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Regional Development: Connectivity of Parks and Gardens

‘Gardens are an essential, but undervalued, resource in the economy’

Gardens and parks—these two words provide mental images of place and style. The images are predictable: grass, trees, flowers, garden statuary and decorations. There are usually buildings that sit in the garden, or the buildings are the reason the garden exists. These are gardens of memory and of our past, both comfortable and reassuring within the stresses of modern society. Francis Bacon in his essay ‘Of Gardens’ (1625) provides perhaps the most quoted statement on gardens, ‘God *Almightie* first Planted a Garden. And it is the Purest of Humane pleasure...’ Romanticism is rife when people remember, or describe a garden. Bacon clearly didn’t have a garden or at least he did not do the work himself. The ‘Humane pleasure’ is hard work, and while there is pleasure in the outcome it is a constant battle against nature, and a continuous drain on financial resources in order to achieve the desired effect.

The problem is that parks and gardens are always understood in this context, green fluffy stuff and flowers that are expensive to maintain. While many accept that parks and gardens are useful, it is not clear how they are useful or for whom. The question is not what constitutes a park or garden, but what value do they have in our society? It is difficult to make an argument to create new parks, or to conserve our existing parks on the basis of beauty, recreation, open space, nature areas, etc. Romanticism and idealism have little impact on the decision making of policy makers, planners, land owners and developers who look for measurable benefits, similar to an accountant when balancing the books. However, the argument for parks and gardens can come from a different direction, one that values them in the traditional terms of culture, education and recreation, but also for their broader contribution to tourism, employment, and industry. The garden can become a product that is assessed and marketed as an artefact on an international, national and regional basis. As such, they can form part of a social and economic infrastructure that supports inward investment, job creation and an enhanced quality of life.

A Trans-European Project for Regeneration

A re-evaluation of the role and potential for parks and gardens is taking place through the part funded European Garden Heritage Network (EGHN) under the EU INTERREG IIIB programme. Partners from England, Germany and France are investigating the potential for parks and gardens within spatial planning strategies for northwest Europe. Initially this was a relatively simple concept, one that would provide best practice guidelines and identify gardens in a wider role. The research and debate developed amongst the partners and our understanding of the value parks and gardens progressed far beyond our early ideas. In part this was a result of the combination of professionals from different disciplines—planning, tourism, marketing, conservation, gardeners, historians, etc. Other projects that have dealt with parks and gardens have been composed mostly of garden experts and have rarely operated on a multi-disciplinary basis. They also tended to think of gardens as singular entities, isolated from other aspects of society. In part this is a reflection of the physical dispersion of parks and gardens across the landscape, but it is also the way they tend to be presented to the public and studied by academics. As ‘islands’ in the landscape, parks and gardens have had little identifiable impact. The role of EGHN is to identify current impact and potentials for the future—how parks and gardens can connect on a broader base and be recognised as providing important economic, social, educational and cultural contributions to a region.

Current marketing emphasis is strongly based on tourism when considering gardens. The UK, particularly England, has a strong reputation and image when it comes to gardens. Tourist agencies promote this image, the standard image of what a park and garden is. The marketing focus is on heritage, the iconic ‘Capability’ Brown landscape, or the romantic cottage garden. While the image is

strong, it is also the problem. The baggage of history is nearly impossible to alter as it is ingrained in the cultural image of the English garden. The implication is that nothing has happened of note since 1800, and that there is no public interest in anything but the traditional garden. As such we are caught in a cycle that is difficult to break—we continue to promote the same gardens, which results in the same groups of people visiting the same gardens year after year. There is no spread of users to other gardens and no expansion of user types. Under EGHN, a user survey has been carried out in the three countries; while the final assessments are not complete at this stage, there are clear indications of the type of person coming to our parks as well as what they do, and why they come. Most other surveys have been more general or combined gardens with other attractions such as an historic house or castle, and hence it has been difficult to assess the garden visitor in their own right. As an example of this problem, Tatton Park, Cheshire (in northwest England), attracts over 400,000 visitors to the park each year. Earlier surveys show that a higher proportion of visitors, visit the park rather than the mansion, as much as 3:1; and, the more visits made by individuals, the less likely they are to visit the mansion again. The data shows repeat visits to the garden, but there is little direct information why they continue to visit the garden, or what they do in the garden.

Gardens have been identified as the Unique Selling Point (USP) for Cheshire

The potential scale of this resource has not been recognised. As an example, Cheshire is a relatively small area (approximately 208,000 hectares), but with a large visitor catchment area with over 8 million people. Tourism is the UK's largest single industry and it generates £1 billion per annum for this area alone, but it is impossible to say how much is connected to gardens. Within the region there are 23 gardens on the English Heritage national register, another 50 parks and gardens considered of regional importance, and another 200 which we have very little information. Add to this the new parks that are found in most urban areas—these fail to appear in any form of lists or documents. This potential is compounded when considering that a similar pattern is repeated in most counties in England, and we are only just discovering the potential in our partner regions of the Pays de la Loire and Nordrhein-Westfalen. In July 2004, Margaret Beckett, UK Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs presented a different slant on parks and gardens; she identified them as having a major role in the government's Rural Strategy, and they fit comfortably within the four priorities of the strategy:

- Social and economic regeneration
- Support for rural enterprises
- Social justice for all
- Enhance the value of the countryside

'Tourism' does not appear within these titles, although it is part of the underlying concept. In the past, there has been too much reliance on the idea that tourist income can cover the costs of our parks and gardens. World events have shown how fickle and precariously balanced the tourist economy is, particularly international tourism. Regional tourism, educational programmes, local products and recreation can support parks and gardens in a more sustainable manner by diversifying both the nature of use and the user. Margaret Beckett's emphasis is on economic development and sustainability, however, the idea of a garden being self-sustaining is a paradox. Even in the UK, it is believed that only Sissinghurst gardens in Kent has achieved this dubious status, a status that has been achieved by being overly popular, crowded and having to issue timed tickets. Gardens have been a physical representation of paradise since the earliest civilisations, a fragile image easily destroyed. Building up high visitor numbers will destroy the very qualities that people enjoy within a garden. So how can we identify and promote the value of parks and gardens without destroying them?

New Ideas, New Approaches to Planning

We need a different form of accounting and thinking. The EGHN project has used the term *soft infrastructure* to place parks and gardens within the planning mindset. Different from infrastructure such as airports, road and rail systems, schools, shops etc., parks and gardens are presented as part of the more abstract reasons that people wish to live in an area, or why an international company might locate its headquarters in a region. It is essentially about the quality of life. As soon as gardens are recognised as having an intrinsic value, then they can be incorporated positively within the planning system. This allows us to recognise and promote the less well known regional landscapes as well, to use them positively and spread the pressure. Further, these landscapes, existing and new, are a positive feature that gives an identity to an area, a sense of place and pride. The concept is not abstract, but one supported by examples such as the English garden, or the German examples of using positively their industrial landscapes such as Duisburg-Nord Landschaftspark in the Emshar Park.

Parks and gardens can form part of the regional spatial strategy, although this planning umbrella will not necessarily be recognised by the public. There are concrete aspects that can connect people more directly with their region. Schloss Dyke, near Düsseldorf, has extended their visitor season and spread the type of visitor by developing some very modern gardens and planting extensive orchards. Because of the orchards, their busiest season is in October and November when most other gardens have closed their gates for the winter. Their modern gardens attract younger visitors and particularly those interested in contemporary design. Nearby, the Museum Insel Hombrioch-more nature park than garden-provides year round interest by infusing landscape and contemporary art. There are landscape typologies that are not normally considered by the public as gardens, yet their very essence is embodied within the ideals of the garden. Port Sunlight, near Liverpool, is an extraordinary example of the designed industrial village from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It has strong sociological concepts inherent within the garden cities movement; it entices all who visit. Similar examples spread across the industrial regions of northern Europe, such as Margarethenhöhe (Essen) and the Wekerle estate (Budapest). We need to redefine gardens in terms of public understanding and image, move past the garden gate and hedges, and think out of the box.

Gardens are usually defined narrowly in terms of typology and use, and there has been little attempt to place them in a broader socio-economic role outside of education and tourism. Gardens and gardening are quoted as a multi-billion pound industry in the UK, yet it is vaguely defined and the figures are essentially sales at garden centres and admission tickets to gardens. Look more broadly-expenditure is widely based and moves far beyond garden centres. The garden illustrated shows a range of materials: steel, wood, concrete, brick, iron, paint and plants. Unseen items are drains, electric cable, compost, mulch, footings, sub-bases and weed suppressants. Then, there is the installation and maintenance labour. This is a major industry in its own right, but add the roles of designers, production engineers, fabricators, transporters, marketing agents, salespeople and others, there is a large, but generally unseen, system supporting a broad range of industries, and hence jobs. While gardens are associated with plants, the plants are probably the least expensive items in this picture. Similar systems can be defined for other aspects of gardens such as local food and produce, often speciality products of a region where garden and agriculture cross over. There are other industries built around the subject such as film and television programmes. Publishing has had a major growth and covers tourist brochures, individual guide books, popular and professional magazines, and subject specific areas from garden history, to design, to growing roses.

What starts to be defined is a parks and garden eco-system, a broad range of garden types with potential multiple uses that connect into our social and economic fabric. To isolate the garden, as it often is geographically isolated, is a misunderstanding of its potential and a missed opportunity. It is necessary to recognise gardens as a positive resource and to incorporate them within our strategic thinking, but the image of a self-sustaining garden is neither realistic nor desirable. Sustainability can only be achieved in the broader context; it is about the tangible rewards that parks and gardens provide for our economic, social, cultural and ecological well being.

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