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Mother of invention



Picture by Allan Pollok-Morris.

Can high design realistically be achieved in our public spaces in a recession? **Andrew Sturgeon** gives his views and experiences with his recent garden project for London's Great Ormond Street Hospital.

Landscape Architecture and the design of our public spaces have been through a purple patch in the last decade or so.

This can be attributed to a number of factors, including the imagination of the clients and recognition of the value of green spaces which has pushed them up the agenda.

In some instances landscape architects have rightly been allowed to climb up the hierarchical ladder on which they have too often been placed on the lower rungs.

Of course, the skill of the landscape architects themselves has contributed enormously but in the end it's the availability of realistic budgets that has made it all happen.

There has been a sense that we have been playing catch up to our European neighbours and our transatlantic cousins, but that gap was definitely narrowing before the spectre of the recession loomed close.

The danger is that in these harder times when money for glamorous projects is far harder to come by that we slip back into

the dark ages of the latter part of the 20th century. Now that the infrastructure and talent exists in the industry, there is a danger that this could be dismantled by a lack of budgets and therefore projects.

This piles the pressure onto designers to become more creative. In some instances this can lead to good design, necessity being the mother of invention and all that. It's true that everyone now has to be even more creative with their value engineering of projects, but the bottom line is that when budgets are cut the end result is in danger of looking cheap or mean.

I wonder what impact this will have in the long term. Perhaps the acres of Chinese granite we have seen will be replaced with less expensive surfaces; gravel or grass?

Mass planting could be seen as a cheaper option to implement, although this punts the burden of maintenance onto a different budget or for some manager to worry about once the scheme is complete and handed over.

The big ideas and grand gestures that could broadly fall under the headings of sculpture or water will surely be amongst the first casualties?

Great Ormond Street

The roof garden at Great Ormond Street Hospital was conceived as a breathing space amongst the urgency and activity of a hospital with 3000 staff and nowhere to go to escape work.

Space is limited in this inner city site and an opportunity arose during the development of the six storey Octav Botnar wing to create a unique garden.

Funds were raised and the architecture firm Spacelab was commissioned to design a café pavilion. Andy Sturgeon Landscape Design was brought in to develop the 29 x 9 metre 'garden' space.

The brief was straight forward. This was to be a flexible space that could cater equally well for an individual wanting to sit alone reading a book or for a gang of friends to socialise together.

We created a variety of spaces and moods within the garden all based around the idea that the space was divided in such a way that it appears different depending on where you are in the garden.

The key to it is the framing of countless views within the garden itself and of the skyline beyond.

Essentially the design is interlocking rectangles to form a rectilinear design but this is layered so that the space changes depending on whether you are sitting, standing or lying down.



"Lack of budgets piles the pressure on to designers to become more creative."





“Structurally, this was a very difficult project.”

The most striking components are two glu lam timber frames. There were originally intended to be three so that they present a myriad of interlocking framed views as they overlap, but as the project crept over budget the axe fell on one frame.

This is essentially the difference between a commercial project and a domestic scheme: decisions are often based on cost alone rather than passion or emotion. I will always feel that the scheme

is far weaker without this one element even though it remains a successful scheme overall.

It was important to encourage movement through the garden so that people didn't just congregate at one end around the café. A choice of pathways at every junction draws people to the far end of the garden.

The varied spaces and secluded corners are created predominantly through the placing of planters and bands of yew hedging all running



Plant list

- Carpinus betulus 'Frans Fontaine'
- Taxus baccata
- Salvia 'Mainacht'
- Lavandula angustifolia
- Astelia chatamica
- Miscanthus 'Yakushimana Dwarf'
- Euphorbia x martinii

Linking

work-making

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parallel to the pathways. Structurally, this was a very difficult project. The planters containing the hornbeam trees had to be positioned over existing steel beams within the roof while all the other planters and timber frames sat on concealed steel joists that stretched left and right to reach the main beams and transfer the load onto them. There was an easier way to do this but it would have meant a far less

interesting design and so we pushed the structural engineer for a solution.

- Andy Sturgeon's Great Ormond Street design will be one of 10 gardens opened to the public over the May Day Bank Holiday, for the second annual 'Great London Garden Trail'.

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