

# Big and Beautiful: Landscape Led Development at Scale

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## First Let's Define Some Terms

### *Big*

The focus of this paper is on large scale development where landscape has impact and adds *commercial and aesthetic value* as well as *natural capital and health benefits*. By landscape I'm referring to anything that isn't architecture; i.e. the spaces between buildings, public squares, streets, parks, transport routes, river corridors, agricultural land and forests. In essence the public realm, green, blue and built infrastructure which supports, nourishes and connects England's villages, towns and cities. In health terminology, the neural pathways and reserves that feed, sustain and enliven the vital organs of our rural and urban centres of population.

### *Beautiful*

The debate about "sublime" vs "beautiful" landscapes has existed throughout the history of landscape design and development. Today techniques deployed by landscape architects over centuries are being redeployed to add identity, diversity, development value, health benefits, and "beauty" to large scale development.

Landscape historians trace the concept of the "English Picturesque Style" to Edmund Burke's 1757 "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful". "Picturesque" arose as a term that mediated between the opposed ideals of beauty and the sublime. This led to landscape debates about the "English Picturesque" seen as gentle, smooth, undulating terrain with watercourses and artfully placed clumps of trees. In contrast to *sublime landscapes* which were regarded as more awe inspiring; towering rock faces, deep chasms, cascading waterfalls, dramatic intense places.

Fast forward to 2019 and MHCLG's call for a *Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission* illustrates how concepts of beauty, design and style remain at the centre of our national debate about planning for future communities. There are of course multiple definitions of beauty and it will be perceived very differently by different people.

### *Landscape Led Development*

This paper explores how big beautiful landscape led projects have shaped our national identity over centuries and created an image of the "English Landscape". Flying over England it's a country that's immediately identifiable from patterns on farmland, hedges and fields. A rich fabric of natural resources, actively managed over centuries that has enabled our centres of population to develop and flourish. Yet so much of what appears as "natural beauty" is in fact systematically designed, planned, and manufactured. For example, the 1800 Enclosures Act marked the moment England's rolling countryside was demarcated according to ownerships and grazing rights. Hedge lines were planted to enclose livestock and define field boundaries and, in the process, the aerial image of the England countryside created.

Today bold landscape techniques are increasingly deployed to enhance development value, de-risk sites and recreate a “sense of place” or *genius loci*. Some examples of landscape led development to help convey what this approach to large scale planning and placemaking looks like include:

- Stourhead, Wiltshire.
- Central Park, New York City.
- Gardens by the Bay, Singapore.

## **Who are the Landscape Heroes and Heroines of the Past and Today?**

### *The Legend*

#### Lancelot Capability Brown 1715 – 1783.

Arguably the UK’s most famous Landscape Architect and the first person to use the term Placemaking. He designed over 170 landscapes and estates including; Stowe, Blenheim Palace, Warwick Castle, Stourhead and Highclere Castle. Brown’s signature style the “English Picturesque” is characterised by:

- Conveying the estate owner’s power, influence and sophistication.
- Use of the “borrowed landscape” conveying wealth and extended ownership.
- References to antiquity, art, culture, and the “Grande Tour”.
- Enhanced or “improved” nature.

### *Father of the American Landscape Movement*

#### Fredrick Law Olmstead 1822–1903

American Landscape Architect, journalist and public administrator. Best known for Central Park in NYC, Prospect Park Brooklyn, and the Emerald Necklace in Boston. Daniel Burnham said of him: “He paints with lakes and wooded slopes; with lawn and banks and forest covered hills; with mountainsides and ocean views.” Olmstead was an expert at:

- Creating nature in the city.
- Adding pastoral natural capital.
- Creating drama and spectacle in the dense urban landscape.

### *Influential Arts and Crafts Garden Designer*

#### Gertrude Jekyll 1843–1932

in partnership with Edwin Lutyens created 400 gardens in the UK, Europe, Asia, and the USA. Famous for her ability to:

- Paint with plants.
- Foreground colour, texture and sensory experience.
- Impressionistic artistic placemaking inspired by J.M.W Turner.

### *New Town Designer and Author*

#### Dame Sylvia Crowe 1901–1997

President of the Institute of Landscape Architects 1957–1959. Produced plans for post-war new towns such as Hemel Hempstead, Harlow, and Basildon. Also author of:

- *The Landscape of Power*, London: Architectural Press 1958.
- *The Landscape of Roads*, London: Architectural Press 1960.
- *Forestry in the Landscape*, London: HMSO 1966 (with Zvi Miller).
- *The Landscape of Reservoirs*, London: Association of River Authorities 1969.
- *The Pattern of Landscape*, Chichester: Packard Publishing, 1988 (with Mary Mitchell).

### *The Modernist*

#### Dan Kiley 1912–2004

Designer of more than 900 projects including the Art Institute of Chicago's South Garden, the Gateway Arch National Park in St Louis and Miller House and Garden. Best known for his:

- Geometric layout of allees, bosques, orchards, and water pools.
- Mathematical order and hierarchy in the landscape.
- Sense of calm and visual clarity, reflective of the modern movement in architecture.

### *The Urban Ecologist*

#### Kate Orff 1971

Founder of Scape Studio NYC. Contemporary practitioner best known for Oystertecture, a manifesto for restoring oyster beds to New York's Harbour aiding wave attenuation. Known for her:

- Ecologically rich and productive landscapes.
- Textured and diverse planting schemes.
- Strong use of bold colours and structure in the built landscape.
- Association with the *Green New Deal* movement in the USA.

## **How are Landscape Techniques Used Today to Add Development Value, Biodiversity and Build Communities?**

Landscape methodologies and techniques deployed by practitioners such as Capability Brown or Fredrick Law Olmstead have been refined in the last century to serve new corporate clients and new urban communities and contexts. For example:

Power, influence and sophistication in the 21st century landscape:

- **The 1980/90's Business Park:**  
Stockley Park.
- **The corporate campus:**  
Apple CA.

- **The urban business/cultural district:**  
i.e. Kings Cross London, Paradise Circus Birmingham, Canary Wharf London.
  - **World stage events:**  
i.e. London's Olympic Park, Coventry City of Culture, Venice Biennale.
- The borrowed landscape, as a tool for adding value:
- **Rugby Radio Station:**  
ecological corridors adding value for home owners and creating wildlife habitat.
  - **Sky gardens, privately owned public space:**  
amenity gardens in dense cities.
  - **Visually and physically reconnecting places:**  
High line New York City, Nene River Park Northamptonshire.
  - **The Urban Square framed by housing:**  
the value of a view, shared green space, semi-public gardens.

References to art, culture, status on the world stage:

- Chicago art park.
- Sculpture Gardens San Francisco MOMA.
- Serpentine Pavilion, Hyde Park.
- Greenwich Peninsula, English Partnerships' Art & Creative Industries Strategy.
- Creativity in the Coalfields, English Partnerships' Art & Regeneration programme.

Enhanced Nature:

- Las Vegas, landscapes of The Strip .
- Gardens by the Bay, Singapore.
- Eden Project, Cornwall.
- Disneyland, Florida.

## What Next?

Landscape architectural strategies and techniques are being deployed at a range of scales to de risk commercial sites; add value, build urban resilience, increase biodiversity, engage communities, and provide long term health benefits for citizens. Some examples of contemporary landscape led projects at a range of scales are listed below.

### Small

- Pocket parks.
- Urban farms.
- Sky gardens.
- Green roofs.
- Interior landscapes.
- Eco allotments.

## Medium

- Government backed projects. Re-working former MOD sites or disused NHS hospitals, Cane Hill, Alconbury, Hanham Hall, Lancaster Moor .
- Waterfront restoration; Liverpool Docks, Newcastle Quayside, Bristol Harbour London Docklands, New Islington Manchester.
- Reimagining the High Street; Walsall, Dudley, Coventry. WMCA Town Centre Task Force 2019.
- Reusing railway heritage; Digbeth High Line; Coal Drops Yard Kings Cross.
- Heritage projects; Talbot Mill Manchester; Royal William Yard Plymouth, Park Hill Sheffield.

## Large

- Garden Towns and Villages; Edible Ebbsfleet; Craven Hill Bicester .
- *New New Towns*: Northstowe Cambridgeshire, Charlgrove Oxfordshire.
- Urban regeneration: York Central, Mayfield Manchester.
- Post-industrial landscapes Ruhr valley, English Coalfields, Seattle Gas Works Park .
- Commonwealth Games Birmingham 2022.
- Liverpool Garden Festival Site redevelopment.
- English Green Belt re-evaluation.

## Extra Large

- London National Park City, the notion of the City as a park.
- West Midlands' National Park proposal.
- Coventry City of Culture 2021, landscape led strategies.
- Birmingham and Wolverhampton climate emergency responses.
- Progressive responses to today's climate challenges coming from landscape architects, digital innovators and the scientific community—Green New Deal.
- Re-wilding projects: English coalfields, brownfield sites, coastline stabilisation.
- Lessons from temporary cities set up and soon dismantled for religious, music or art festivals: Glastonbury, Latitude, Burning Man.

All these projects illustrate the growing influence of Landscape Architects in creating a more progressive, engaging and responsive built environment. The landscape led strategies set out in this paper underpin the activity of government funding and development agencies such as Homes England and arms-length bodies of government such as the England's 8 regional Combined Authorities. The new wave of 21st century development corporations such as Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, have placed landscape led development and the principles of healthy placemaking at the heart of their 10-year funding and development programme.

Government backed new towns such as Northstowe in Cambridgeshire have seen substantial public investment in early landscape infrastructure and engineering works. The landscape masterplan for Northstowe developed by Homes England, Arup and Tibbalds, established the development framework for 10,000 new homes, with associated schools, health centres, parks, wildlife corridors, community facilities and commercial development. Projects like Ebbsfleet, Northstowe, Houlton Rugby, Alconbury Cambridgeshire, Ancoats Manchester, Paradise Birmingham, and York Central, that all place big beautiful landscape strategies at the core of their commercial development model, are setting the direction of travel for new programmes of large-scale development across England.