

NOVEMBER 2011 - SGD CONFERENCE - IMPERIAL COLLEGE, LONDON - REVIEW

The Conference of the Society of Garden Designers met last November to answer the question: 'What are gardens for?' From the 4 very different presentations, we heard answers that were personal, political and even metaphysical!

The first speaker has been based in California for the last 15 years where he has a thriving practice...perhaps not surprising when you consider that Bernard Trainor has completed 4 academic landscape and design programmes.

For inspiration he turns to the rugged landscape of the Big Sur area which reminds him of the playground of rock, sea and sky he pitted himself against as an adolescent growing up near Melbourne, Australia (the city of 4 seasons in a day). There he surfed huge waves, in his own words: 'trying to kill himself', which was obviously, paradoxically, the way the teenager felt most alive...

In his work he doesn't aim to compete with nature, but lets us feel the raw edge of the encounter instead by introducing vertiginous contrasts...Think infinity swimming pools with a backdrop of valleys and hills cloaked in a wild froth of green, for example. He possesses the restraint to allow the setting beyond to define the garden space, proffering light brush strokes as plantings that include many native species. These are arranged with an effortless-looking fractal geometry that derives from his life-long dialogue with elemental forces, and a meticulous, rigorous attention to the preliminary science and art of site observation – 'the most important of the disciplines' he brings to his projects, according to Bernard.

Interestingly, Derek Jarman's garden in the UK provided a bridge for him between the 'English gardening aesthetic' (of people like Beth Chatto and John Brookes,) and the harsh growing conditions of parched California, where gardens 'only look good from a distance'. It took another man 'living on the edge' (Jarman was dying of AIDS when he created his garden at Prospect Cottage, Dungeness) to guide Bernard's hand in fusing an instinctive and unbridled naivete with an educated approach to integrating a building with its surroundings.

The results are balanced and tranquil, but never complacent. You feel the wild encroaching on Bernard Trainor's designs; reminding us that ours is ultimately a humble place in the grand scheme of things. But what the heck, if we have to be humble, let's be Sublimely, Elegantly Humble!

Wendy Titman was next up, and for me, as for many, she provided the moral compass for the day, bringing us right down to earth in considering the native habitat of the lesser-spotted-child in today's urban environment. UK children have less legal right to outdoor space than organic chickens. At last, it seems the government are recognising this in the 'Early Years Framework', which, thanks to the tireless efforts of people like Wendy, now describes the outdoors as an 'enabling environment', and encourages free-flow between inside and out for pre-school and school aged children. But there's no room for feeling smug. 70% of today's adults enjoyed most of their childhood adventures outside, compared to 29% of young people growing up in 2008. ("Adventure', what's that mummy?')

The potential Bernard Trainors of tomorrow are being thwarted in their infancy...

Wendy regards 'play' as 'the worst 4 letter word in the English language', since it's now been hijacked by a consumer culture intent on delivering plastic 'play solutions' to a society that is rapidly abandoning the un-mediated, un-monitored, nitty-gritty fresh air world outside altogether...

Could anyone have foreseen that we would design a world so inimical to our children?? A world that prioritises fast cars, tarmac and the paranoid strains of the tabloid press above the freedom and well-being of our children... And we're still at it. RIBA recently granted an award to a gargantuan, multi-purpose building where the 'play area' comprised a wiggly slide in a garish colour (straight out of a TOYS'R'US catalogue, one surmises) perched on a sea of (prettily-patterned) brickwork.

If we've designed ourselves into this predicament, we rather urgently need to design/(dig?) ourselves out...Wendy reminds us that: **'This isn't just a job. It's a vocation that changes lives.'** As responsive and responsible representatives of an evolving profession, surely alertness to the state of affairs beyond the garden gate should inform our approach to what happens within it? It's important to realise that 'our ethos is embedded in our behaviour and our design.' Children imbibe these things: 'The presence and absence of objects convey signification.'

Our young people are the mute recipients of tacky, tacked-on, tarmacky 'play' spaces that often don't even deserve the word 'design' to be attached to them. And as Robert Pyle says: 'the extinction of experiences implies a cycle of disaffection'. It's time we felt the pain and the shame in this legacy. It's time to wake up to a 'design ethic' to accompany our much-vaunted 'design aesthetic'.

Our third speaker, Jane Owen, had the unenviable task of encapsulating trends in garden design over the last 30 years in an hour's presentation. The fearless whistle-stop tour was as eclectic as you would expect from someone who has studied erotic gardens, who included a Kalashnikov in her gold-winning partnership at Chelsea last year and who ended her presentation with the Chinese national anthem... To continue with Wendy's theme, Jane noted that in 2008 more than half the world were living in urban environments...by 2050 that figure will be two-thirds.

Well, what can I say? Andy Sturgeon invented holes in water and won a Chelsea gold for doing so in 2005. Geoffrey Jellicoe's influence spanned most of the 20th century. Ground Force emerged onto our TV screens in 1997, the same year Tony Blair got elected, and changed our attitudes to tying hair back and wearing bras forever. Sorry, I meant to say 'gardening' of course! Ivan Hicks did something with plastic legs sticking out of a fibre-glass canoe, and Chaumont-sur-Loire has pioneered the art of conceptual gardening ever since, and it's getting better all the time because we can manipulate light and water so much more effectively these days.

Sex was banned in public places in 2003. Ian Hamilton Finlay was primarily a poet, not a gardener, and did you notice he has wittily and incisively substituted grenades for pineapples atop some pillars at Little Sparta? Jane Owen doesn't particularly like grasses, but she had the good grace to include a token image of them to please the rest of us who do. (Possibly the shot was of a converted subway; a post-industrial, aerial garden in New York known as 'High Line').

John Brookes coined the phrase 'garden room', and garden centres have been thanking him for it ever since! The potager was popularized by Rosemary Verey, but has nothing to do with John Seymour and the muck and magic brigade, 'cos you're not allowed to eat the stuff.

Oh, and I nearly forgot, we live in a 2-tier economy, and even today, those with more than £5 million worth of property still have a ridiculous amount of money to spend. And in case you hadn't noticed, Asia is on the rise, both economically, and with regard to its influence on garden design trends in this country.

Which brings us on to our final speaker, who's back from at least a couple of very interesting commissions in Asia. Dan Pearson described in his presentation several projects in the UK, Japan and one in Southern Italy (the only job he got from 5 years worth of Chelsea gardens!)

Wroughton Hall is an estate in the English Wiltshire countryside purchased and developed by an entrepreneur who has enabled 500 people to move out of the city to work there...Dan has created a 'landscape in a box' close to the business hub that decompresses and inspires, using swathes of perennials. The budget for planting and maintenance was constrained, but the garden has become the 'core and heart' of the estate, attracting weddings and outdoor theatre as well as business. So much so, that it has developed a momentum of its own, allowing more investment in maintenance, and in turn, planting.

Another success story was a landscape design around a development of apartment blocks in Tokyo ('a fascinating but scary city'). Adopting an attitude of investing in quality that runs counter to the recession mentality has ensured that all of the apartments have sold. Dan has created a 'green city effect', inspired by his research into the history of the site...Once glaciated, human settlement brought meadows, rice paddies and orchards. The planting is of shady, spacious, verdant groves where one can meander at will between apartment blocks. The feeling is of being transported to a time and place where the breath naturally deepens and the body relaxes to the beat of a softer, more harmonious drum...where the mind can wander, becoming nourished and refreshed...

One imagines this also to be the effect of the 240ha project in Hokkaido commissioned by a newspaper magnate to offset his carbon footprint. Here Dan created a meadow garden inspired by the Japanese forest floor, planting 35 000 perennials, many of them native, which attract clouds of butterflies and create an experience of 'heightened nature' for the visitor.

Closer to home, Dan has created 'tranquil, thoughtful, restorative' gardens for cancer sufferers and their families at a 'Maggie's Centre', where holistic care is provided.

...He was brave enough to show photos of 'the (winter) wreckage' of his 120ft Peckham garden, that layers colour in summer ('no clashes in nature', being the guiding principle), but 'harbours all sorts of feelings and thoughts' in January... As a designer who's not afraid to also describe himself as a gardener, one gets a measure of the depth of participation and affinity he brings to his subject, embodying a sensual simplicity that welcomes decay and abundance in equal measure. A rare specimen indeed!

I'm reminded of some of his opening words: 'gardens are about evoking feeling rather than an intellectual response'...and also of a photo he showed of himself and a sibling in childhood standing together, engulfed and dwarfed by the rambling overgrowth of his parents' newly acquired garden. You sense his horticultural and design odyssey started right there.

'...Maybe I don't need to add anything...maybe a subtraction...' he muses about his new house and land in the Somerset countryside, where he primes the palettes of the locals with vegetables he's grown himself ('I fed the whole hamlet!') and waits for his own to be re-educated through a patient and willing immersion in his new surroundings. We look forward to hearing about that new opportunity as it takes shape...

The conference was rounded off with a passionate appraisal by our chair of the day, Lucy Huntington, who had evidently been moved and inspired by the various contributors. As an advocate and creator of 'healing gardens' herself, she resonated deeply with the need for young people to be provided opportunities to explore and express themselves in 'natural', albeit designed, environments. More than ever, I was struck by the privilege and responsibility it is to be part of this profession, and how important our role will be in times ahead in enhancing, preserving, upholding and reinventing the 'great outdoors', not just for the privileged few, but for all of humanity. As David Attenborough says: **'Nobody is going to protect the natural world unless they understand it.'** And no one is going to understand the natural world unless they are afforded access to it and are granted the freedom to participate in it.

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