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From: Kemnay Community Council on 06 May 2016

Proposal to Designate Place Of Origin (POO) as an Special Landscape Area (SLA)

Typicality

The three Artists that designed POO were John Maine, Brad Goldberg and Glen Onwin and the project was managed by Chris Fremantle, who at the time was Director of Scottish Sculpture Workshops. The underlying ideas of the design of POO are not something complicated but very typical of not only reflecting the contours of the distant Bennachie Mither Tap but also blending in with the existing Kemnay Quarry, which originated in the mid-19th century. POO provides an elevated view of the otherwise hidden historic Kemnay Quarry against the backdrop of the distant but ever present Mither Tap. It draws inspiration from the Quarry itself, and in particular the construction of the historic retaining walls and platforms. The concept was to make the landscape as art, rather than placing art in the landscape.

Intactness and Condition

POO is now an established and impressive modern sculpture representing landscape art. The overall condition is that of an established and well maintained dominant landscape feature, which is continuing to evolve as the surrounding flora, fauna and woodland mature over time. The path network was established by the artists going out with the JCB digger and cutting the path network intuitively based on their walking the site and their understanding of the contours and desire lines. Shortly after the paths had been established, John Maine flew over the site and took a photo through the window of the plane. The artists were startled by the image they had created with these paths. Within the paths they had formed two circles and connecting lines which clearly resemble symbols used by Picts to represent mirrors.

Scenic Qualities

Similar to and emulating the distant contours of Bennachie Mither Tap, POO is not only a central landscape feature for Kemnay, it also provides elevated scenic views of the surrounding area as well as previously unseen views of Kemnay Quarry workings, the lower regions of which are now extensively flooded. Apart from the obvious landscape features, the three Artists John Maine, Brad Goldberg and Glen Onwin suggest that POO shares an aesthetic with a Japanese garden – it reflects the larger landscape it sits in. This Japanese concept is translated as ‘borrowed landscape’, which is used in Japanese garden design to bring the larger landscape into the garden. The summit provides a special view, and POO conforms to the more general statement, “the garden was planned for the sake of enjoying scenery.”

Built heritage assets

In paragraph three of the proposed LDP Supplementary Guidance Bennachie SLA Designation Statement, Place Of Origin is referred to as a historic feature in the form of a modern sculpture, located overlooking the quarry at Kemnay. There can be no doubt that POO is now very much a part of the built heritage of Kemnay and surrounding area. John Fyfe Ltd operated the quarry at Kemnay as well as a number of other major quarries, including nearby Correnie and Tom’s Forest. The list of buildings made from Kemnay granite includes several bridges in London and Glasgow, the Liver Building in Liverpool, numerous Bank headquarters in London, The Forth and Tay railway bridge foundations, piers and approaches; and in Aberdeen the Town House in Castle Street and the extraordinary Broad Street frontage of larger scale extraction Marischal College. More recently it has been used for the construction of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh.

Naturalness and Natural Heritage assets

POO seeks to emulate and reflect a number of key visual characteristics of the locality. These include most obviously Bennachie Mither Tap, which forms a major landmark in Aberdeenshire. The work also draws inspiration from the Quarry itself, and in particular the construction of retaining walls and platforms. More generally the Artists looked at the North East and Highland landscape including Neolithic recumbent stone circles typical of the North East, the Brochs on the Western Isles, and other man-made marks on the landscape characterised by the use of stone. Each massive stone that forms the upper structure of the viewpoint was selected and placed individually, drawing on the expertise of the quarry men and the judgement of the Artists.

Views

The underlying idea of Place of Origin is to lead people to a vantage point from which Kemnay Quarry would be revealed. In order to let viewers see the drama of the quarry without actually being exposed to the dangers of the sheer granite cliffs, a hill with a viewing platform was constructed, high above the quarry workings. This also made a panoramic link with the village and surrounding landscape including the mountain ranges of Bennachie, Millstone Hill, Pitfichie Hill and Cairn William and also the plains to the west, which is where the name 'Kemnay' originates, the Gaelic ceann a' maigh meaning head of the plain.

Uniqueness

Place of Origin is a 'landscape as art' project. Work commenced in 1996 and was completed in 2006, when it was officially opened by HRH The Duke of Kent. The following year it received a Saltire Award, which is commemorated by a bronze plaque at the site and was also given a "Highly Commended" Certificate under the Aberdeenshire Council Design Awards Scheme in 2008. POO is totally unique in that it draws inspiration from Kemnay Quarry and the surrounding countryside, in particular Bennachie; there is no other art in the landscape sculpture of this kind in the world. The hill was made from granular material which was compacted in layers and tested throughout for stability. This material had to be consistent without excessive boulders or areas of alluvium. It took more than two years to amass the 100,000 tonnes of material and allow it to settle in courses. Quarry waste and locally excavated material were used in the construction. John Maine described working with the process of construction in the same terms of shaping material in the studio, directing huge earth moving machines to adjust the form of the viewpoint as an Artist shapes clay. Each massive stone that forms the upper structure of the viewpoint was selected and placed individually. It is arguably the case that there can be no landscape in Aberdeenshire more special than POO.

Wildness

The Artists set out the tree planting to mirror the larger landscape. So at the bottom of the site you will find willow and in the middle birch and oak and in the upper areas pine and larch. POO was designed to be a natural area free of any maintenance requirements. Paths are preserved by constant footfall and the only occasional intervention by people is in the form of removing any casual litter. The woodlands are an ideal habitat for wildlife and are allowed to flourish naturally. On reaching the summit in summer time there is no better sight or sound than that of the Peregrine Falcons that patrol the Quarry rim in search of prey.

Enjoyment

There is a diverse network of footpaths throughout the adjacent woodland area which link up to the more challenging paths of various gradients that eventually lead to the summit of POO. The main access is from the car park at Fyfe Park and one route emerges at Bremner Way, which can be used by schoolchildren as a safe and pleasant walk to Kemnay Academy. It is hoped to eventually develop the path network to continue east from POO, along the boundary edge of Kemnay Quarry turning north to eventually link up with a footpath network around Mill Farm Lochs. Various walks are available, either a pleasant walk through the woodland or choosing to continue further to the summit by a choice of routes that offer a variety of differing gradients. Apart from a healthy and strong heartbeat, the rewards of accessing the summit are not just the views into Kemnay Quarry but the panoramic views in all directions, not to mention meeting with fellow walkers and having a wee blether.

Cultural Qualities

Chris Fremantle, who was Director of The Scottish Sculpture Workshop at the time, invited John Maine to lead a project which addressed the history of granite quarrying in the North East of Scotland as part of the 150th anniversary celebrations of Kemnay based John Fyfe Ltd. The creation of Place of Origin was always seen by the Artists as an alternative to a quarry museum of a more formal kind which would have needed high maintenance costs. In contrast to Archaeolink, a sustainable landscape does not require Staff costs and regular overheads. The result is the creation of a natural woodland, with stone features leading up the hill to a vantage point, where people could see and enjoy the post-industrial quarry of Kemnay, and can connect the old workings (now a cliff bound lake), to the surrounding landscape as far away as Bennachie and including the original core of Kemnay.

The Artists also had in mind to incorporate the impact in the landscape of castle structures such as Dunnideer near Inch and Hall Forest near Kintore as well as many structures further away. They travelled together to the Outer Hebrides, visiting brochs as well as prehistoric sites such as Calanish. The Clava Cairns were also an influence on the eventual design. Further cultural links can be found at the top of POO, the final section is constructed from large quarry blocks, set together in the normal method for constructing gigantic retaining walls throughout the quarry. An example of this style of construction can be seen from the road near the former Lawrence of Kemnay site. Looking across the road to the left of the entrance to the Quarry stone works there is a rock tower structure. This was the base of one of the 'blondins' (steel towers), which supported cables across the quarry hole in 19th century quarrying operations.

Impact on settlement setting

The viewpoint is constructed out of some 100,000 tonnes of quarry waste and other subsoil material. Prior to the development of POO, the area had no visual or amenity value and consisted mainly of quarry waste. The area is now transformed into an impressive landscape feature with high visual and recreational amenity value. It exists in geological time and will last for many centuries. Eventually, when the granite supply is exhausted, the flooded quarry itself will become an integral part of POO and not simply a visual aspect. Incidentally, a planning application for "final restoration" was submitted by Breedon Aggregates in 2015. It is a living place and POO constantly changes with time, seasons and the daily weather conditions. The growth of the woodland and the ecological systems will change and develop through the growth and decay of this man made environment. It is a living system conceived and developed by people but which now functions independently, taking its own natural directions. Apart from occasional attention to litter, the area is not maintained; it is merely enjoyed, nurtured, preserved and occasionally enhanced with minor embellishments such as appropriately sited seating.

Connectivity

The village of Kemnay grew up as a result of Kemnay Quarry, and is now a flourishing community with a diverse range of local amenities. The historical connection with the industrial history is now more visible as a result of opening up the view into Kemnay Quarry, which is now a substantial water filled hole in the top of Paradise Hill. POO has now become a well loved part of Kemnay and ensures that the history of quarrying has remained a part of the unique quality of the village landscape. POO connects with and reminds people of the underlying source of geology and industry, while at the same time providing a natural landscape in the heart of the village, with access to all. This dramatic view was largely invisible from the settlement, prior to POO.

Forces For Landscape Change

External and undesirable forces for landscape change are evident in the form of constant pressure from Developers to build houses in the immediate vicinity, thereby detracting from the amenity and setting of POO. A Developer bid for housing adjacent to and south of POO was submitted for inclusion in the 2010 LDP but after Examination by the Scottish Government Directorate for Planning and Environmental Appeals, the proposed housing site was removed from the finalised and formally adopted 2012 LDP. A Developer bid was again submitted for 56 houses in a similar area, via the Main Issues Report, for inclusion in the 2016 LDP. This bid was rejected for inclusion in the finalised LDP 2016, which is presently being considered for formal adoption. During the process of preparing the 2016 LDP, the Developer decided not to wait for formal adoption deliberations and submitted a speculative planning application in 2015 for 49 houses on the same site, even though part of the site was designated P2 in the LDP, "Protected to conserve the Place Of Origin and its setting". The application was subsequently refused in December 2015.

A constant trend is apparent in that every time the LDP is reviewed, the Developer has become a "serial bidder" and will continue to bid for housing on the site or submit speculative planning applications. Each time such bids are submitted, Kemnay Community Council, John Maine RA and Chris Fremantle are obligated to devote a great deal of time and effort to opposing such proposals. To avoid this constant pressure to develop the sites adjacent to POO, it is necessary to provide some form of unequivocal protection in perpetuity. In this respect, we would propose that the site should be designated as a SLA.

Location and Boundaries

The plan below shows POO shaded pink, the protected amenity woodland shaded green and the area shaded yellow is presently designated P2 in the 2012 LDP and 2016 LDP, “Protected to conserve the Place Of Origin and its setting”. The area shaded orange is the crucial additional area required for protection in that it is the vulnerable area constantly under threat from speculative development bids. We would suggest that the Special Landscape Area of POO can only be afforded true protection by inclusion of the area shaded orange, which could in future years be developed for community woodland. Therefore, the boundary of the entire site that we propose for designation as a Special Landscape Area is shown outlined in red on the plan.

These boundaries have been chosen as defensible physical field boundaries that enclose the key areas and settings, which have been identified as meriting designation within the SLA. Designation of POO and its setting as a SLA, recognises and acknowledges its importance to Kemnay’s landscape identity, its historic links with Kemnay Quarry and its intrinsic balance with the background setting of Bennachie. Designation would also recognise the contribution of POO to the unique artistic features of Aberdeenshire that date back to Pictish stones and symbols, which embellish and enhance the countryside of Aberdeenshire.

Management Recommendations

1. POO is a unique landscape feature classed as landscape as art. It is the only landscape of its kind in the world and as such emphasis should be on conserving and retaining its setting and visual amenity. This means ensuring that any developments are located outwith the designated boundary (shown outlined in red on the plan) and designed to limit their wider proximity and visibility.
2. Impact of development at short ranges should avoid negative impacts to the view and ensure that they are not disproportionate or detrimental to the setting of POO.
3. Woodland creation in the form of native woods and pedestrian / cycle paths should be encouraged in the areas shaded yellow and orange on the plan to balance harmoniously with the existing woodland and paths to the west of POO.

