

Heroes for our time?



1 The Westergasfabriek Culture Park is a modern city park built on the site of a former gasworks at the edge of Amsterdam

Does heroism have a part to play in modern landscape design, or is it incompatible with the more concrete challenges of sustainability and ecological correctness? **Tim Richardson** reports on the outcome of a debate held at the 'Breaking Boundaries' conference in London

HEROIC LANDSCAPE WAS the theme at the heart of a conference held at the Garden Museum in London on 7 June, organised by the museum and the Landscape Institute. The conference – 'Breaking Boundaries: are we living in a heroic age of landscape design?' – provided not so much an overview as a series of snapshots of different notions of 'heroism' in landscape design in the recent past and present.

The day was split into two parts. Three morning sessions dealt with mid-20th-century garden and landscape history, specifically the achievements (and otherwise) of Modernism. The afternoon was taken up with individual presentations by three landscape architects. As the chair of the afternoon session, I refereed a final debate involving all six speakers and the sell-out audience of about 80 professionals.

After short introductions by Garden Museum director Christopher Woodward and Jo Watkins, president elect of the Landscape Institute, the day began with landscape historian Jan Woudstra (Sheffield University) running a whistlestop tour of the evolution of landscape architecture as a subject at colleges and universities, from the 1890s onwards.

That 'heroic' figure Christopher Tunnard, the pioneer garden-Modernist and author of *Gardens in the Modern Landscape* (1938), who famously incorporated a Henry Moore sculpture into his design at Bentley Wood, was the topic of David Jacques' talk, based on the book on Tunnard that he published last year with Dr Woudstra. Dr Jacques advanced his thesis that Tunnard abruptly changed direction when he moved from Britain to the USA, 'renouncing' (and later denouncing) 'High Modernism', condemning the MARS planning group as a crime and moving instead into city planning from his base at Yale.

For Dr Jacques, the self-promoting 'heroism' of the Modern movement proved

risibly misplaced, whereas for Barbara Simms, reflecting on Eric Lyons and the Span housing group (the topic of her 2006 book), there is something truly inspirational about the way these low-density developments were carefully grouped around communal, park-like green spaces. It was particularly interesting to see how Lyons' ideas developed from existing housing models, notably the Sunnyside Gardens development in Queens, New York (1924-27), and even from the exemplar of the Oxbridge quadrangle.

Peter Wilder of Macfarlane Wilder kicked off the afternoon session with a vigorous and at times eco-evangelical account of the firm's triumphs over adversity, opposition and incomprehension. Wilder presented a range of projects, including the Innovation Park at Watford (for the Building Research Establishment) and the forthcoming Rowan Road housing development at Mitcham (which has some affinity with Span).

For the landscape architects attending, the presentation was a useful lesson in how to pitch ideas involving 'sustainability' to non-specialist clients, but we heard little about real challenges on the ground. I was particularly concerned by the apparent lack of consideration given to design or aesthetic quality, which was not mentioned. Questioning Wilder directly afterwards about this, it transpired that his partner, Glen Macfarlane, deals with such things.

Neil Porter of Gustafson Porter also presented several projects, including the Westergasfabriek Culture Park in Amsterdam and the controversial Diana Memorial Fountain. A remarkable project such as the Desert Park in Al Ain, Abu Dhabi, set beside an arid mountainside, showed how a process of careful research and site analysis can result in a scheme that is both environmentally sustainable and aesthetically appropriate. The plan here is for visitors to 'acclimatise' to natural heat and humidity levels in a /...



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2-5 The Westergasfabriek Culture Park provides space for both business and recreation

6 Plan for the Chelsea Barracks residential development, in which open space is crucial



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“A BURGEONING ECO-BUREAUCRACY MIGHT IMPEL DESIGNERS TO ADOPT THE LANGUAGE AND FORMAL VOCABULARY OF SUSTAINABILITY”

series of spaces around the visitor centre, having arrived in air-conditioned cars. Porter modestly suggested that perhaps this scheme was not landscape design at all, but for me it was the most ‘of-the-moment’ project shown.

There was a real sense that the architecture profession was at last ‘buying in’ to landscape architecture, thanks in part to the growing tendency to include environmental issues in initial project specifications. This means that the landscape surrounding the building is discussed seriously at an early stage of the project. (I did hear one landscape architect suggest, however, that architects are only interested in landscape at the moment because they have not got enough work.)

Kim Wilkie did not reflect on this specifically while presenting his plans for the Chelsea Barracks residential development, and would not be drawn into revealing anything about the hierarchy within the project team. However, it was clear that the revised plan for Chelsea Barracks takes open space as its defining theme, with the buildings left as grey shapes on the plan – the reverse of the situation landscape architects might expect.

Wilkie envisages a long, straight formal stream bounded by a hedge running down one side of the development, against the road, and within it a variety of smaller spaces, each with their own naturalistic character. Consultation revealed that residents emphatically did not want a large central

square. There are formal vegetable plots in one area (images of the kitchen garden at Villandry have been used to reassure nervous developers about the prospect of vegetables on Millionaire’s Row), an orchard effect in a gated area and rows of trees elsewhere. The old barracks church has been retained and may become a concert hall or gallery; the plans and impressions of this zone were somewhat reminiscent of Central Square at Hampstead Garden Suburb.

While I found this a thought-provoking day, several delegates were left confused by the theme and the disparate choice of speakers, who sometimes seemed to be going in different directions.

Perhaps gratifyingly, given the conference’s ‘inspirational’ title, it did not descend into a mutual pat-on-the-back session. In fact, the notion of heroism in landscape design turned out to be a somewhat chimerical and double-edged concept, with heroism in contemporary landscape architecture apparently bound up solely with concerns about sustainability or ecological correctness.

I left the museum not so much inspired as apprehensive about the direction landscape design may be taking in the coming decade. It seems possible that a burgeoning eco-bureaucracy might impel designers to adopt the language and formal vocabulary of sustainability, potentially at the expense of other elements within the scope of landscape architecture. Or is this happening already? ●