

CHELSEA

The new gardenesque

Andy Sturgeon examines the growing move to bring human scale to public spaces within city developments across the world

A new global trend is emerging that I call “gardenesque”. Let me explain: as the pace of globalisation and urbanisation has accelerated, so too has the demand for public space to take on a more human scale – an intimacy to offset a world in which, for the first time in history, more of us live in towns and cities than in the countryside.

Green spaces within urban areas have become widely recognised for their environmental, aesthetic and generally life-enhancing qualities. However, a few trees protruding from a paved piazza are no longer deemed sufficient. The current trend is to break down these areas into more personal spaces that have a heart and soul, to give communities an identity and to push nature to the fore.

In places such as the High Line in New York and the Potters Fields gardens along the Thames footpath in London the balance is tipped away from hard paving and built structure towards plants and greenery. These places take on some elements of our private realms, our own gardens. Hence, gardenesque. In the 19th century the term was used mostly to describe a style bigging up trees and shrubs. I use it to denote a style which brings human scale to monumental city developments.

A few trees protruding from a paved piazza are no longer deemed sufficient

Feedback from commercial clients from Hong Kong to London is that, even in large public landscapes, they want plant-heavy schemes on a more intimate scale. They are turning their backs on the hectares of granite paving typical of the late 20th and early 21st century's corporate and public landscaping. Many of the big landscape architecture practices involved in planning new cities in China and the Middle East are increasingly accused of “drawing interesting shapes” on paper that fail to translate into the human scale place making that people actually need.

This brings into sharp focus the distinction between landscape architecture and garden design. Until recently they were considered two different disciplines, and the one tended to have little respect for the other. Landscape architects typically look at the bigger picture of parks, urban planning, large-scale developments and the spaces between buildings in towns and cities. Garden designers focus more on the fine grain – the detail – with an emphasis on a strong horticultural bias and, usually, on a much smaller scale. The overlap between the two disciplines has always been blurry and small, bordering on non-existent, but now this overlapping area itself is thriving – and beginning to take centre stage.

For instance, the old massed plantings of dogwoods and berberis are on their way out and, with a bit of luck, the miles of schefflera that line the highways in the subtropics will soon become an eyesore of the past. Those ubiquitous shrubs chosen to provide bulk rather than texture and subtlety are now supplemented, or even replaced, by grasses and perennials and a far wider palette of plants. This approach requires more time and skill to manage, with the attendant higher maintenance costs, but build costs – the capital cost – can even be reduced. Put simply, clients can expect to pay about £350 a sq metre for hard landscaping and £100 a sq metre for soft landscaping (the plants) in prime London sites today.

I am working on a series of new London squares and courtyards where the client frequently refers us back to my plant-rich Chelsea Flower Show gardens from 2010 and 2012 with



Potters Fields in London is an example of how built-up areas are being transformed with more intimate, plant-heavy landscaping similar to private gardens

Potters Fields



Hudson River Park in Manhattan



Roof garden in Hong Kong

the word “urban” virtually banished from design meetings. Each space will be different in character and these idiosyncratic places are intended to create local identities and atmospheres, addresses and postcodes for the new towers of glass, stone and steel. The background to this gardenesque movement seems rooted in the way that the world has changed so quickly in recent times.

Twelve years ago, when I decided to move my landscape and garden design studio 50 miles out of London to Brighton, the business suffered at the hands of geography. Gone was my respected London phone number and postcode and, along with it, an unknown number of prospective clients whose perception was that I was no longer located at the convenient and logical centre of their universe.

Yet in little more than a decade horizons have utterly changed and location seems almost irrelevant as the market is no longer London-centric or even countrywide. It is global. So now merely being in the UK is good enough as long as I am near an airport and willing to spend a lot of time in the air.

With the rise in super-prime residential, investors will happily go to a property show in Singapore to buy a multimillion-pound apartment they have never seen in a golden postcode in London. So why not recruit a landscape designer from the other side of the world after a few minutes searching the internet and a brief exchange of emails? It is a psychological shift in attitude to procurement. People, it seems, have lost their geographical anchors and, to many, there is no longer such a thing as “foreign”. Those who use a private jet to nip down to the Caribbean for a party, or pop over to Paris for a fashion show, never think twice about shopping for consultants around the globe.

In Hong Kong, where our UK-based practice is working on a landscape concept for a high-end apartment building in Kowloon, the architect is Australian and the interior designer is Canadian. Architects have always travelled – Le Corbusier worked in Moscow from the late 1920s for instance – but nowadays they have no

geographical limitations. Landscape designers have followed in their wake.

London's cultural supremacy and growing reputation as a design capital has been good for business and, combined with England's long tradition of garden-making, it means that global clients frequently beat a path to the doors of UK-based landscape architects and garden designers. It seems if you want a well-designed chair, you look in Milan; and for gardens, England is the obvious choice.

The landscape budget has always been intrinsically linked to the value of the real estate, so the rise of super-prime residential properties means these budgets are also heading north. Latest figures from international real estate agents Savills show prime central London property stands at £2,000 per sq ft, while prime real estate in Hong Kong and Singapore is reaching £2,500 and £900 per sq ft respectively. In comparison, landscaping typically costs between £100 and £200 per sq ft for private gardens in London (although they are less than half this for commercial schemes, where profit margins rule). So, as property prices soar in global cities, the cost of flying in a landscape designer to mastermind the garden and surrounding environment has become increasingly viable to developers and in many cases invaluable, as they strive to stand out in a competitive market.

While the UK is the perfect base for Europe, Russia, north Africa, the Mid-

dle East and the US, a significant number of British architects, including Foster and Partners, Terry Farrell and Paul Davis and Partners, have opened offices in other regions, including Hong Kong, to capitalise on the growing Asian market.

Although my practice is minuscule in comparison, I too have opened a small office in Singapore, teaming up with two Singaporean landscape architects and a garden designer from Australia to form Garden Design Asia. It was becoming obvious that life would be considerably easier with a hub in Singapore to reach growing markets as disparate as China, the Maldives, Malaysia and Indonesia. It will also be a gateway to some of the growing economies in Cambodia, Vietnam and, perhaps, Myanmar.

And as these various global economies grow, so too do their gardening industries and their horticultural aspirations. The Garden City of Singapore leads the way but many other countries are trying to catch up. Often using the Chelsea Flower Show as the model, new garden shows and festivals are popping up all over the place. The biennial Singapore Garden Festival, launched in 2006, now attracts 300,000 international visitors over nine days. Other places to jump on to the bandwagon in the past few years include Malaysia, Moscow, St Petersburg, Bahrain and now Dubai.

The latest Asian country to catch the garden design bug is South Korea. Last month I put the finishing touches to a show garden for the 110-hectare Suncheon Bay Garden Expo, which runs in Suncheon City until October this year. It includes wetlands, an arboretum, a medicinal herb garden and international contributions from the US, Japan and Europe. The interesting prospect here is that event organisers have pledged to create the Suncheon Bay Ecological Park on the site after the event closes, incorporating all the garden exhibits.

This sort of urban regeneration is the future and it is encouraging that garden scale, or gardenesque elements, will be at their heart.

Andy Sturgeon is a former Best in Show winner



The High Line in New York

Getty

Chelsea: a potted history

International exhibitors have long tradition at the show, says Brent Elliott

One hundred years ago this May, the first RHS Chelsea Flower Show was held in the grounds of the Royal Hospital Chelsea, Christopher Wren's home for superannuated soldiers. The show has been held there ever since, with two breaks (1917-18, 1940-46) for world wars. So this will be the 92nd Chelsea rather than the 101st.

Chelsea's alternative title is The Royal Horticultural Society's Great Spring Show, and under that name it had been held at two previous venues: from 1862 at the RHS's now vanished garden in Kensington, and from 1888 in the gardens of the Inner Temple, on the banks of the Thames.

In 1912, the Great Spring Show was cancelled so that the RHS could help stage

the Royal International Horticultural Exhibition, which had special tents for French, Belgian and German exhibitors. That exhibition was a stunning success, and there is a lovely anecdote about a German visitor who “was heard to say, in slow, measured tones, “This is the happiest day of my life”.

At any rate, the site proved to be such a superb venue for a flower show that the RHS moved its Great Spring Show there from the following year.

Although the majority of exhibitors at Chelsea have always been British, there has been an international contribution ever since the first show in 1913, when the French rose growers Robichon had a stand.

Even in 1947, when it was hard to find an adequate



Queen Mary at the show in 1913

RHS, Lindley Library

number of British exhibitors for the revival of Chelsea, and many thought that it was premature to start the show again, there was a display by Plant Publicity Holland.

Over the course of the past century there have been some 200 exhibitors from outside the UK. The greatest proportion of them has naturally been European: there have been more exhibitors from the Netherlands (34) than from any other country. The British empire and its successor, the Commonwealth, have also been a steady supplier of exhibits; as early as 1920 the government of Victoria (Australia) staged a display of Australian plants. The coronation year of 1937 saw an Empire Exhibition, arranged by the Curator of the Royal Botanic Gardens,

Kew, with 15 different stands showing the characteristic flora of countries from Canada and India to Fiji and the Seychelles.

But second only to the Netherlands has been the US, with 22 exhibitors to

A German visitor was heard to say: ‘This is the happiest day of my life’

date. The first American exhibitor at Chelsea was the Massachusetts orchid grower Albert C Burrage, in 1925, with a display of Paphiopedilums (slipper orchids). He was followed in

1929 by Mrs Sherman Hoyt, who staged what was probably the most celebrated exhibit in the show's entire history.

Hoyt, who helped to create Joshua Tree National Park in southern California, was a tireless promoter of the beauties of the desert and the need to conserve desert environments. Her display was a modified version of one exhibited at the annual show of the Garden Club of America the year before: three tableaux, with painted scenic backdrops, stuffed animals, and a range of their native flora, representing the Mojave desert and similar Californian environments.

The exhibit won the Lawrence Medal for best of the year and the RHS made Hoyt an honorary Fellow. She later donated the plants