

It is often said that Britain's second most popular obsession, after pets, is a love of gardens and the countryside. But while our landscapes and our private gardens remain sources of inspiration, our neglected parks and public green areas are a different matter. This is not always the case in other parts of Europe, as a recent symposium in Arnhem, 'Creative Ecology and Integral Landscape Design', made clear. In the Netherlands, and more recently in Germany, traditional landscape design and management are responding to new public demands. While there is an increasing consciousness in the UK of the fragility of the natural environment, and a desire to see more 'naturalistic' landscapes, we are not altogether sure what these altered landscapes might look like.

At the beginning of the 1960s, practitioners in the Netherlands began to re-examine the link between planting design and a responsibility to the wider environment. The whole relationship between ecology and garden art was challenged. Parks such as the Jacques P Thijse outside Amsterdam began to establish a different culture of planting design, with 'mosaics' of planting echoing native compositions. Behind much of this, paralleling the UK experience, was the need to reduce maintenance costs. Unfortunately, here subtlety in planting design was often lost.

The experiences of the last 20 years in the Netherlands are different – the early experiments have been continually revised. This symposium aimed to illustrate some of the best results and

Lessons in altered landscapes

Dutch, German and American designs presented at an Arnhem symposium should be studied by our landscape professions

BY PETER SHEARD



Stuttgart's 'Green U': a swathe of landscape connecting the centre to the hills outside, largely created via garden festivals

examine current thinking. It ranged from large-scale planning interventions (the *heemparks* of Amsterdam and the 'Green U' parks in Stuttgart) to more private examples of planting and garden art (US and Dutch examples being the most relevant). The two days turned the spotlight on elements of landscape design rarely practised well in the UK.

Beyond the technical

Some key themes emerged to show what some of our European neighbours take for granted – that landscape design extends beyond mere technical engineering to fulfil much deeper human needs. In the larger-scale interventions, a major train of thought was to shun traditional imposed landscape designs and accept gradual evolving change. Hein Koningen

(a park supervisor of the Amstelveen parks in Holland) explained this eloquently, using as an example the public green spaces (the *heemparks*) of the dormitory town to the south of Amsterdam, developed in the 1930s. These parks' 'natural' appearance is deceptive, constantly arrested and altered as it is; but the overwhelming impression is that nature is all around, represented by a rich mosaic of changing plants. Perennials play an essential part in the scheme with their adaptability and variety: a valuable asset when the aim is to allow subtlety and dynamism.

In addition to the *heemparks*' dynamics, the development of the Dutch town of Emmen, explained by Andre de Jong, showed how natural elements should always be respected and

the desire for human interaction with the surrounding landscape encouraged. Emmen has tripled in size in the last 30 years, and de Jong showed how the human factor, so often destructive of natural processes, could be harnessed as a vital part of change. The view alters over time, but it is just as beautiful.

Professor Hanz Luz of Stuttgart presented a more conventional line but an extremely effective one. His principal contribution to Stuttgart's open-space system has been to design a sequence of parks more than 5km long, which connects the city centre to the hills at the outskirts. Luz regards ecological design and functional requirements as being of equal importance – something of a departure from the more purist ecological messages, but many of the horticulturally specialised speakers at the symposium echoed his thinking.

Looking at private rather than public spaces, James van Sweden of the US and Henk Gerritsen of Holland showed how exciting perennial plants can be all year round, and by comparison how dull many of the 'tried and tested' planting schemes of today really are. Metaphors abounded in their lectures – these were not just gardeners but 'garden artists', creating 'tapestries'.

Thankfully, such rhetoric was justified by some stunning work, particularly that of van Sweden, who showed how he challenged conventional formality by trying to embody the American passion for frontiers and love of change. In his scheme for Freedom Plaza on Washington's Pennsylvania Avenue, he ripped out unused lawns and static hedges, replacing them with sweeping curves of grasses (often native) and massive blocks of perennial ground covers. 'I always plant thousands of one plant,' he claimed. A gratifying aspect of



The Jacques P Thijse park near Amsterdam: one of the early forerunners of the Dutch style of perennial planting with a complex mosaic of various species

van Sweden's work was the lack of reliance on high-maintenance regimes. The design intent 'became forgotten over time' and a form of Nature took over. Landscape architects here would do well to study his work, with its elegant sweeping designs fitting beautifully into private gardens and public spaces alike.

Artificial wildness

A similar message was presented by Henk Gerritsen, creator of the Priona Gardens in Holland. Like Luz, however, he illustrated that a wild effect requires human intervention – it is another form of garden art as subtle as Gertrude Jekyll's borders, and just as artificial. He almost mocked Dutch conventions in perennial plantings by introducing all sorts of weird and wonderful things into the landscape, including flowers for cutting, a vivid and incongruous counterpoint to his wild planting.

The symposium as a whole raised questions that have more than one answer. While a lot of the speakers claimed that the use of perennial plants can produce a much more natural landscape, some of their theses were spurious. Perennials are largely transitory things, and their use in contemporary landscape design is as man-made as hybridised roses; this casts a certain doubt over some claims of 'working with Nature'. If, however, one discovers the beauty of these largely underused plant species, a palette exists which remains under-exploited in the UK. Worries about maintenance costs, a variance in public taste between here and Holland, and an ignorance on the part of a lot of landscape architects (including myself) of the subtlety of perennial plants have produced few schemes in the UK that compare with the Dutch. But attitudes are changing here, and the demands for more naturalistic landscapes in our urban areas is growing. The landscape professions must rise to the occasion.

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