

# Representing Vernacular Landscape in New Towns

## Abstract

**Keywords** Vernacular Landscape, Everyday Practice, Representation in Landscape

Considering the vernacular landscape of some of the first wave New Towns in the UK; Welwyn Garden City, Stevenage and Harlow and four housing districts, the areas have developed specific identities and cultivation practices of inhabitants from everyday use. However, there is sometimes a design paradox as landscape constantly changes though its representation remains static (Ruddick in Harris 1997, pp.107–112). To address the landscape character is a great challenge as this involves the representation of time in which landscape form constantly morphs (Jackson, 1994, pp. 3–7). Using derived representational practices which record sequences and movements; ‘motation’, remote sensing, and cinematography, the author argues that these are essential in providing the greatest range and data to urban landscape form (Halprin, 1965, Girot in Waldheim, 2006 pp.87-104)). To this extent, the choreography of landscape representation is required.

This ‘everyday’ landscape is the repeated activities of inhabitants and users appropriating spaces, shaping the space to their accord (Certeau, 2002). The spatial strategy of residents creates indirect designed space and changes the methodology of the landscape architect working with such space relations at small urban scales.

The New Towns were devised as population overflows and economic growth areas and are suitable cases in which to gauge the landscape dynamic in localised housing districts over time.

## Introduction

*“A sense of place is something that we ourselves create in the course of time. It is the result of habit or custom” (Jackson, 1994, p. 151).*

The relationship between landscape design representation and the everyday experience of spaces are sometimes located on two completely different vectors. This relationship poses the question about methods from design professionals where this ‘experience’ can be incorporated within the scope of landscape architectural representation and environmental assessment. This issue is particularly noted in planning phases in which Landscape Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) is undertaken, either as a requirement of EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) or informally (Landscape Institute and Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment, 2013) in the UK. Such an interest reflects on the paradoxical processes in which the landscape architect defines space and thus identifies cultural sensibilities at play in the initial design and at an appraisal or evaluative stage. There is no permanence to the landscape; the inhabitation of the landscape in UK New Towns<sup>1</sup> is a testimony to this effect. Such problems of scoping the landscape and the lived, and the repetitive experience of inhabitants utilising landscape can be understood working from ideas of Michel De Certeau who discusses heterologous spaces<sup>2</sup>. Places to De Certeau are deemed as fixed locales and spaces are constituted of polyvalent (sometimes conflictual) practices of its inhabitants (Certeau, 2002, p. 117). Thus, the relationship between designed place and spatial uses is a highly complex research enquiry.

The vernacular landscape can be understood as cultivation by its inhabitants, a product of practice of use or of abandonment, not a theory but competing repetitions and movements<sup>3</sup>. J.B Jackson’s *Vernacular Landscape & Sense of Place a Sense of Time* analyses amongst other things the American courthouse and grid layout and its changes through modernity (Jackson, 1984, pp. 85–87). Jackson’s approach is a combination of narratives of architecture, landscape and human geography. Moreover, Jackson’s approaches to describing vernacular landscapes are time-based observations of even the simplest, least interesting landscape. It is, of course, noted that De Certeau and J.B. Jackson have very different research trajectories; however, both consider every day as an important focus for spatial understanding. This understanding is important in assessing local spaces for assessment, design, adaptability and heritage protection.

The 32 New Towns in the UK designated since 1946 sought to cater for urban overspill and particularly London expansion through the work of Patrick Abercrombie and John Forshaw in 1943. The New Towns were part of planning led reformation against poverty and sought local ‘units’ to provide decentralised services to its communities (**Figure 1**). The New Towns marked one of the biggest urban residential expansions in the UK. Therefore the vernacular landscape character and the mode to which it has subsequently been shaped is worthy of analysis as well as considering

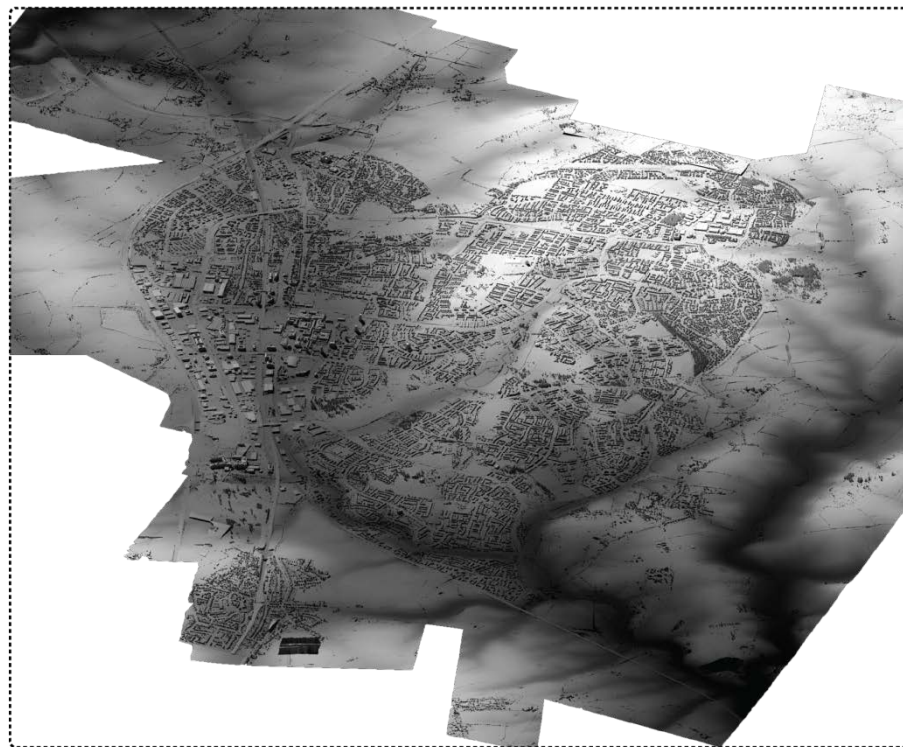
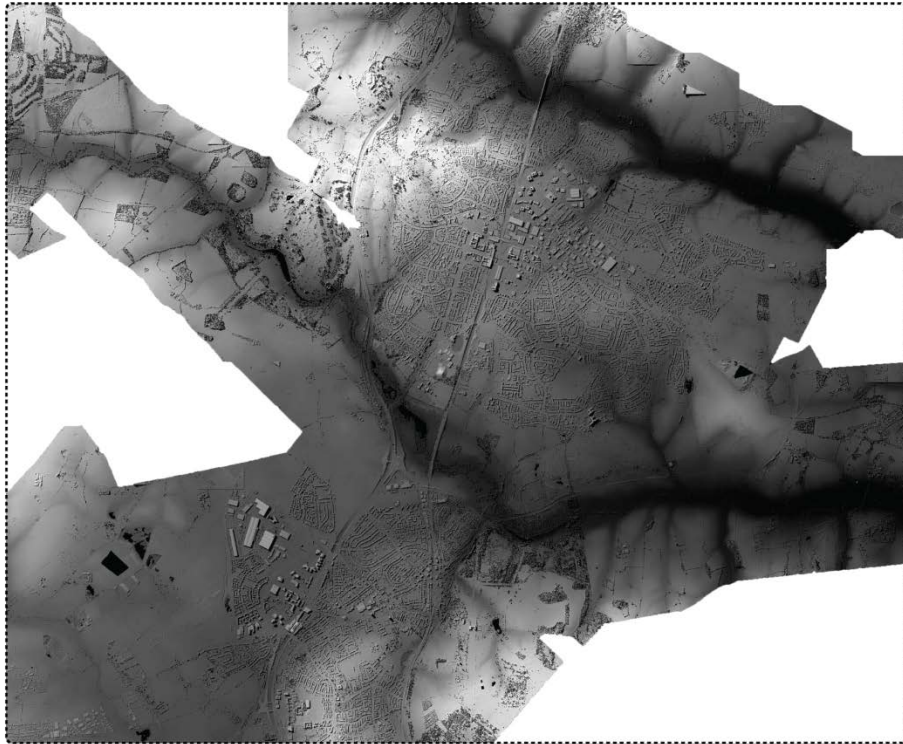
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<sup>1</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Generation New Towns 1946-1951: Basildon, Bracknell, Corby, Crawley, Harlow, Hatfield, Hemel Hempstead, Newton Aycliffe, Peterlee, Stevenage & Welwyn Garden City. 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation 1961-1964: Redditch, Runcorn, Skelmersdale, Telford & Washington. 3<sup>rd</sup> Generation 1966 – 1970: Central Lancashire, Milton Keynes, Northampton, Peterborough & Warrington.

<sup>2</sup> A position between theory and practice; practice narrates, it tells stories of places.

<sup>3</sup> Understood as ‘local’ the vernacular relationship towards a social anthropology is interesting.

mode in which to represent this character. Such work reflects wider issues of constrained planning practices and development and the urban adaptability of New Towns something which is reflected in wider research and recent government development in city policy in the UK (Clark and Clark, 2014).



**Figure 1:** Cureton, Welwyn Garden City & Hatfield. Stevenage New Town, LIDAR Composite, 2014.

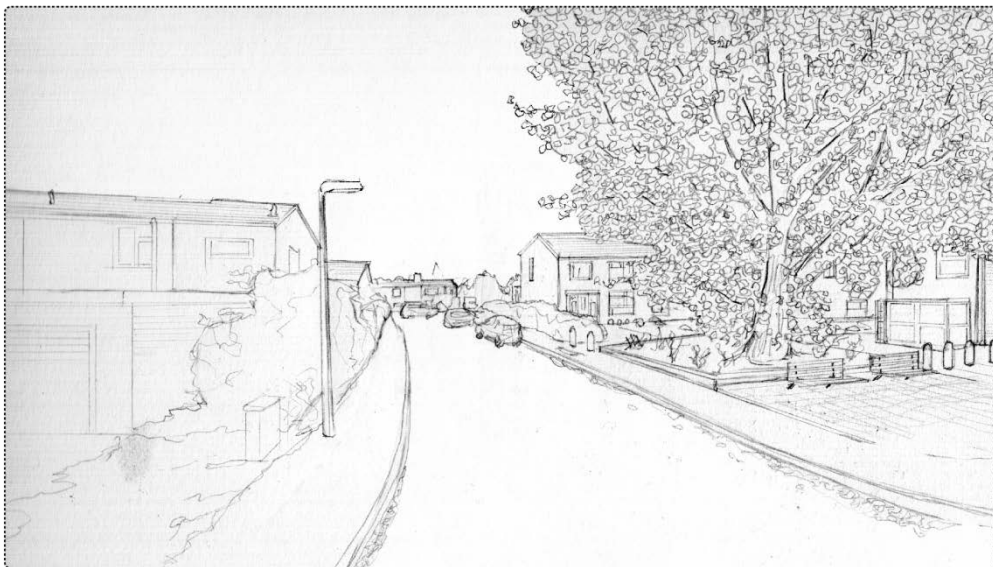
## Representational Method

The New Towns were devised for population overflows and economic growth areas. They are particularly suitable cases in which to gauge the landscape dynamic in localised housing districts over time. The New Town characteristic of localised space challenges the methodology of the landscape architect working with such space relations (Treib, 2002). These methodologies at a representational level require a set of graphics practices able to adapt to the multi-layered and vernacular aspect of these spaces, as the everyday undoes the integrity of standard forms of representation due to its multiplicity (Ruddick in Harris 1997, pp.107–112). While LVIA provides a clear framework for landscape assessment, such work is not called for or economic in these non-designed spaces. The localised forms studied were analysed using some representational techniques. These techniques have been brought together, layered and compared to generate a mode of evidence with wide coverage of complex landscape aspects. Thus, in this case in the analysis of the vernacular landscape of New Towns, the choreography of representation is required. I mean by this the management of a range of sources which address the representation of time in which landscape form constantly morphs (Jackson, 1994, pp. 3–7). This means observing sequences and movements of the site and its inhabitants but also sequencing the fieldwork and organising this into meaningful landscape assessment which can thus then develop design directions.

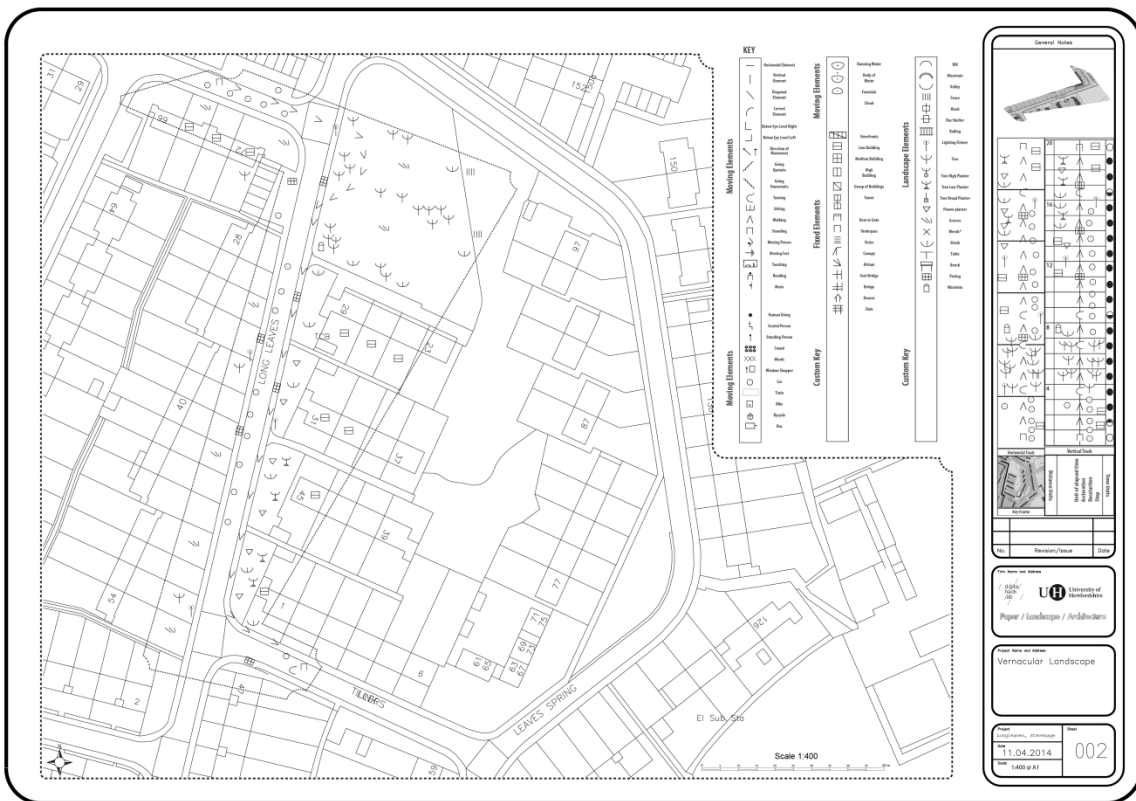
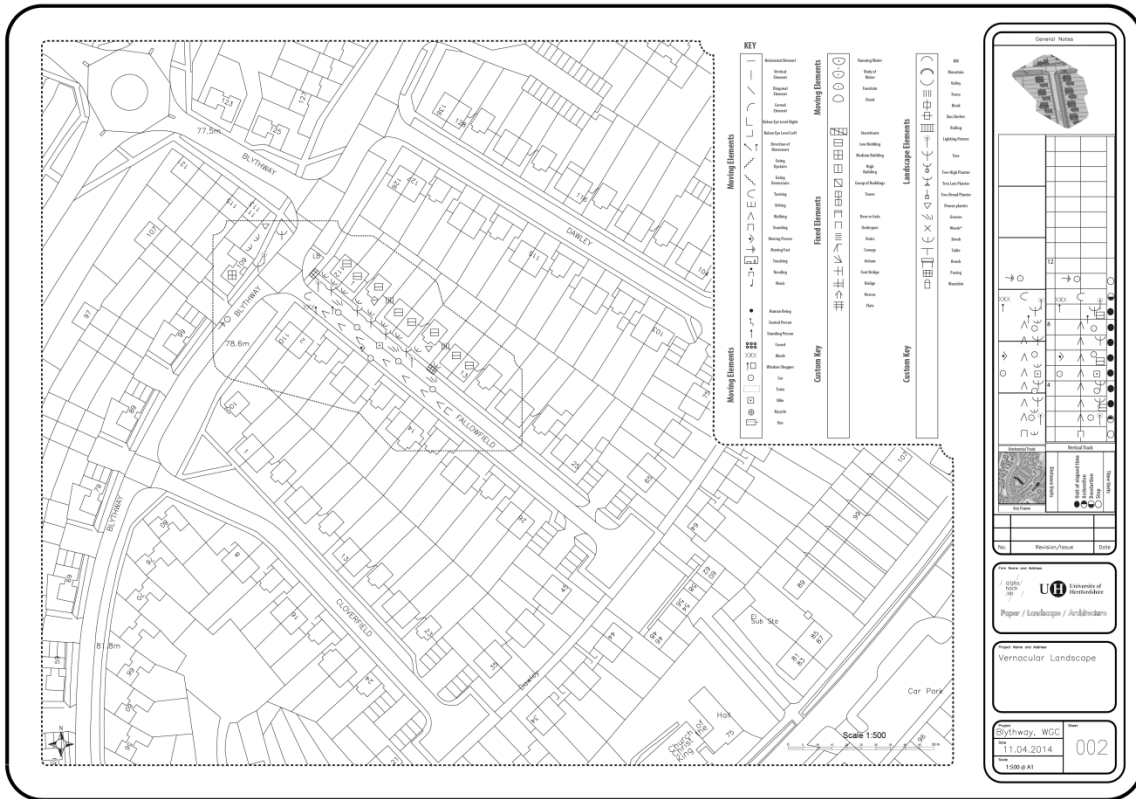
Using derived representational practices both analogue and digital; remote sensing and cinematography I would argue, that these are essential in providing the greatest range and data to this urban form. This is not a call for a radical invention which James Corner has subsequently argued (Corner, 1992), but the synthesis of some of the discipline of Landscape Architecture's most successful representational modes. These modes are the 'Motion' (Movement Notation) score of Lawrence Halprin (Halprin, 1965), the cinographic 'Move' of Christophe Girot (Girot in Waldheim, 2006 pp.87-104) and the advanced GIS post-Ian McHarg (McHarg, 1995) of LIDAR composites. A representational method combined requires choreography of movements, sequences and forms of landscape. Such work does not break the paradox of designed place and spatial use, but in this case narrows the area of the unknown of landscape character. The choreography of landscape representation is a time-based approach to address the vernacular landscape, as Jackson states "identified with local custom, pragmatic adaption to circumstances, and unpredictable mobility" (Jackson, 1984, p. xii).

Four housing districts in three New Towns were selected, and precedent research was conducted, gathering photographic evidence. Site visits were also conducted, and some field perspective drawings and photographs were produced (**Figure 2**). Each visit was set at the same time and for the same duration. This provided a working ground to develop further approaches. From this point a set walk using movement notation was undertaken, recording and notating the perception of the walker through the set route. The walker uses a set pace and notes important identities in the landscape as they proceed. The notation is digitised, and a summary is extracted (**Figure 3**). This method works particularly well in groups as a comparator is possible of the group's observations, such as the recognition of particular monuments or events. A mobile camera was then mounted to the walker and the walker repeated the same route. The human scale film was then collated and partially edited using the techniques developed from Christophe Girot and the ETH in Zurich. Such work was then compared to the precedent, the film work and then compared to the notated perception walk. Finally, LIDAR composite data was assembled to form a 25cm accurate 3D model of

the housing district and wider city allowing the plotting of the movement data and the calculation of mass and void space of the vernacular landscape (**Figure 1**). With all of the data sets assembled comparisons were made and assembled to create a visual design summary of the data sets. The 3D model was also 3D printed in order to attain an accurate physical landscape model. This formed the second part of the choreography of the landscape representation to derive meaningful landscape character assessment using a variety of modes (**Figure 4**).



**Figure 2:** Cureton, Potter Street and 'The Maples' Housing area, Harlow, Perspective, Pencil, 290mm\*160mm, 2014.







## Welwyn Garden City, Stevenage & Harlow

Considering the time-based observations of J.B. Jackson, four housing districts were chosen as a basis to assess their landscape and urban character. The representational method involved modes which accommodated a time-based lens. This allowed for a summary of the housing districts character.

Welwyn Garden City which was established in 1919, owes much fidelity to the Garden Cities of Ebenezer Howard and was the second garden city (Buder, 1990; Howard, 2009). Its later residential character is interesting given the report of the New Towns Committee on progress (1970). Blythway Welwyn has small residential loop streets with several offshoot cul de sacs. Housing is offset from the street, with small front gardens, grass verges and geometrical tree planting feature with block paving walkways (later tarmac). Comparatively, the street use has changed little from 1974 compared with 2013 though has been subject to some housing infill. The scale of spaces is small; though show how walkways have been cut in. The walkway channels connecting each block are also underused, managed but wilder spaces giving rise to fly tipping and an 'off-putting' characteristic. Navigating the walkway channels from this research shows its disorientating effect. The human occupation of its public areas is minimal. The heavy car use evident at street level demonstrates a transitory nature through these public spaces. There is the clear cultivation of private vernacular gardens, and this is the major factor shaping its urban characteristic as its architecture is deliberately non-descript and vernacular<sup>4</sup>.

Stevenage was established in 1946 and radicalised its layout through cycleways and separated transport infrastructure. Leaves Spring & Longleaves Road in Shephall, Stevenage signify the planning policy of cul de sacs, village greens and low height non-descript two to three bedroom housing subject to 'characterless' assessment (Alexander, 2009). Such low density has led to a reserved sociological aspect (Orlans, 2013). At municipal park level wider intervention as taken place by HTA Landscape Architects for Stevenage Park thus, the housing block landscape is a managed landscape little deviating from its original layout (Collings, 1987). This raises questions about future adaptability. Longleaves is subject to a strict rhythm, and low human occupation in its public areas housing and recreation are clearly separated aspects to its urban characteristic. Like Welwyn Garden City this mediating space was important in addressing the high-density housing conditions of London through satellite towns. This is meant that the New Towns provided a much private space held by a surrounding public landscape infrastructure<sup>5</sup>.

The New Town of Harlow was masterplan by Fredrick Gibberd<sup>6</sup>, its housing areas and landscape character subject to Garden City principles and the visions of Le Corbusier's *Ville Radieuse* (1924) of access to green space evidenced in the Water Gardens, formal gardens in Harlow's town centre (Gibberd, 1980) though has now been part converted into a car park. The landscape architecture

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<sup>4</sup> Jackson describes this as block after block of silent, nondescript houses (Jackson, 1994, p. 152). This observation reflects in the minimal aesthetic of the four housing districts which utilise modern form and minimal façade.

<sup>5</sup> Landscape Infrastructure is defined by Jackson as "a composition of man-modified spaces to serve as infrastructure of background for our collective existence; and if background seems inappropriately modest we should remember that in our modern use of the word it means that which underscores not only our identity and presence, but also our history" (Jackson, 1986, p. 8).

<sup>6</sup> Advised by Sylvia Crowe on planting aspects.

emphasis<sup>7</sup> that Gibberd praised (Elwall, 2000, p. 15) has been subject to high-pressure density planning as seen in its later expansion areas. Canadian architects, Central Mortgage & Housing Group, designed the Maples, a series of two-storey terraced timber clad houses built in 1968. Comparatively the 1968 photograph and its 2010 version show the shared designed space un-designed though a wider maturity and cultivation of garden space by its residents<sup>8</sup> (**Figure 2**). The lack of a drop curb has not deterred residents in utilising the shared space for parking. The housing district is supported by surrounding playgrounds fitted to the edge of field boundaries. Harlow also has Splash Parks and five paddling pools for its residents; this recreational pursuit has declined in the Town Park, being preferred by skateboarders and as a graffiti wall. Such space, however, has also been reinvigorated in the case of Potter Street were the civic space actively designed and serviced to its housing blocks. This is an important point in that Harlow merges its housing districts and recreational spaces in its urban characteristic (**Figure 4**). J.B. Jackson describes the development of city park spaces first structured and formal parks, secondly natural parks and thirdly the emergence of a new type “unstructured, unbeautiful, multipurpose public playground where adolescents can assert themselves and become social beings, defend and serving some youthful concept of community”(Jackson, 1986, p. 130).

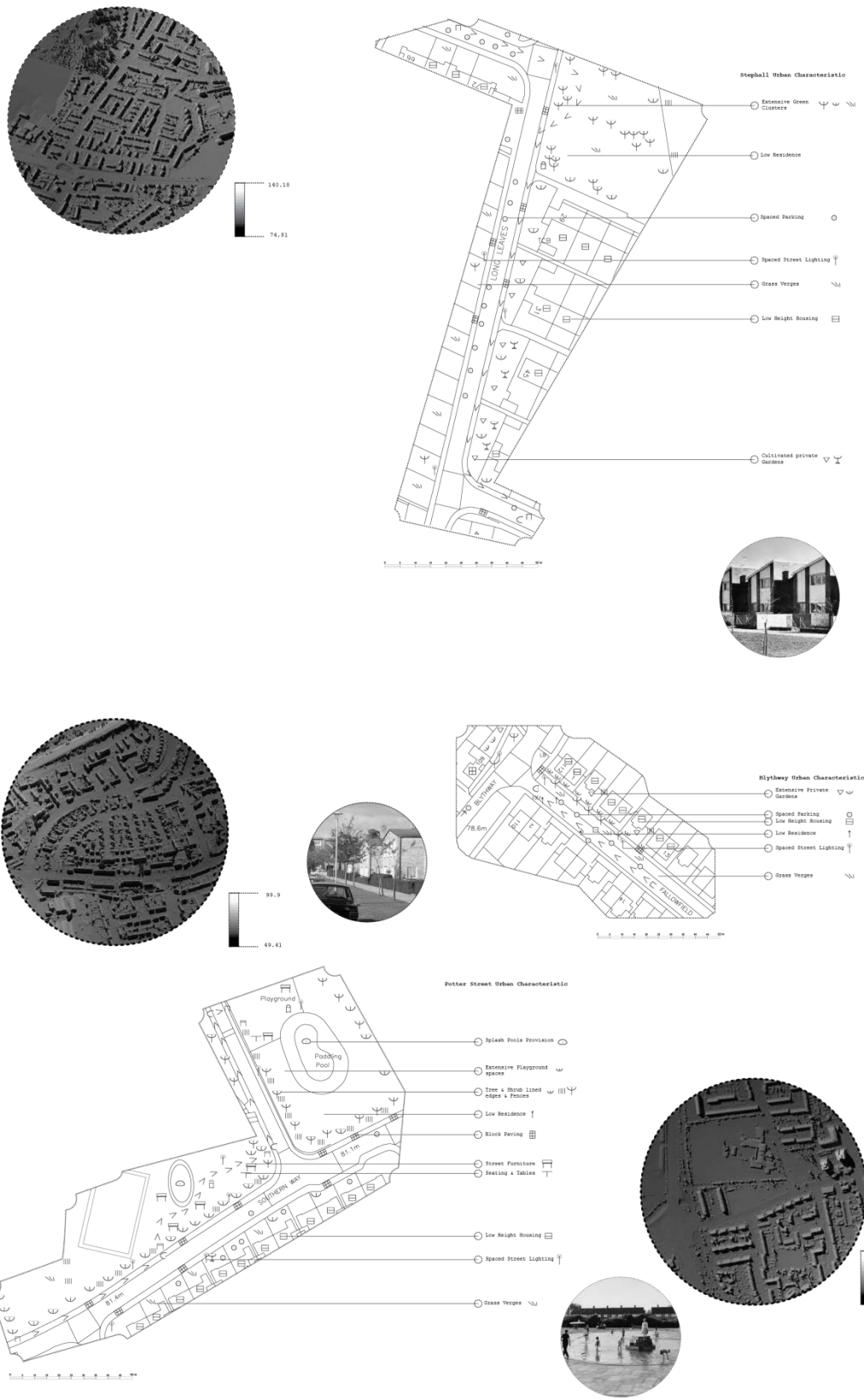
These localised residential spaces and particular green channels and access routes are important to the overall site identity and beg the question whether the New Towns need heritage? At this scale, reflective time and application on these conditions demonstrate a discrepancy between designed scale and the practical use of such places. Some of the landscape spaces show little habitation, are zoned and boundaries are set, though are important to mediate the housing. These spaces show little signs of change. The increase in vehicle ownership has certainly placed pressure on the cul de sac through the design of the spaces for car-based urbanism is a continuous vector. These spaces demonstrate a scale in which design intervention other than management works from residents and the Council or landscape firms is not viable. Larger municipal landscape form in comparison remains static and is subject to greater public scrutiny and management. However, to observe the initial observation of Jackson, of landscapes shaped by habit or custom, the small recreational parks embedded within Harlow’s housing districts show greater levels of evidence of its vernacular landscape character<sup>9</sup>. It is here that we can see the inhabitants in an open-air space and importantly as Jackson has observed on the park, it reflects the private relationship to the natural environment (Jackson, 1986, p. 130).

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<sup>7</sup> The housing district landscape was also criticised by Gordon Cullen, *Architectural Review* 1954.

<sup>8</sup> This is an interesting signifier from civic space to the private vernacular garden (Hunt et al., 1993).

<sup>9</sup> This is similar to LVIA Townscape character; context, topography, layout and scale, patterns, contribution of landscape, types of open space and access and connectivity (Routledge, 2014, p. 74)



**Figure 4:** Urban Character Analysis 'Motation' & Lidar Composites: Stevenage, Welwyn Garden City and Harlow, 841\*594mm, 2014.

## Conclusion

It is through the choreography of landscape representational practice that vernacular landscape place can be further understood through 'everyday' spatial practices of inhabitants. This is defined as the time-based observations of sequences and movements in a landscape and the design and sequencing of the fieldwork evidence into meaningful urban data. This is especially important given the context of UK New Towns and its urban housing pattern. Vernacular landscape and its assessment give questions to the adaptability of original plans, its cultivated use and its suitability for heritage protection or enhancement through a time-based lens. These spaces often managed, and under significant since designated at planning scale are telling of wider humanistic changes and practices. The spaces are politicised through Parish Councils and community preservationists through the design aspect is diluted. The ability of these small landscapes and access routes are fixed within the original master plan, their adaptability will certainly prove interesting for adopting sustainable principles such as SUDS and wider cultural and economic changes, in particular, expansionist planning and infill of green infrastructure. Vernacular landscapes and its characteristics require time-based assimilation of methods for understanding its housing places and its spatial practices particularly due to the social reformation sought by New Town planners and their intended use. The representational methods discussed feedback and evaluate such social intention and have been particularly useful in identifying the importance of unstructured parks in residential areas. They reflect the places urban pressures and reflect on residents views of its local unit – the Landscape Architect using a variety of imaging practices must continually ask the question - what are the subtly complex stories of these everyday spatial practices and the landscape form sculpted by such action?

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