

The Hidden Gardens – Green Space of the Month November 2003

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The Hidden Gardens is a visionary new landmark for Scotland, a contemplative space in the heart of Glasgow and a sanctuary, which celebrates the diversity of nature and humanity.



Background

The Hidden Gardens, Scotland's first contemporary sacred gardens, is being created by transforming a derelict site to the rear of Tramway Theatre in South Glasgow's Pollokshields.

The project is an inspirational collaboration between Scottish arts charity nva organisation, landscape architects City Design Co-operative, and an international team of artists in consultation with the diverse local communities.

nva organisation has a long history of producing powerful large scale works, interpreting natural and man-made landscapes in exciting, mind broadening new ways. They aim to enhance the image of Scotland as a country of serious artistic standing, attracting major media attention for their unique cultural activities. Their works also echo and encapsulate historical and cultural diversity in a way that is meaningful to incredibly mixed audiences.

For the last three years they have been working on a variety of environmentally sensitive areas to create cultural events which also initiate long term conservation or improvement strategies, with the support of national agencies.

The Hidden Gardens is one such project, entailing the creation of a unique public green space celebrating the diverse cultures of the city's population. Urban regeneration policies, which often involve the creation of new public spaces populated with commissioned artwork, are common to most European cities. Inaugurated during the Year of Cultural Diversity 2002, this project, to convert an ex-industrial site of 0.8 hectares, is a large, artist led environmental regeneration project.

Consultation

nva organisation has strong links with local communities and genuine efforts were made to consult with as many residents as possible.

Linda Macdonald, nva organisation's Resource Manager, told me how she used to work as Arts Development Officer in Easterhouse, the notorious 1950s built 'spillout' estate where asylum seekers – the first to be subjected to the government's dispersal policy – now try with more or less success to rub along with the indigenous residents. It was there that she learnt that it can be hard to communicate with everyone, and not everyone wants to be involved or participate in your project.

With this proviso, nva organisation set out to be truly inclusive. Their community liaison officer went out every day for 2 years, consulting with people in the immediate vicinity and further afield, before the decision was made as to what type of garden this would be. Workshops were conducted with the five primary schools and one secondary school in the area. Recognising the need to be culturally aware, visits were made to the key faith groups including the Sikh community who have just been granted planning permission to build a Gurdwara on neighbouring land. Although Pollokshields hosts the main Asian population in Glasgow, the only Hindu Temple is in the city centre, so consultations were also conducted there.

Feedback from questionnaires and interviews revealed that people wanted a safe, peaceful, beautiful garden with water in it. Asked, "How can you use this?" people responded that the garden needed to be educational, family oriented, alcohol free, and to respect a preference for gender segregated public spaces by employing a female gardener.

Design concepts

Although not every particular need may be met, many of the desired elements are apparent in the resulting landscape. It is clear from the subtlety embodied in The Hidden Gardens' many, beautiful design features that these consultations have gone far deeper than the typical, token efforts of some 'top-down' projects. Such specific attention to detail, within a holistic design, can only result from authentic conversations, the engagement of whole persons transcending cultural barriers to connect at all levels – mind, body and spirit.

To quote Angus Farquar, Creative Director of nva organisation, 'The Hidden Gardens celebrate the universal spirit of nature through horticulture and human culture, a dialogue, which at its most sublime can help us to sense the soul of the world and the joy of being part of it.' As such the gardens are seen as a respite and refuge where bigotry, racism and conflict are challenged by the use of imagination; a sanctuary dedicated to peace.



Hard landscaping and Artworks

Until recently a derelict eyesore, the plot of land behind Tramway in fact has an interesting history. Originally a tree nursery, after a period of disuse it had then been converted to a tram depot and boiler house. These layers of industrial wasteland and woodland wilderness are retained in City Design Co-operative's contemporary 'reinterpretation' of the site.

Designers Rolf Roscher and Chris Rankin state that they had aimed 'to trace back to sources of common ideas and themes' linking divergent communities through their respective horticultural traditions. Julie Brook's Broken Circle, for instance, is a micro-built environment, a circular rill exploring the relationship between water and land, which draws inspiration from both Islamic and English gardens. It is one of five distinct art installations linked to a spiritual overview encapsulated in the idea that all aspects of life are non-oppositional. This thinking gives rise to the unifying design feature of a strictly

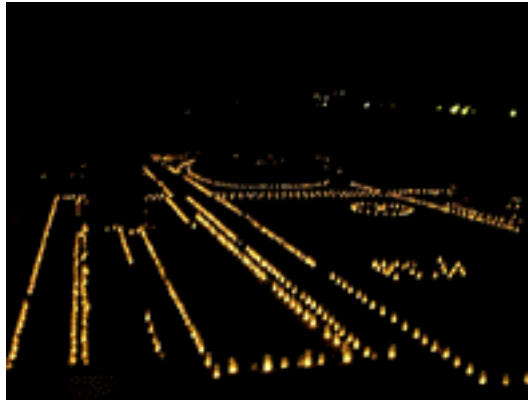
formal pattern of paths encompassing the Hidden Gardens, echoing the age-old sacred routes surrounding hills, stupas, temples, mosques and monasteries.

Sandstone way-markers engraved with Gerry Loose's circular poems repeat the numerological theme found in the five pillars of Islam, the five sacred trees of Buddhism (and the five sacred things of Wicca?). Peering into a vast aluminium kaleidoscope, I disappeared for a moment into a minute, meditative otherworld within its coloured interior. Kids apparently love this artwork, which swivels like the old witches hats from my childhood playgrounds. Perhaps the most enchanting discovery is the xyloteque – a kind of woodland library of Scottish trees, which defies description. It simply has to be experienced!

Cultural planting

The Hidden Gardens have been described as Asian / Celtic gardens. Plants such as magnolia, black bamboo and Chinese plum, chosen to express local cultures, are paired with indigenous sister species. The garden explores the idea of the movement of plants across continents. Unlike so many gardens in Britain where plants from many parts of the globe coexist, all the plants here are either Asian or 'native'. The Muslim community asked for fruiting trees such as apple and fig; Hindus wanted to see herbs – basil and tulsi.

Although the old boiler house chimney still stands tall, a key feature of the site, in many ways the central figure of the Hidden Garden is the gingko tree. This stately tree has spread its green protecting crown over the earth for 300 million years. 160 million years ago it grew worldwide, including in Scotland and the countries of origin of many of the communities of people and plants here now, so in a sense it is both native and exotic. In ancient times, "Asia's Sacred Tree" protected the temples of Japan and China from evil spirits. This living fossil seems to have defied time and changes in the environment. Its regenerative power is immense. In the 18th Century it was brought via Holland to the whole of Europe where it inspired Goethe's poetry and later appeared in the Art Nouveau decorations common on building facades around Glasgow. Now virtually extinct in the wild, this tree stands as a monument to common origins.



Participation

After two years of preparation, Hidden Garden opened to the public on the auspicious occasion of the Summer Solstice, June 2003.

nva organisation have worked with the Tourist Board to ensure the widest possible publicity for the garden. The thinking is that by bringing tourists into the area, the garden can help to give a much-needed boost to the economy of Pollokshields and to the city of Glasgow as a whole. It seems to be working. Already a great many people have visited Hidden Garden. The visitors' book contains a very cosmopolitan selection of entries of travellers from far and wide. Comments are overwhelmingly positive, describing the garden as "magic", "wonderful", "fabulous" and "funky".

Two Open Days in September 2003 were aimed more at local residents and attracted 300 people per day, generating a healthy list of potential volunteers.

Volunteer roles will include giving guided tours to visitors. There are also opportunities for local people to come and take part in gardening. Volunteers recently helped to plant six thousand bulbs on a bank bordering the site.

Training

There is a training element to the project. Nva organisation currently employs two school vocational trainees who attend courses, run by Glasgow City Council, in hard and soft landscaping. They will work for one day a week with the Hidden Garden on a six month placement, including learning about how to work with Black and minority ethnic communities. After this period the council guarantees them an interview for a modern apprenticeship. A new training scheme is also due to start in March 2004, funded by Arts in Business

Daldowie, the council's training centre, welcomes 160 recruits per year, through promotions in schools, but this was not enticing representative proportions of young people from Glasgow's ethnic communities to come forward. So nva organisation is now working with BEN's EQUAL Project and Glasgow Anti Racist Alliance to address this issue.

Events

Throughout the Autumn a series of free events are taking place at the Hidden Gardens. Every Saturday there is Storytelling about nature and all things magical; and on Sundays, music sessions blending classical, Celtic and World music, served up with hot soup. Most exciting of all is surely the Festivals of Light. This season of celebration includes lucky Rangoli painting for Diwali, a bazaar in the follow up to Eid, and Winter illuminations, rounding off with chestnuts and a carol concert in late December. The Diwali celebration has already taken place. It was a huge success, attracting about 900 people, in spite of Glasgow's first proper rain for 6 months.

The Future

One area of the Hidden Gardens site remains to be developed. Currently used by the gardener as a storage area, the idea is to create an open-air, culture-friendly kitchen complete with rammed earth bread oven. So there's lots of potential for greater community involvement in the Hidden Gardens as time goes by.