

Nature into Urban Landscape: Theory into Practice

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Abstract: - Urban green is a necessity for the urban landscape, not a luxury, because human culture is based on nature. However, nature in urban areas is represented in many different ways either symbolically or literally. Because cities are people, the act of introducing nature into the cities is about introducing nature to people. Two new public spaces in the heart of London, Riverside Walk Gardens in Westminster and John Madjeski Garden at the Victoria and Albert Museum introduce nature into the centre of London in an abstract and symbolic way.

Key-Words: Riverside Walk Gardens, Victoria & Albert Museum Courtyard, Nature, Urban Landscape

1 Introduction

We are going to discuss the introduction of nature into Urban Landscape and illustrate three basic points. Firstly, that nature is a requirement, not an optional extra, in the urban environment, because human culture is based on nature. Secondly, that nature is represented in many different ways both symbolically and literally in our cities. And thirdly, that cities are people and introducing nature to cities is really about how to introduce nature to people. These points will then be illustrated using two recent examples of new urban landscape in London: Riverside Walk Gardens and the John Madjeski Garden at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

2 Nature as a cultural necessity

Some would claim that bringing nature into the city is a luxury. The authors choose to disagree. This is



Fig. 1

the view out of the window in the centre of Athens where this paper was prepared (Fig.1). In this short section of street a simple calculation



Fig. 2

suggests that the time and money these private individuals choose to spend is about € 50.000 per year. Similarly, the effort to maintain this palm inside Kew Gardens is enormous (Fig.2). It is concluded from this and other examples that urban green is

valued so highly and so widely that cannot be considered an option; it is a basic requirement of urban living.

On consideration, it is perhaps not surprising that there is this basic human requirement to put green into an urban environment because culture is based on nature.

When we humans started to become cultural animals, nature is all we knew and this is reflected in our archaeology and artefacts.

For example, many of the hieroglyphics shown are abstract images of plants and animals (Fig.3).



Fig. 3

Earliest habitations were made of raw materials:caves, logs, branches, leaves and so on and when we started to process materials to form more complex structures, we largely followed the forms that we had learnt.

In classical stone construction, for example the Parthenon built in 500 B.C. (Fig.4), the forms reflect timber construction.



Fig. 4

And as styles become more sophisticated, the use of timber building techniques are still evident. This image is appropriately enough from the Natural



Fig. 5

History Museum in London (Fig.5).



Even in the most modern structures, natural forms are still an inspiration. The Swiss Re Tower by Norman Foster in the City of London (Fig.6) appears to be an abstract but is in fact inspired by complex spiral forms found in simple animals and plants such as this from South Africa (Fig.7).

3 Nature in cities



It used to be simple to bring green into built development in Neolithic times when they were much smaller and better connected to the rural landscape (Fig.8).



In some places it is still easy, for example where powerful landowners have retained open space either for pleasure or defence. This is a picture of the

Riverbanks in Durham (Fig.9), where the steep banks of the peninsula were kept clear by the medieval Church in fear of the Scots coming to attack. The Cathedral, the Colleges and University and the City of Durham are now collaborating to restore the 16th century gardens cultivated by the monks in these slopes.



It is more usual, however, that the nature that we introduce into the urban environment is either a symbol of the rural landscape such as some Maori artwork from the Turangi in New Zealand (Fig.10) or an abstraction of a natural ecosystem such as this plane tree (Fig.11) in the square of Kalarrytes, the



village of one of the authors in Epirus, in Northwest Greece rather than an entire functional ecosystem such as the alpine meadows and the hills above the village (Fig.12).



Princes Square, which one of the authors has been restoring for Imperial College in London, (Fig.13), is an example of one of London's Parks and Squares, many of which are an adaptation of the principles of the English Landscape Garden such as Novar Castle (actually in Scotland), (Fig.14).



The English Landscape Garden itself is an abstraction of the English Pastoral Landscape recreated here in Poundury, Prince Charles's



model village in Dorset (Fig.15) which is in itself an abstraction of the archetypal Arcadian Landscape. This Arcadian Landscape is of course a



Northern European 18th century idealisation (as painted by Poussin and Claude Lorraine) of an originally Roman (and distinctly urban) concept of man living in perfect harmony with nature in Greek Arcadia.

As the examples at the end of the paper will show, the more urban the setting, the more abstract the realisation often becomes.

4 Communicating

The last point made is that cities are people, and that communication with residents, (Fig.16) officials and other organisations is an essential part of





Fig. 17

communicating ideas through simple sketches (Fig.17), graphics, complex diagrams and more conventional plans.

5 Two examples

The paper concludes with two recent examples from London which illustrate that bringing elements of nature into the city is highly valued, that the forms in which the natural world are expressed in the urban environment are often highly abstracted or stylized, and that the successful introduction of nature depends on effective communication at a number of levels.

5.1 Riverside Walk Gardens

This project was a competition for the regeneration of a public space in the Thames in the heart of London, close to the Tate Britain and the Houses of



Fig. 18

Parliament. The brief was to reflect the natural history and the man history of the site (Fig.19) in a space which is welcoming and functional, pleasant to use and attractive.

The whole site was once a row of wharfs extending back as far as Milbank Road. You can see by the piles (Fig.18) that this land was reclaimed when old wharfs were removed. The sculpture is called Locking Piece by Henry Moore and is owned by Tate Britain who chose to display it in this public open space.

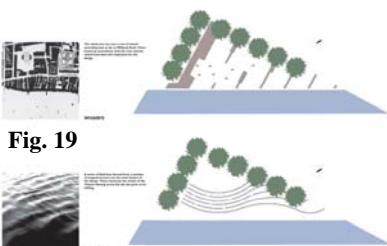


Fig. 19

These represent the Thames flowing across the site

putting the practice of introducing nature into cities. Landscape Architects are well versed in techniques for finding out what people want or do not want,

These historical associations with the river and the wharfs have been the inspiration for the design in which a series of fluid lines formed from a number of stepped terraces are the main feature.

prior to its infilling. The materials chosen are simple and robust and relate to the concept: the movement of water is petrified with white granite kerbs;

timber benches echo the timber of the boats which used to occupy the space; and the resin bound gravel by SureSet represents the tidal beaches of the Thames. The arrangement of the old wharfs is depicted by strips of dark granite paving which cut across the ripples and by concrete walls.

These ideas were developed into a series of concept plans to communicate how the space could work culminating in the winning competition entry (Fig.20).

Having won the competition, the project proceeded into detail design. Detail plans showed the client, Westminster City Council, and the public the arrangement and choice of materials. Once this was approved, production drawings allowed companies to tender for the work. Sections through the site showed levels and clarified the arrangement of materials. Construction details were produced for every element of the work with particular attention to junctions between materials, edges, and bespoke items such as the planting pits, specialist paving and seats.

When construction started, project boards kept the public informed of what was happening and who to contact for further information. Natural stone and resin bound SureSet gravel were used for the lower level of the space, which forms part of the Thames River Walk and had to be extremely robust and hard wearing.

An important part of the brief was the careful siting of the sculpture and provision of the plinth. The client is the most important member of the team

and the success of this job owed a lot to the vision, support and trust they place in the design. Once the



Fig. 20



Fig. 21



Fig. 22



hardworks were completed, turf and planting quickly transformed the space from a building site to a park (Fig.21). The time spent in carefully working out

details is well repaid by the finished work and the new park and the sculpture were immediately adopted as favorites by the public (Fig.22) who use the space. London plane trees (*Platanus x acerifolia*) between the park and the road reinforce the line of planes all along the Embankment. Attention to detail will ensure that the park continues to look its best (Fig.23) even after years of heavy use and the simplicity and clarity of the design will not go out of fashion.

4.2 Victoria and Albert Museum Courtyard

The Victoria and Albert Museum Courtyard is in South Kensington (Fig.24). This project involved



the removal of the old Pirelli Garden built in the 80's and the construction of a new courtyard Garden sponsored by John Madjeski and opened by Prince Charles in July 2005. Like all urban landscapes, it is an abstraction of more complex landscapes. The lemon trees reflect the Italianate Architecture of the buildings designed by Fowkes for the 1851 Great Exhibition. Water always attracts people especially on a hot day (Fig.25).



Here the elliptical pool is an abstract of a reflecting lake and the fountains of natural falling water. The red sandstone from China increases the depth of the reflection (Fig.26). Cool grass, water and the sunken ellipse of computer cut Yorkstone create a calm oasis in the heart of London; within days of opening, it was a popular destination in its own right and another attraction for the Museum during the day.

The brief also required that the space be a stunning venue for night-time exhibitions and events. To achieve this, striking



elements were picked out in a dramatic lighting design. The glass planters are a reinterpretation of traditional garden planters (Fig.27).

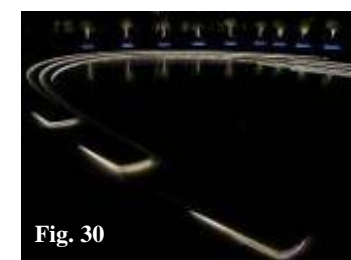


The power of the reflecting pool is perhaps even more impressive at night. Notice for example how the façade has been lit to pick out the detail around the windows and not washed with floodlights (Fig.28).

LED lights encapsulated in plastic (Fig.29) can operate above or below the water line as the pond can be filled with huge pumps from a 60 cubic meter tank located behind the Museum or emptied to make a space for parties. The precise coordination of complex information between all design team members (landscape architects, electrical and mechanical engineers, structural engineers, cost consultants, management contractors, lighting designers and cost consultants), contractors, suppliers and fixers was critical to the success of the project.



The beauty of the curved solid steps (Fig.30) each block of which had to be separately designed and cut and brought through the Museum by hand is at its most abstract and elegant, picked out in light at night.



4 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is hoped that these two projects illustrate the value and importance of applying theory into practice to create quality urban landscapes; some of the ways in which natural elements are abstracted to fit urban needs; and finally the complexity and need for communication in implementing green spaces in the urban environment.