
3. Incorporate and communicate current knowledge and case studies concerning the importance of the visual environment to societal and individual wellbeing in planning, design, and implementation.
4. Support existing statutes, policies, ordinances, and guidelines which encourage or mandate protection, enhancement, or restoration of the visual environment in the project review and approval process.
5. Advocate for new or additional legislation, policies, and guidelines that encourage or mandate the protection, enhancement, or restoration of the visual environment in the project review and approval process.
6. Foster heightened public awareness of our natural and cultural landscapes, so that their scenic values are routinely and effectively incorporated into decision-making at all levels of private and governmental practice.
7. Recognize and support the varied values and perceptions of different users, which can promote inclusivity and help increase citizens’ care and connections to their landscapes.



Resources:

1. Visual Resources Stewardship Conference Proceedings
<https://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/pubs/57492>
2. Scenic America
<http://www.scenic.org/issues/scenic-easements-a-view-protection>
3. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/nature-that-nurtures/>
4. Main Street America
<https://www.mainstreet.org/>
5. The Practice of Biophilic Design
<https://www.biophilic-design.com/>
6. The Paris Lexington Road: Community Based-Planning and Context Sensitive Highway Design (Schneider, 2003)
7. Taking the long View: A Proposal for Realizing American the Beautiful
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B-O0lnBUK36Ua2p5N0g3X3pUZHc/view>
8. Charting the Multiple Meanings of Blight: Executive Summary. Keep America Beautiful, 2015
https://www.kab.org/sites/default/files/BeautifyCommunities_ForAffiliates-Teachers-Businesses_Charting_the_Multiple_Meanings_of_Blight_Executive_Summary.pdf
9. Capturing Landscape Visual Character Using Indicators: Touching Base with Landscape Aesthetic Theory, Landscape Research Journal Vol 33 2008 Issue 1
10. Cultural Landscape Foundation
<https://tclf.org/>