

Landscape Institute Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland Assembly Inquiry into the Creative Industries **by the Committee for Culture Arts and Leisure**

Response of the **Landscape Institute**.

20 December 2011

For the attention of the Committee for Culture Arts and Leisure, Room 344, Parliament Buildings, Ballymiscaw, Stormont, Belfast BT4 3XX. E-mail: committee.cal@niassembly.gov.uk

Introduction

The Landscape Institute is the chartered institute in the United Kingdom for landscape architects, incorporating designers, managers, and scientists, concerned with conserving and enhancing the environment. The Landscape Institute promotes the highest standards in the practice of landscape planning, design, management and research, and represents members in private practice, at all levels of government and government agencies, in academic institutions and in commercial organisations.

The Landscape Institute is an educational charity and chartered body whose purpose is to protect, conserve and enhance the natural and built environment for the benefit of the public. It champions well-designed and well-managed urban and rural landscape. The Landscape Institute's accreditation and professional procedures ensure that the designers, managers and scientists who make up the landscape architecture profession work to the highest standards. Its advocacy and education programmes promote the landscape architecture profession as one which focuses on design, environment and community in order to inspire great places where people want to live, work and visit. The Landscape Institute is committed to the principles of sustainable development by improving the quality of design of urban and rural environments and to the protection and enhancement of our physical and natural environments.

The Landscape Institute Northern Ireland branch (LINI) represents the professional membership within Northern Ireland and is particularly concerned with design, management and planning for the protection, conservation and enhancement of the natural and built environment of Northern Ireland

Landscape architecture is the design profession for the external environment. The Landscape Institute welcomes this opportunity to inform the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure about the position of landscape architecture as part of this inquiry into the Creative Industries in Northern Ireland.

1. Identify the potential of landscape architecture, with particular emphasis on economic benefits

Major design challenges face us in the early 21st century. We cannot continue to simply reproduce buildings and public spaces on the models we have used in the past. We know that our natural environment provides us with irreplaceable ecosystem services, and that we must find ways of sustaining and enhancing these in the fabric of our urban areas as we plan for the future. We know that we need to develop less energy-intensive approaches to construction. We must find ways of managing water resources more effectively, to reduce our reliance on major infrastructure to deliver us safe, clean water and minimise the risks of flooding. We must create public spaces in our cities and towns which encourage prosocial behaviour and promote a sense of shared civic responsibility and belonging. The Landscape Institute has published a Position Statement on Green Infrastructure (<http://www.landscapeinstitute.org/policy/GreenInfrastructure.php>) demonstrating the contribution of landscape architecture to the holistic design of places.

Also, we must create places where people actually want to live. The creation of ‘the green city’ is not merely a technical challenge. American landscape architect Marta Schwartz has summed this up as follows – ‘if it is not beautiful, it is not sustainable’. If a place is not inspiring, or pleasant, or even comfortable, people will avoid it and it will be economically, socially and therefore environmentally unsustainable. At the level of a town square or park, poor design decisions can lead to abandoned spaces which attract antisocial behaviour and crime. At the level of an entire town, poor design can lead to skilled and transient people moving away to establish themselves somewhere more pleasant and conducive to the good life. Conversely, places which design and manage their public space effectively can become poles of attraction for business, tourism and inward investment. Northern Ireland has a tremendous asset base of both natural and manmade landscapes. It is not yet deploying and developing these as effectively as it can.

There are many examples of how landscape architecture has played a vital role in transforming spaces in Northern Ireland into valuable community assets. These include the Connswater Community Greenway in East Belfast (Paul Hogarth Co. Ltd) and Omagh Town Centre (Scott Wilson). What is missing is a coherent vision for this across government or an understanding at a strategic level of the possibilities it offers.

2. Key challenges facing the sector

The benefits which landscape architecture can bring to society can only be secured through enlightened public sector clients procuring design work in an intelligent, design-aware way. Three main challenges may be highlighted:

1. A lack of recognition by public officials of what landscape architecture actually is and has to offer to society
2. Northern Ireland’s system of procurement of public works, which is uniquely expensive and burdensome as well as making it all but impossible for local SMEs to compete for work because of the time, costs and risks involved. We believe there is little point in using public money to build capacity in the creative sector on the one hand, and then hamstringing it by making it very difficult to operate on a commercial basis.

3. A fondness for giving larger-scale design work to firms from mainland Britain or indeed from other countries, on the mistaken assumption that this somehow offers 'better quality', less risk or an assurance of greater 'design flair'.
4. The lack of an ethos which is minded to seek ways of supporting local creative and design enterprise, not through grants and special favours, but by establishing simple design focused procurement mechanisms that give it a fair and reasonable chance of securing work. The contrast between Northern Ireland and Wales, in particular, is noteworthy in this respect.

3. Gaps in Current Policies:

3.a. Tax credits and other special financial mechanisms: Landscape architecture does not need these. Given a level playing field it is able to flourish on its own merits.

3.b. Education, training and skills: there is currently no degree programme in landscape architecture in Northern Ireland. The University of Ulster recently initiated a postgraduate degree programme in the discipline which demonstrated its feasibility from an institutional point of view. However the particular pressures facing HEIs in Northern Ireland meant that delivery of the programme has been curtailed in 2011.

Recognising the core position of landscape architecture within the design professions, the Ministerial Advisory Group for Architecture and the Built Environment has a landscape architect as one of its eight members. The DCAL Policy for Architecture and the Built Environment has the support of a landscape architecture programme in Northern Ireland as a specific point of its Action Plan. At a European Level, signatories to the European Landscape Convention (ratified by UK in 2006) undertake to promote training for landscape specialists in each area of devolved government. The Landscape Institute is concerned of the impact of not fulfilling these commitments.

The lack of an established landscape architecture degree programme means that the profession of landscape architecture in Northern Ireland has to work without the kind of nucleus of skills development, research, outreach and public profile which build up around University programmes in cities such as Sheffield or Leeds. However the new funding structure for higher education in the UK may offer some possibilities for renewing the pilot and building a centre of excellence for landscape architecture in Northern Ireland. A well-conceived programme, particularly one with good links to other creative disciplines and to the creative and professional community outside HEIs could serve as a beacon of excellence across the British Isles.

Conversely the absence of a strong university hub in Northern Ireland poses several threats to the advancement of the design agenda in Northern Ireland. To cite one example – the Design Council in London is developing a research agenda which will involve participation from HEIs – without an established research base in landscape design, there is no way of participating in this. To cite another – over the next four years the way that design professions in the built environment collaborate with each other and interact with their clients will be completely transformed by the adoption of Building Information Modelling, which will enable the built environment to be designed collaboratively and in three dimensions in ways which have never before been possible. Without a landscape architecture programme in Northern Ireland there is no ready means of the profession engaging with this technology or preparing itself fully for the creative and professional challenges it faces.

There may well be an emerging market for landscape architecture degrees in Northern Ireland. UK students are keen to find affordable degree programmes, and at the same time the overseas student

market for landscape architecture has more or less reached saturation point in the English universities. Mainland institutions do not wish the proportion of non-EU students to increase any more but the overseas demand continues to rise.

Although there are currently no statistics available, it is known that upwards of 15 students from Ireland (North and South) per annum are accepted on Landscape Architecture courses in Scotland and England. Further investigation would be required to establish what proportion of these local students would have subscribed to a Northern Ireland Landscape Architecture course had it been available.

3.c. Leverage into international markets: One of the most important things any creative industry needs in order to play its full part internationally is a firm and established home base. What landscape architecture practices in Northern Ireland most need is for the public sector to be an 'intelligent client' - appreciating the value of well-designed public space; procuring them through a fair and proportionate tendering system; and proudly showcasing its achievements in international arenas. At the moment, cities across Europe travel to Barcelona to learn the lessons of excellence in design of public space and to Freiburg in Germany to learn about how rethinking the design of a town can enable it to support sustainable living and new kinds of community development. These cities are not major global metropolises and they have not necessarily spent vast sums of money on their achievements, yet today they serve as exemplars to cities all over the continent. Why could a city or a town in Northern Ireland not do the same?

3.d. Legislative Developments: We very much welcome the recognition by the Executive that prosperous economies need a strong creative sector and that building creativity is a key priority. We note that it was a key objective of the 2008 Creative Industries Strategic Action Plan to grow the sector by 15% to 2011. We are somewhat doubtful that this has been achieved but we feel it is more necessary now than in 2008 for the Executive to redouble its commitment on this front.

In recent years the Executive has made encouraging statements about the creative industries and put in place a number of funding schemes and initiatives to improve the support for them. We do not wish to make any specific criticism of these and we understand that, especially in current circumstances, there is little scope for increasing the funds available.

We see the major challenge not as being about specific pieces of legislation or policy but about strategic leadership for design and the creative industries in Northern Ireland. We have seen how other small European countries, including Finland and Estonia, have developed design strategies and effectively carved out a place for themselves in the international area as places to learn from and invest in, bringing them enormous economic and other 'soft' benefits. We suggest that as well as reviewing current thinking and practice in other nations of the UK, the Assembly should be looking more widely across Europe at how the most effective hubs for design and the creative industries have established themselves. As Estonia has shown, it is not all about more subsidies and lots of money, and there may be much to learn from there.

Since the UK is a signatory to the European Landscape Convention (as, indeed, is the Republic of Ireland), the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly have a legal responsibility to recognise landscapes as an expression of shared cultural and natural heritage; to establish policies aimed at landscape management and planning, and integrate landscape into town planning strategies as well as cultural, social and economic policies. We believe awareness of the Convention is very poor among MLAs and in the Executive, and we see little evidence that the spirit of the Convention flows through to broad range of policies and strategies adopted by them.

3.e. Local Planning and empowerment: Design in planning policy is considered less as a matter of Executive policy and more as something to be delegated to local planning authorities. There is no evidence in many cases that local planning authorities are properly equipped to be good clients for design, and this needs to be remedied as a matter of urgency. There are tools available to help local communities make informed and constructive decisions on how to use their public space (e.g. the Landscape Institute's Spaceshaper tool) and local planning authorities and community groups should be directed to these and supported in their use of them as far as possible. Relating to the Reform of Public Administration and the reform of the planning system in Northern Ireland, the Landscape Institute is concerned that local authorities are not adequately informed as to the capacity of landscape architects within a good design-based planning system. The employment of landscape architects within the public sector encompasses only those within planning service commenting on strategic planning applications, and within Belfast and Derry City Councils relating to projects on their own lands only. There is currently no government landscape architectural advice given to government-led projects such as roads schemes and other infrastructure. Relating to the response given in point 1 above, this is far below the standards of government throughout the rest of the UK. The Landscape Institute specifically requests that the Department work with the Landscape Institute and the MAG to ensure that local authorities and the Northern Ireland government establish appropriate landscape and design experts within the new planning and public administration system.

Relating to community empowerment, local Landscape Architects are obviously also members of the communities they live and work in, and are able to recognise through their professional experience, potential for these spatial environments and could develop creative solutions that others may not have considered. However, traditional structures generally result in our design professionals taking a reactionary role, responding to predetermined design briefs that have been set by planners, private developers or active community groups. Whilst this mechanism is still valid and valuable, many spatial design based projects often miss potential opportunities at inception stage to reach a much wider audience and extended environmental benefit through a connective creative thinking. The Landscape Institute suggests that perhaps some form of research-based initiative could be developed to tap into the full potential of these professionals, by allowing local landscape architects to apply for basic support to develop potential 'seed' design ideas and concepts that would benefit all. This potential source of design concepts could then be used to stimulate debate among government, local authorities, communities, local stakeholder and the design profession, with the best concepts being taken forward to generate further funding and investment opportunities and realised as projects. This sort of mechanism would inspire our local professionals to become creative innovators and leaders rather than purely reactionary.

Place-making often involves significant contributions from highway and other public authorities. It is rare to see a scheme by a government-led authority (eg. DRD, or local authority) submitted for MAG Design Review even though these can have wide-ranging impacts for the public realm. This creates an unnatural division between the effects of the design activities of the public and private sector, with the presumption that the private sector needs to be subject to Design Review but that the public sector does not. This is a false premise. The Architecture and Built Environment policy states that Government must be a Design Exemplar. Many projects are integral with the design of the public realm, and the Landscape Institute does not find that Northern Ireland government processes are sufficiently robust relating to quality design in the public realm across all sectors.

In a pressured economic climate the resources for development projects are squeezed, and Northern Ireland's already entirely inadequate representation of skilled staff in design, conservation and green space in government departments and local authorities is being reduced. The Landscape Institute notes that there is a need to provide high quality design professionals to assist with local

and effective design policies in the strategies, masterplans and action plans that may not be an everyday skill within each department and authority.

Northern Ireland needs a standard-bearer that takes a high level view above specific delivery targets, and leads nationally on the development of capacity at a local level with the specific focus on optimising the quality of procurement and design outcomes. It should seek to improve the delivery of quality in planning and design at all scales. This means advocating and facilitating high standards in sustainable quality design issues for masterplanning and public space.

Northern Ireland needs a network hub for design so that government departments and local authorities can:

- access external design support, preferably free of charge, that is politically independent from officers and procurement restrictions.
- act as public sector Design Champions to push design support into some public services that supply and manage the infrastructure of space and land that traditionally are weak in design (highways, utilities etc)
- provide a hub for communities and neighbourhoods to access design support on how to procure or challenge design
- Maintain and promote case studies and knowledge.
- Meet the need for skills which local communities will require in the new planning environment, and which many do not have: co-design skills; mentoring; facilitating and negotiation skills; community strategic visioning; collaborative policy and objective setting; brief writing; advice on local procurement and design competitions advice; selection of design consultants.

Northern Ireland need to recognise the benefits to our whole society that a well supported, inspired creative core of Landscape Architects can add to the entire spatial environment. Similarly, Northern Ireland needs to recognise and support its small but excellent core of locally-based Landscape Architects who are eager to explore, develop and realise a diverse range of environmental design projects.

In conclusion, the Landscape Institute directs the CAL Committee to the following video clip which gives an overview of the creative profession and industry of landscape architecture, and the place of the profession in this DCAL Inquiry: "I Want to be a Landscape Architect" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbX3FDDNeQM>).

As the professional body for landscape architects, who are professionally accredited with the skills, standards and expertise relating to landscape matters, the Landscape Institute respectfully request to be integrally involved as core stakeholders to the Northern Ireland government in the process of development the creative industries in Northern Ireland. The Landscape Institute would appreciate the opportunity to meet with the DCAL Minister and the CAL Committee, to discuss this response further.

The Landscape Institute Northern Ireland branch would like to thank the Department of the Environment for the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into the Creative Industries in Northern Ireland.

For any queries and further discussion relating to this response, and for future consultations, please contact:

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