

# Landscapes of the recent future - an incomplete project? What the 20th century landscape design legacy might mean for today's landscape practitioner

Chris Rankin

(Partner in rankinfraser landscape architecture, Edinburgh / Lecturer in Landscape Architecture, Edinburgh College of Art)

---

### ABSTRACT

The presentation was a reflection on the relationship of contemporary landscape practice in Scotland and the landscapes of the recent past. It was organised around two central questions:

1. Do current practitioners reflect on the original designers' intentions when proposing development of significant sites, and do they respect works from this era?
2. How will designers wish that their designs be treated in the near future?

It was firstly suggested that the landscapes of the recent future within the Scottish context can be considered as an 'incomplete project'. What is meant by the incomplete project is that the landscape was often not considered or designed as an integral component of new developments in the period in question but was rather seen as picturesque context or background into which architecture was sited. By landscape it is meant both parks and gardens as well as the urban realm of streets, squares and urban infrastructure. The consequence for the contemporary landscape practitioner is therefore two fold;

1. That the issues practitioners are required to address today are often concerned with the reconfiguration of landscapes of the recent past due to their failure to adapt or evolve, or to have been considered at all (this was later illustrated by the Garscube Landscape Link project).
2. That further exploration of the relationship of landscape and architecture is possible when considering current practice within a modernist framework (this was later illustrated by the landscape design for the Maggie's Lanarkshire).

### THE INCOMPLETE PROJECT

By the incomplete project is meant that unlike in architecture, landscape was often not considered as an integral component of buildings and developments of the post war period and remained as the un-designed background or context rather than an integral design element. This approach can be seen as following the precedent set by earlier influential works such as the Farnsworth House by Mies van der Rohe or Le Corbusier's La Tourette, both projects where landscape has importance as setting and context but is not in itself the subject of design intervention.

Scottish examples of where the approach was adopted were presented through a comparison of photographs and drawings of projects from the period with the picturesque landscape paintings of Claude Lorrain (Figure 1). The comparison illustrated the similarities between the picturesque 17thC view of the relationship of landscape and architecture with contemporary representation of modernist buildings in mature landscapes which, if designed at all, dated from a much earlier period. Thus 'Landscape with Aeneas at Delos', 1672 was juxtaposed with a photograph of Gillespie Kidd & Coia's St Brides Church, East Kilbride (Figure 2); Landscape with Apollo and the Muses, 1652 was compared to James Stirling's St Andrews University student residences and Landscape with Shepherd (Pastorale) was presented beside Robert Matthew's Stirling University campus.



Fig. 1: Landscape painting by Claude Lorrain



Fig. 2: Gillespie Kidd & Coia's CIA's St Brides Church, East Kilbride

Furthermore the drawings of Basil Spence's Mortonhall Crematorium and Newton Aycliffe housing and William Whitfield's Glasgow University (Figure 3) were analysed for their representation of landscape as decorative (picturesque) components of the view.

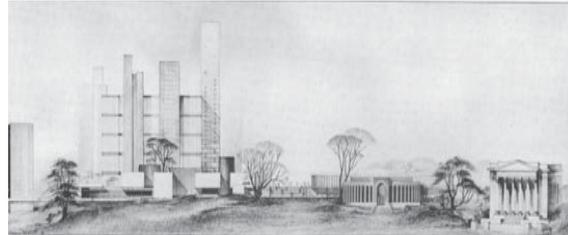


Fig. 3: William Whitfield's Glasgow University

### LEGACY

The legacy of this picturesque view of landscape (which remain undesigned) for the contemporary practitioner is the often dilapidated condition that much of the public realm of the recent past now finds itself. When commissioned to work with landscapes of the recent past, the requirement is very often to address the failings of the past and reconfigure these landscapes to meet contemporary standards. The design challenge can be defined as 'how does one respond to the particular aesthetic of the existing landscape, where are the qualities worthy of retention or conservation and where is transformation of the landscape required?'

### GARSCUBE LANDSCAPE LINK

Many of the above challenges were present in the Garscube Landscape, a crucial pedestrian underpass connection between the Forth and Clyde canal network

and Glasgow City Centre under the M8 motorway. The project brief called for the radical revitalization of the space, which had deteriorated over time since its completion as part of the wider motorway construction. The inner city section of the motorway was built between 1968 and 1972 and required large areas of demolition along its route. The result of the motorway construction was the severance of many neighbourhoods from the city centre and the consequent requirement to re-connect these areas for pedestrians. The Garscube Underpass (Figure 4) was one such connection which had degraded over time to a hostile, dark noisy and intimidating space. It did however retain a particular spatial quality, 'cathedral like' in the height of the overhead carriageways, with a monolithic concrete materiality characteristic of the period of its construction.

### RESPONSE

In addressing the obvious spatial problems of the underpass the design team of rankinfraser landscape architecture and 7N Architects deployed three main design approaches. These can be characterised as; spatial transformation, widening the pedestrian route considerably; contrast, bright surface colours and sculptural aluminium 'flowers' were introduced to counteract the dominance of concrete; transformation of materials, re-use of materials from the earlier scheme were combined with complementary materials and reconfigured into different situations.

The combined effect of the three approaches creates a necessary spatial transformation

whilst seeking to balance the introduction of consciously new elements within a reconfiguration of the existing spatial qualities.



Fig. 4: Garscube Landscape Link

### MAGGIE'S LANARKSHIRE

The proposal for a new Maggie's Cancer Care Centre at Monklands General Hospital (Figure 5) was used to illustrate how contemporary designers (Reiach and Hall Architects and rankinfraser landscape architecture) respect the legacy of landscapes of the recent past and reconfigure the elements from this period into new arrangements appropriate to today. The work of the Scottish practice Morris and Steedman at Avisfield and Carlo Scarpa at Fondazione Querini Stampalia were cited as important precedents for the proposed single storey brick building which extends a brick wall into the landscape creating a



Fig. 5: The proposal for a new Maggie's Cancer Care Centre at Monklands General Hospital.

walled garden

### THE FUTURE

Finally the question of 'How will designers wish that their designs be treated in the near future?' was addressed by reference to the landscape of the Scottish Parliament. This is a landscape of the very recent past which has already undergone a series of alterations and additions. Whilst it is inevitable that landscapes change and evolve, indeed it is the essential quality of landscape that they do, and one supposes most designers accept this, the nature of the change is worthy of consideration. The landscape of the Scottish Parliament presents an interesting case study where, unlike many post-war landscapes, the original designers, EMBT, are still practising. That the client chose not to re-appoint the original designers and instead appoint a local practice that sought to replicate the particular aesthetic of the original design raises interesting issues of authenticity and possibly a blurring of the process of change and authorship

of the landscape design. The nature of some of the changes, which resulted from both a requirement for increased security measures and enhanced health and safety requirements, would appear in certain instances to dilute the original design intent. Whilst today's designers may well view these alterations as an unfortunate (and perhaps inevitable) consequence of the demands placed on contemporary public landscapes, it was suggested that the nature of the interventions should always be carried out with a clear vision of how the process of change is revealed and how the authorship of the parts communicated for future generations.