

Interpretation Partners

Interpretation is a discipline that often needs to work with other professions. Some would argue that interpretation is a profession in its own right, but that's a theme for another issue! In the first of a new series about these partnerships Seamus Filor, Coordinator of the Master of Landscape Architecture Programme at Edinburgh College of Art, looks at the relationship between interpretation and Landscape Architecture.

The landscape architect has a key role to play in heritage interpretation. They can hold the ring between the conflicting interests of development and conservation; tourism and rural tranquillity; visitor perceptions and local values; myths and realities. They are part of a profession with an awareness of the social, natural and physical sciences, so they should be well qualified to approach these issues with a rounded, holistic view. In this short article I want to discuss aspects of landscape design attitudes that are pertinent to the field of interpretation, and look at some examples of collaborations between landscape design and interpretation. This is a very personal view, seen from the perspective of an academic as opposed to a practitioner. Since the early 1980s we have included a small component on interpretation within our Master of Landscape Architecture programme, so our graduates are aware of your profession, and of the benefits of collaboration.

There are many perceptions in common between landscape design and interpretation. A journey through a series of connected spaces, linked to an overt or buried narrative, is the essential structure of any landscape design. This journey is built on a good understanding of the site character, in terms of natural, physical, cultural and social factors. "Consult the genius of the place" wrote Alexander Pope in 1731, as William Kent, one of the first true landscape designers "leaped the fence, and saw that all nature was a garden".¹ Parks and gardens of this period carried political and philosophical messages: visitors to Stourhead in Wiltshire were immediately aware that they were participating in a journey across the Ancient world; at Stowe the parkland reflected the Whig politics of the owner. In these cases the interpretive stories were imported, not site specific, more like a contemporary theme park. The client and landscape designer imposed the artefacts, and created the settings.

Anne Spirn, in her inspirational book *The Language of Landscape* (1998), describes and interprets her personal journeys through a range of landscapes; cultural and designed; temperate, tropical and arid. She uses the rules of language as a means to structure and communicate her dialogue with these places and their designers. This book, to me, illustrates the common ground between landscape design and interpretation, what Hal Moggridge has called retrospective collaboration across time with previous designers, recognised and unrecognised.

There have been a few examples in Scotland of landscape practices "embedding" interpretive consultants into the office. These arrangements seem to have been

short-lived, and current collaboration is normally on a contract by contract basis. In some projects, the landscape practice create their own interpretation, in some cases they are engaged by the interpreter, in others the landscape practice is the lead consultant, and even more usually both landscape architect and interpretive consultant are in a team lead by an architect.

Some examples of collaboration between the two disciplines are:

The Hidden Gardens at the Tramway theatre in Glasgow (City Design - pictured left). Here a landscape architect controlled the design process to develop a garden of peace and contemplation on a former industrial site. In an ethnically mixed part of Glasgow, the perceptions of the local community have driven much of the conceptual thinking. Plant species have been chosen primarily for their structural, space defining qualities; they also mix exotic species with native. This is to encourage a sense of ownership by the users, and reflect their multicultural diversity.

At the Falls of Clyde, the boardwalk, designed by Martin Berkley, provides the circulation spine from which the natural and cultural values of the site are communicated. Interpretive material came from the ranger service, the landscape architect put it on site.

Henderson Park, in Coldstream (opposite page on right), is an example of collaboration between interpreter, landscape architect, poet and artist craftsman. It was also part of a wider project to interpret the heritage of the River Tweed. The Coldstream site adds to the enjoyment of visitors to the existing park by exploiting the view over the river as an interpretation point. In this case interpreter, James Carter was the project coordinator, and Peter Daniel the landscape architect.

I hope this short article has demonstrated how landscape architects can contribute to the delivery of interpretation. They are trained to be aware of the contextual issues related to each particular site, to regard, respect and work with existing landscape components, and to weave these into a continuing design narrative. They are used to working within a team of other specialists, and to evolving design principles and realised contracts through group dynamics. I believe the skills of a landscape architect are important in interpretation projects at both the strategic level of defining and choosing themes, and at the detailed level of establishing and managing projects on the ground.

Seamus Filor, Coordinator, Master of Landscape Architecture, Edinburgh College of Art s.filor@eca.ac.uk

1 Horace Walpole, On Modern Gardening (1780)

Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.
Antoine de Saint-Exupery