

Essay 01

How are landscape policy, planning and strategy projects driving forward the sustainability agenda?

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Strategic thinking



IMAGES: FROM TOP LEFT: ROGER HULME AND MIKE JOCELYN; CITY OF YORK COUNCIL; JOHN BRIGGS; ERZ LTD; LDA DESIGN

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In 2001, reflecting on the four previous years of Landscape Institute Awards, Newcastle University senior lecturer Maggie Roe CMLI, had to concede: “So far as we can see, sustainability was not a criterion for judgement in any category, nor was it uttered – so far as we remember – at the awards ceremony.”

A decade later, things have changed. A quick word-check across the descriptions published over the past five years alongside the awarded entries related to landscape planning, policy or strategy returns encouraging scores.

The phrases ‘sustainability’ or ‘sustainable development’ are applied to one-third of the projects in 2006 and 2007, to close to half in 2008, to one-fifth in 2009, and again to close to half in 2010. The LI itself now explicitly features as one of the aims of its Awards to “reward schemes that demonstrate a high level of commitment to sustainability”, although how this is reflected in the judging criteria is not entirely clear. While the sustainability agenda has moved into the limelight, the brief remains open as to what it means practically for the landscape profession.

This seems particularly true of landscape architects’ role in planning, policy and strategy.

For site design, a number of performance frameworks have become available to gauge the sustainability of a particular project. Initially, mostly focused on buildings (LEEDS, BREEAM), such benchmarks are now available specifically for landscapes design, construction and management (SITES). At a macro-scale, however, where planning and policy decisions are at stake, methodologies and benchmarks are less forthcoming. Yet many point out that, until land use and resource management are better dealt with at a strategic scale, local solutions will have a limited impact on improving our ability to address our current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

THE AWARDED ENTRIES under the Strategic Landscape Planning, Local Landscape Planning, Landscape Policy and Landscape Science categories over the past five years provide good clues on the direction that the landscape architecture profession is taking to fill this gap. Consider landscape characterisation assessments. The technique has evolved to offer an increasingly sophisticated and systemic view of the relations between natural systems and

people in an area. Five years ago, the Landscape Character Assessment of the Essex Coast, by Essex Landscape Design (*Commended, Strategic Landscape Planning, 2006*), was describing areas in terms of their typical geological, topographical, ecological, archaeological and cultural features, with the general objective to inform planning policy.

This year, another award-winning coastal characterisation went even further, by combining coast and sea into a single assessment of the ‘land–sea’ interface. LDA Design’s Dorset Coast Landscape and Seascape Character Assessment (*Commended, Strategic Landscape Planning, 2011*) will help to better manage climate change adaptation and competition for space from interests such as shipping, commercial fishing, minerals extraction and renewable energy – all of which are central to avoiding resource depletion and environmental degradation.

The renewable energy field is clearly a hot topic. Over the past five years, the landscape profession has adapted landscape sensitivity and capacity-assessment techniques, providing communities, planners, elected members and investors with an analysis of how an area /...

Essay 01 cont.

might accommodate new infrastructure – often a source of divisions. The track record of awarded innovative work attempting to bring objectivity to this field is impressive. In 2006, Lovejoy Birmingham was recognised for Arecleoch Windfarm EIA/LVIA (*Winner, Local Landscape Planning, 2006*), which developed an iterative process of design and assessment combined with regular input from statutory consultees and the public.

White Consultants was similarly recognised for its windfarm development and landscape capacity study, Knowesgate and Harwood, Northumberland (*Commended, Strategic Landscape Planning, 2006*). The 2011 LI Awards again see some innovation in this field with Land Use Consultants' study on the Sensitivity of the Coastal Landscapes and Seascapes of Wales to Tidal Stream Developments (*Winner, Strategic Landscape Planning, 2011*.)

Yet there is more to the 'landscape architecture' and 'sustainable placemaking' tandem than just the ability of the former to provide useful techniques for facilitating decisions on the latter. In the past five years, the profession has taken ownership of the infrastructure debate. Landscape planning

and policy has departed from its traditional emphasis on scenery to capitalise on the ecological ecosystems that landscapes can provide. This 'green infrastructure thinking' is certainly not new. What is novel, however, is the physical scale and range of needs for which this approach is now being applied. This is where the greatest potential lies for landscape architecture to drive, structure and deliver the sustainability agenda. The more proficient the profession can be in articulating a green infrastructure approach, the better chance it stands to lead on local development issues and make a lasting impact.

CONFIDENCE IN TACKLING key infrastructure needs on a large scale has been strengthened by the success encountered in turning regenerative design concepts into a reality on the ground. Good examples of this are Randall Thorp's work for Cambourne New Settlement (*Highly Commended, Local Landscape Planning, 2010*) and TEP's bioremediation scheme for the Regeneration of the Avenue Coking Works (*Winner, Landscape Science, 2008*). Confidence has also been heightened by successes in turning what was considered pilot approaches

into standard policy, such as the Landscape Partnership's Cambridge SuDS Design and Adoption Guide (*President's Award, 2008*).

Since 2006, there has been a fascinating stream of strategies offering environmental infrastructure solutions to changing regions, towns and neighbourhoods. Contemporary work, such as Leeds Green Infrastructure Strategy, by LDA Design (*Winner, Landscape Policy, 2011*), uses as a starting point the most pressing local needs and aspirations – people's health, climate change resilience and water management – to offer a series of programmes and interventions. The approach embraces the wider landscape resource, while capturing value where it exists to shape a more self-sustaining and potentially regenerative model.

Sow and Grow Everywhere (*Commended, Local Landscape Planning, 2011*), a project arising from the Glasgow and Clyde Valley Green Network Partnership, might also be pointing to what lies ahead. Using food growing as a medium, it understands the nature and degree of social changes that sustainable landscapes imply, and designs both the processes, and the places, from which the required social capacity can grow. ●