

Dynamic Planting For Public and Garden Spaces

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Paul Bramhill has been Chief Executive of GreenSpace since 2001. Prior to this he gained over 20 years experience in environmental management, specialising in heritage landscapes and management planning.



Paul has worked on a range of large-scale projects such as the audits of entire new town landscapes both in England and Scotland. As Technical Director at Scott Wilson Resource Consultants, Paul was involved in the design and implementation of multi-million pound projects under a range of initiatives.



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Q&A

What are you speaking about at Palmstead?

I will be talking about the challenges facing Local Authorities and how we can go forward, touching on different aspects of management and how communities are being encouraged to do more in the green space field. People wonder; how does that work? Where does it work well? If you look at the likes of Green Flag and Green Pennant winners, you can see that the winners are fantastic sites where communities have got together and managed these locations very well. These are sites where quite often more TLC has been lavished by the community in question than could be achieved by the Local Authority. So there are instances where that works well. The challenge comes when trying to create structures for communities that are long term; in Birmingham they're doing very well, and have a forum with 100 community groups linked together. The most important thing is to keep enthusiasm up.

From your work at GreenSpace what direction do you see the design of public spaces progressing?

New projects and public spaces are going to be down to innovation and the drive of local people. We are moving towards a time when facilitators and advisors from the community lead, rather than design being led from the top down. This new structure is going to be a challenge to the design community. Community and designers are not always natural bedfellows. Designers often work from 'inspiration'; there's always been a personal freedom involved; for example, if you look at Chelsea, the designer has freedom of choice. The future of public space creation is also going to challenge designers when it comes to being dynamic on a shoestring, and finding innovative ways of funding projects.



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Is the future of public space design moving towards consensus rather than concept?

For landscape architects and garden designers used to purity of concept, the future is going to be a challenging time; it's going to be more about consensus design. Some will argue that this approach will not give that purity of concept, but I think if there's good engagement and understanding of a design brief, rather than the design being the personal essay of the designer, then the community gets the space they need. I think it's going to be about good engagement. Too often in the past we've ended up with personal essays from the designer - it can be a wonderful design but a nightmare to maintain, or a set piece that doesn't function. We've found that if communities are setting the brief, more functionality is integrated into design.

So are you talking about 'audience participation'?

Good park authorities are on the ball when they know who their audience is. The concept of understanding your audience and audience development is something the Heritage Lottery Fund have championed. Understanding your audience is the key to understanding what to provide and how to provide it. Design then becomes less about the individual expressing a concept and more about understanding needs. Pure design moves into a personal area; while some sites are wonderful creations, they don't relate as well as they could. The trend towards minimalism and very open precise spaces with little shade and functional slabs of concrete for a seat, veer more towards trend than function; there aren't many people on a hot sunny day who'll want to sit in these open spaces, with no shade, on a boiling hot slab of marble!

It's important that we look at how people 'use' the space in question, not just 'how does it look?' I'm not sure that some examples of modern public space designs relate to the idea of creating comfortable zones for different ages and different needs. Designers often strive to set trends, but we have a basic portfolio of grass, trees and water and they're the things that work best.

We've just had 'Love Parks Week', what parks do you love?

The parks in South Liverpool are beautiful to me, because that's where I grew up; Camp Hill, Calderstones and Sefton. Internationally you have to be impressed by Central Park and Prospect Park in New York – they're great examples of good management and good programming.

How should we better maintain our public spaces in the UK?

You wouldn't expect to have an art gallery with no one looking after you but this is what we do to parks. Getting people back into parks to manage them on a day to day basis will change their fortunes. The presence of park workers would reduce issues over safety and would instantly remove barriers to non use. We also need to look at the degree of programming that goes into space and the different range of activities. We don't tend to promote or manage the users anything like as well as we used to, but people are doing it very well in certain areas; through Parks Week for example, we have seen cities such as Liverpool, Manchester, London and Plymouth really embrace the initiative and put on a range of events. Carlisle for example closed off one of the main city streets and turned it into a temporary park!

What makes a successful public space?

We've forgotten an awful lot of the reasons as to why people use public spaces. If we understand 'use' then we will succeed. Over 65% of users go to parks for their 'natural beauty'; the idea of 'beauty' is an effective and big pull; be that a rose garden or big trees by rivers. Another 'use' is active recreation. They're both quite obvious things but the idea of creating beautiful spaces where people want to go rather than where there are just activities has been lost. Parks are only working for their communities if they're providing diverse activities and experiences.



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So who do you think should be in charge of looking after our public spaces?

People look at it as a presumption; we pay our rates therefore our parks should look great and if they're not then it's the Local Authority's fault, where as in fact they only have 4% discretionary spend and the rest is tied in to what they have to provide. Parks are discretionary like most of the cultural services such as libraries, art galleries and museums; they don't have to be provided. Given the massive cuts in public expenditure there has to be a new partnership created between councils and communities and innovative approaches to future management and maintenance. If you look at all the research and evidence which is common sense – most people benefit greatly in health terms from being close to parks and using them; good for well-being; for countering depression; you get uplift and happy hormones from taking exercise and all of this contributes to our health; it's all there, but we take it for granted today because we've always had the legacy of the Victorian era of providing parks. In Victorian times there were towns competing to provide the best. The Victorians knew the value of parks but we've forgotten it for 100 years. Now we're coming back to it.

What can we learn from the past?

When we look back to the Victorians, the great builders of public parks, we can see from the minutes of the formative councils, that among the first committees established was the sewerage committee to improve sanitation and then the parks committee – outdoor space was a primary focus. Nowadays we spend a lot of money on a disjointed society rather than focusing on the preventative stuff.



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Some may wonder what the point of GreenSpace is?

People always query organisations not giving direct delivery, but what we do is act as a network between people; to bring about greater improvement. If you look at 'Love Parks Week', no one was running a similar initiative before we took it up - Local Authority managers were putting on events but no one was making the most of joint activity. We take an overview, be it's regional or national, to help local authorities and communities work together, combining expertise and knowledge with community dynamics.



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Paul Bramhill will be speaking at Palmstead Nurseries' 2010 Soft Landscaping Workshop on 22 September at the Ashford International Hotel.

Registration is now underway for the workshop at www.palmstead.co.uk