

Design Trends in the Use of Amenity Planting in the U.K.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last 20 years there have been many changing fashions in the landscape designer's use of amenity planting. In the early 1970s, the emphasis on the rehabilitation of derelict sites encouraged the use of plant species that were tolerant to impoverished or contaminated ground conditions. The landscape design profession was small, relatively young and inexperienced, having had few opportunities to design large amenity planting schemes.

Most of the projects were restricted to the public sector using government grant aid, such as, Derelict Land and Urban Programme Grants. In the private sector, there was not a sufficient level of commitment to landscaping, as it was generally seen as a cosmetic addition to building development.

Towards the end of the decade, there was much debate on the malaise of British cities, with large areas of derelict land particularly in former dockland areas. This led to the setting up of urban development corporations in Liverpool and London to encourage public development initiatives to halt the decline. The "greening of cities" was seen as a key to unlock the potential of such sites in the regeneration process.

At the same time there was a new awareness of the landscape and its value in the private development sector, particularly with reference to green field site development in science and business parks. Here the emphasis was on creating new parkland and lake settings around which pavilion style buildings could be located in harmony with their surroundings.

Furthermore, major new infrastructural projects were being carried out in increasing numbers, including: new motorways and urban bypasses; thermal, nuclear and pump storage power stations; reservoirs and river regulation schemes; north sea oil and gas developments; new towns and town expansion projects.

These large scale projects were ideal opportunities for landscape designers to experiment with substantial planting schemes, primarily using indigenous plant material.

THE ERA OF THE BRITISH GARDEN FESTIVAL

The British Garden Festival era began in 1981 with the announcement of the International Garden Festival to be held in Liverpool in 1984 by the Merseyside Development Corporation on a 70-ha derelict refuse and oil tank farm site on the banks of the River Mersey. The two demanding constraints—2.5-year time scale and a heavily polluted site—weighed heavily on the design and technical challenge for landscape designers.

In Germany and Holland there were 30 years of experience of such events but constructed over longer time scales of around 6 years and on greenfield sites with little or no technical and environmental constraints. In both cases, the 10-year internal International Buntessgartenhaus in Germany and Floriades in Holland are shop windows for the respective horticultural industries which both have important export markets.

In the U.K. there was no such tradition, exhibitions were restricted to short term events such as the popular Chelsea Flower Show.

At Liverpool IGF, however, the time and technical site constraints were outweighed by the opportunities of designing on a 70-ha highly visible river bank site, with a substantial public and private budget that encouraged the use of a broad palette of plant material. The structure planting designed for permanency on the new landform used indigenous plant material influenced by the new landform and the exposed aspect of the site. This structure in turn provided the necessary framework for the more ornamental planting of the international and national theme gardens created for the event. Even on such difficult site conditions a significant amount of large size tree planting was achieved with girth sizes from 20 to 30 cm possible in selected locations. It was also possible to specify the bulk of the smaller trees and shrub material in a containerised form, supporting the growing trend in the U.K. nursery industry.

NURSERY SUPPLY INDUSTRY

The 6-month event in 1984 proved to be a great success, attracting 3.2 million visitors to Liverpool despite its poor image. The site had been reclaimed and totally transformed in under 30 months—a major design and technical achievement. Ten years later, 50% of the site is maturing as a festival garden theme park associated with the indoor leisure facilities housed within the former Festival Hall. The remaining area has been developed for private and public housing effectively using the landform and maturing landscape framework of the festival site.

Although the remaining four garden festival events were restricted to a national status, they followed on from the achievements of Liverpool. At Stoke, on the site of the former Shelton Steel Works a 75-ha national event was staged in 1986. The site was designed with a strong central ridge which was heavily planted with indigenous plant material. To the west, a series of themed landscapes were located around several new lake features and to the east a major outdoor events area and temporary retail village was developed. Again, the opportunity was taken for using a wider range of more ornamental tree stock and containerised shrub planting. In contrast to Liverpool, there was more effective use made of herbaceous and annual plants providing strong seasonal colour effects. Probably the major success of Stoke has been its after-use. The permanently planted central hillside became an effective backdrop to a leisure park to the west and a retail and business park to the east, now completed and fully occupied.

The third festival was staged in 1988 on a former derelict dock on the banks of the River Clyde in Glasgow. In contrast to Liverpool and Stoke, the site was privately owned and was leased to the Scottish Development Agency for 5 years to mount the festival and was then handed back to the private owner with a new landscape infrastructure for the provision of a mixed end-use of housing, office, and waterfront leisure uses. At Glasgow the permanent structure of planting and mounding used a mix of indigenous and ornamental plant material and a preparation period of four planting seasons encouraged a more mature landscape into which a variety of temporary theme garden displays were located. Although it was an extremely successful event attracting 4.5 million visitors, the end use has yet to be achieved due to the recession and is now likely to require at least 5 years to make any real impact. However, much of the structure planting has been maintained as an important backdrop to new development.

The fourth event, held in Gateshead in 1990, was prepared during the depths of the latest economic recession and it struggled to attract sufficient support from the private sector. However, it was organised by Gateshead Metropolitan Borough which encouraged a wide participation from other local authorities resulting in a strong array of seasonal bedding displays. Much of the site has now been retained as a permanent park with new associated housing development.

The final event was held in Ebbw Vale, in a steep-sided South Wales valley, on the site of a former steel works. It had distinctive advantages over the other events. Firstly, it had 6 years of preparation time, similar to Continental examples. This allowed for thorough site preparation and up to five planting seasons to allow structure planting to be in good condition for the event. Secondly, the site was in a rural location some distance from a major urban location—on the edge of the town of Ebbw Vale with a population of 20,000. This allowed woodland and farmland to be incorporated with the derelict site and broadened the range of displays from new landscapes through to the conservation and management of countryside.

Thirdly, the site was prepared with the end-use in mind. As a result, some 70% of the site has been retained as parkland and managed countryside that will be an attractive setting for a proposed new village settlement and an employment centre.

Although the British Garden Festival experiment came to an end with the Ebbw Vale event in 1992, it was an important period for the U.K. landscape for the following reasons:

- It raised the profile of what could be achieved with derelict, apparently useless sites.
- It encouraged new planting and establishment techniques for the rehabilitation of difficult sites.
- It provided a shop window for the wider landscape industry.
- It attracted large numbers of people to view new landscapes in an attractive atmosphere.
- It kept the issue of the landscape on the wider political agenda.

CURRENT AND FUTURE TRENDS

The recent demise of garden festivals and the recession of the last 5 years has severely curtailed a considerable number of public and private sector amenity landscape projects. Also, major infrastructural investments, with the exception of the Channel Tunnel, have greatly reduced in number. There are also changes in emphasis, such as, road construction in and around large town and cities being curtailed in favour of integrated transport schemes.

This has all contributed to a reduction in the number of design opportunities available for landscape architects to create significant new landscapes with amenity planting. Many small and large design practices thrived on the opportunities of business and retail parks in the 1980s, but these have all but dried up in the 1990s. Also the leisure boom of the 1980s, with new golf courses, heritage centres, hotel and conference centres, and new village developments, has declined.

There are, however, a number of exceptions, two of which our practice is currently involved in:

1) The new European Research Headquarters for Glaxo near Stevenage. A 50-ha campus costing £700 m, it is the second largest capital project in value in the U.K., after the Channel Tunnel. A £6 m hard and soft landscape budget has

enabled a bold planting scheme to be prepared which utilises a strong structure of large trees to respond to a strong massing of buildings.

2) The New Theme Park for the LEGO Toy Group on the Site of the Former Windsor Safari Park. The mature parkland landscape is being recycled for a family event experience. Again, a hard and soft landscape budget of around £5 m will ensure a strong contribution from the landscape plantings. Furthermore, this is a unique design opportunity to exploit the use of bold amenity planting in association with conservation and woodland management as part of the site is situated adjacent to the Windsor Great Park and the remnants of an ancient English oak forest.

These exceptions, amongst others, will not be sufficient to stave off a decline in major landscape schemes of distinction. Although, we are in an era of so-called "green awareness" this seems to be more political rhetoric than reality, in terms of new projects. Take the decline of the urban park, for example, where the majority were Victorian in origin and products of philanthropic concern in the mid to late 19th century. Many are now subject to severe decline resulting from municipal neglect with insufficient maintenance and public interest. Yet at the same time, interest in private gardening never seems to wane—could it be private space at the expense of public space?

As we move closer to the new millennium, the industry badly needs a number of new initiatives to reawaken public interest in public and private amenity landscape.

In this context, a small think tank was set up by the Joint Council for Landscape Industries last April to explore ways of bringing landscape back onto the political agenda. This group has recommended a major new landscape initiative called "The Landscape Challenge—The Next Heritage", which was debated at a specially convened seminar in September 1994.

Its key features will be partnership, innovation, competition, and sustainability. It will not only demonstrate the relevance of our green landscapes to the achievement of sustainable development but also secure their most effective long-term management as an integral part of the project. It is the intention to organise a pilot project in 1998 and a millennium project in 2001, following an invitation for *competing bids from towns and cities throughout the U.K.*

It is also hoped that such a scheme will attract funding from the new Millennium Fund, being financed by proceeds from the new state lottery which begins operation in the autumn of this year.

The key criteria for schemes competing in Landscape Challenge include:

- The completed schemes will be innovative serving to demonstrate the best design, construction, and management skills of today's landscape industry.
- The physical area of competing schemes must be substantial and be of demonstrable benefit to an urban catchment area of not less than 100,000 people.
- The subject area may be currently available public open space, such as parks and recreation grounds. However, competing proposals must be able to demonstrate greatly enhanced public benefits with a wide diversity of intended use, together with high visual amenity. Both the construction work and subsequent maintenance should provide for extensive training.

It is hoped that this or a similar initiative will be the catalyst for a re-awakening of amenity landscape in the U.K. This will also encourage a renewed demand for plant material of the highest quality.