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RESPONSIVE DESIGN

Reflecting on Robert Myers' diverse portfolio, **Darryl Moore** finds a designer with ever-evolving skills able to respond to the particular demands of site and place, whether public or private commissions



The optimism of the postwar period, fuelled by a modernist drive to create a brave new world, provided fertile grounds for the development of the British landscape architecture profession. At the centre of this ferment stood the shared studio of Sylvia Crowe and Brenda Colvin, a veritable creative nexus, responsible not only for shaping much of the national landscape, but for also germinating a notable string of talents including garden design godfather John Brookes and English Gardening School co-founder Anthony du Gard Pasley.

A more recent manifestation of another such creative hub can be evidenced in the practice of Elizabeth Banks, established in 1988, through whose doors passed no lesser luminaries than Tom Stuart-Smith, Todd Longstaffe-Gowan and Robert Myers. Banks provided a solid education in management planning, developing a good eye for detail, and understanding the importance of topography, placement and vistas. Valuable experience was drawn from important work on historic properties, the manifestations of which have been in evidence in all of the associates' work. The former two departed the practice to work together in 1998, before pursuing their well-documented subsequent careers, whilst Myers remained firmly ensconced, eventually taking over the business, and eponymously renaming it, upon Banks' retirement in 2006.

Myers has grown the portfolio to embrace a varied diet of work, divided evenly into three strands, comprised of large private gardens, institutional sites and work with developers. Such diversity calls for differing approaches to client engagement, with a high level of hand-holding in the domestic sphere, contrasting sharply with the need to respond to the immediacy of developers' demanding deadlines. Such flexibility has offered diverse opportunities to learn, enabling him now to sympathetically respond to a wide range of clients' needs, by metaphorically stepping into their shoes.

Within this framework Myers has developed a niche reputation for contemporary landscapes within

historically sensitive sites, skilfully combining the old and the new, through the employment of finessed detail and quality materials. But most importantly, running like a backbone through the practice's portfolio is an emphasis upon the Three Ps of landscape: People, Places and Problem Solving – the essential considerations involved in creating successful spaces with distinct identities and atmospheres.

Fresh encounters

Finding solutions to the vicissitudes of a site and fulfilling the brief, while creating something beautiful in the process, is key to Myers' approach. Seeing the resulting spaces being occupied and used is something that he finds both exciting and satisfying. He is a firm believer that designed landscapes have the ability to stop people in their tracks, both in everyday experiences, and in first encounters with new places.

These interests can be traced back to a degree in Geography at the University of Cambridge, followed by a tentative foray into landscape architecture. The shift of focus offered Myers an opportunity to put into practice the insights garnered through his studies, into the human and natural complexities of place. An initial interest in the environmental aspects of the discipline was soon displaced by studies with Kathryn Moore at Birmingham School of Architecture, whose unique approach to design theory inspired Myers to think beyond the supermarket car parks he was working on, in his first employed role with Landscape Partnership.

Myers' following tenure, with Banks, taught him much regarding spatial design, ground modelling, tree planting and, above all else, the importance of ensuring that a strong sense of structure and legibility are central to any scheme. Much was learnt from Banks and Stuart-Smith about planting, although it is something he ultimately considers to be secondary to structure, an ephemeral element prudently deployed, according to client and scheme. Also firmly embedded in Myers' consciousness was Banks' dictums that gardens must look good long after the initial photo shoot and that the success of any project is down to long-term maintenance, often involving ongoing client liaison.

"Myers' tenure with Banks taught him that a strong sense of structure and legibility are central to any scheme"

Wellcome Trust Genome Campus

Evidence of such enduring engagement is apparent in the first project Myers really cut his teeth on in 1993, the Wellcome Trust Genome Campus in Hinxton, →

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“Chelsea is a rarefied opportunity to concertina what would normally be a 15-week process into three weeks”

Cambridgeshire. The original 20-acre site, replete with lake and cricket pitch, has expanded over the past three decades, and Myers has overseen new developments with an eye to maintaining a sense of landscape unity between the existing historic fabric of the site and the contemporary additions.

The Hinxton project initiated what has become an ongoing relationship with Cambridge, where he is involved in a number of major projects, and also opened an office in 2013, complementing his main base in Herefordshire and increasing his team number to 10. The city's burgeoning bioscience industry has produced an increase in business and student numbers, necessitating more workspaces, accommodation and corresponding green spaces, a situation very much to Myers' advantage. Working with colleges and developers, current projects include designing parks and gardens for a 50-hectare new town development in the east of the city, and creating pocket parks in the CB1 development around the railway station, an area originally master-planned with Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners. The phased nature of the schemes will keep the practice occupied for the next 15 years, ensuring a sense of continuity and active engagement with the place.

With such extended timelines, the endgame can sometimes seem a distant prospect, something Myers tempers with the more immediate gratification of producing shows gardens at RHS Chelsea Flower Show. His eight gardens over the past decade have allowed him to flex his creative muscle on temporary designs, which both showcase and prototype ideas and materials, whilst also promoting a prominent public profile.

The show provides a rarefied opportunity to concertina what would normally be a 15-week process into an intense three-week period. Bringing with it a plethora of challenges that fuel Myers' appetite for problem-solving, it offers occasion to explore things he may not want to try in a real situation. He is adamant that there is no point in participating unless showing something new, but there is clearly a symbiotic

interaction between his show gardens and other projects. He draws analogies between sponsor and client briefs, which both set specific parameters and limits, creating a focused framework for the creative process.

Medal-winning show gardens

The brief for the Brewin Dolphin garden in 2013, which called for a native planting palette to reinforce the brand identity of Britishness, drew a parallel with his work for colleges at the University of Cambridge, where native planting is enshrined in policy. The garden for Cadogan Estates in 2003 took the interaction between the show and the wider world a step further, reconfiguring the garden in the nearby Cadogan Place Gardens. A second garden for the sponsors in 2008 took a more hypothetical route, imaging a future London garden responding to climate change, with a mixed horticultural bag of temperate and exotic plants.

The conceptual nature of three consecutive show gardens for Cancer Research allowed Myers to venture in a another direction, by responding to a one-word prompt for each design. The garden based on the idea of 'surviving' in 2011, drew upon the abilities of plants to endure harsh conditions, reflected through a stepped coastal design, transitioning through differing degrees of adversity to an area of respite at the plot's rear. As an adventurous design it didn't enamour the judges as much as some of his other gardens, but it has recently resulted in three coastal commissions for private clients. The 'impact' design in 2009 made a bold modernist statement premised around a ripple effect. Departing from his usual rectilinear form, the design featured a white curvaceous shape with an inviting sense of enclosure. The design drew freely from aspects of his Burle Marx-inspired roof garden on the Lexington Apartment building in London, a strikingly contemporary statement planted with a lush semi-tropical palette, deftly balancing architectural and natural elements.

As a veteran with six Gold medals under his belt, Myers was asked to design the Bowes-Lyon Rose Garden at RHS Garden Wisley. Opened to the public in June 2011, it is home to over 4,000 roses from 150 varieties, including hybrid musks, floribunda and species roses, as well as 5,000 herbaceous plants, including drifts of *Verbascum*, *Verbena* and *Digitalis*. Featuring a series of descending terraces and a river of roses around circular lawns, the garden structure was designed by Myers whilst the planting plan was created by RHS Wisley staff and Michael Marriott of David Austin Roses. →



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Success through competitions

A further source of work comes through invited competitions, which although time and labour intensive, can provide unprecedented opportunities. One successful submission was for the Duke of York Square, a Cadogan Estate site which provides a pocket of spatial decompression in the busy linear promenade of Kings Road, Chelsea. In contrast to the many well-known and well-heeled neighbouring private squares, the site provides a public space for multi-use activities, including farmers markets, a festive ice-skating rink, and a harbour of repose for those suffering consumer fatigue. Eschewing the obvious commercial value of developing the property strictly for retail, the landowners sought to create a cultural quarter featuring the Saatchi Gallery and a shopping precinct, to which the landscaping contributes in a significant way. Myers' design divides the hardscaped site subtly with a series of benches and discreetly integrated artworks. The simplicity of the design is deceptive, allowing it to be easily read at a casual glance and understood for its functional aspects, and also as a narrative site imbued with historic importance.

Another project won by competition is of a distinctly different nature. A design for a playscape in the former tilt yard tournament ground at Hampton Court Palace, 'The Magic Garden' is due for completion in 2015. It will feature a series of fantastical wooden follies referencing the palace architecture, and various heraldic beasts transformed into play forms to ignite young imaginations.

An unrelated sequence of commissions has also made Myers the go-to guy for ecclesiastical landscapes, with designs produced for Hereford, Exeter and Southwark Cathedrals. The latter featured an almost conceptual brief to create a planting plan based solely upon references to Shakespeare and the Bible, a novel challenge to which he suitably rose.

The diversity of projects in Myers' portfolio attests his relish for work that puts design, as a problem-solving discipline, to the fore. Many of the results may involve light-handed interventions rather than loud statements manifestly stamped upon a space, but they all imbue an underlying ethos of a well-considered response to site. The process of learning from projects as they evolve over time, and addressing unpredictable behaviour and unanticipated uses in spaces, with new design solutions, are all part of the process which drives him on. The rich mix of public and private projects his practice is engaged with, bringing the past together with the present, certainly looks set to take him well into the future. ○