

## **The landscape of the global village**

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*What's the landscape equivalent of soy sauce, the Notting Hill Carnival and Bhangra? Are our open spaces representative of users; ethnic diversity? Clare Rishbeth questions whether the landscape profession is rising to the challenge of a multi-cultural society.*

Globalisation: bureaucracy, corporate takeovers and the glorification of the massive at the expense of the small and fragile. The profession of landscape architecture may rightly posture itself as the antithesis of this - people working with culturally-specific forms and natural patterns, striving to reflect the locally peculiar. Landscape architects often consider it important to be rooted geographically; we design to be site specific, but is this approach limited in only addressing one type of diversity - geographic diversity? That London is different from Edinburgh is important to us; climate, geology, built form and civic culture all inform different decisions to be made during the design process. Other aspects of distinctiveness, though, are less easy to define. This article approaches one of them - the issue of ethnic diversity.

Movement of people across borders and continents is no new phenomenon, but the explosion of travel, migration and international communication which has marked the last half century has irreversibly changed the citizenship and experience of cities today. If people and culture shape city form, the challenge is to enhance a local character that reflects the histories of both cities and city dwellers. Can such an acknowledgement of global influences relating to city life lead away from a stifling uniformity? On the micro-level of urban experience, walking through a cross-section of neighbourhoods in London, Manchester or Birmingham would offer a hopeful response. Local distinctiveness of place - though underpinned by a structure of building materials, scale of buildings and details of architecture - is most clearly described by the culture of its residents. People arrive, settle and produce their own culture - sari shops, Chinese supermarkets and Irish pubs are a tacit adaptation of a place for living. One neighbourhood is different from the next. The shops, eating establishments, and the events in community centres all lead the way to a complex embodiment of ethnic identities which have been transformed, transferred, fused together or set in contrast. In comparison, buildings and parts - the urban realm of the charge of environmental professionals - lag behind, seemingly deaf to this dialogue of multi-ethnic voices.

There are valid reasons why the ethnic influences that have started to enrich our media, our fashion, our food, our music, are not often found expressed in our public spaces. We value our built heritage as something special and threatened by fashionable whims. The relative permanence of city form tends to impose a requirement for longevity, a less immediate and accessible creativity than one in which products are quickly consumed and re-created. The public nature of a landscape architect's work requires a response to a democratically negotiated set of values. The inherent danger is that pleasing most of the people most of the time tends to maintain the status quo, rather than engendering change or supporting minority requirements.

People from ethnic minority groups have a range of experiences of living in Great Britain, some of which are significantly different from the majority white population. Within both these groups there are key differences with regard to feelings of national identity and of religious practice. The term 'ethnic minority groups' includes people born in the United Kingdom, but with parents of different ethnic

backgrounds as well as first generation immigrants. A report from the Runnymede Trust states that, "All communities [minority and majority] are changing and complex, with internal diversity and disagreements."<sup>1</sup> Despite the difficulty of terminology and definition, it is important to address the issues and impact of a multi-cultural society. A well intentioned 'colour-blindness' is not an adequate response if designed landscapes are to be inclusive. The situation is far from simple, with a range of social, cultural and environmental factors which need at least to be acknowledged - and many of which need to be addressed on a political as well as an individual level.

### **Ethnic diversity in park use**

Should landscape architects make different design decisions with regard to the ethnic profile of users? What difference does this make to their work? Research has, in the past, tended to focus on environmental perception, questioning whether one group of people rates views for scenic value differently from another. In terms of ethnicity, these findings are contradictory. More pertinent, though, are the studies into the concept of place attachment - the importance of places as having cultural and symbolic value beyond their appearance. For immigrants, this underlies the importance of the physical landscape as a contribution to culture shock and the challenge of feeling 'settled' in a new country. A study into a range of factors which influenced the experience of transition by people who emigrated from the former Soviet Union to Israel, found that the strongest 'homesickness' was for the parks that people had left behind.<sup>2</sup> Another study discussed with a group of Asian women their use and perception of parks in South London and drew a link between using open space and a sense of the 'homeland'; the importance of open space both as a conduit for nostalgia and as a way of recognising familiarity in the new.<sup>3</sup>

More easily defined examples relate to differences in how groups and individuals use public open space. Research in the United States of America found significant differences in the patterns of use and qualities valued in Los Angeles parks by Hispanic, African American, Chinese and white users.<sup>4</sup> For example, the Hispanics tended to use the parks in large groups, brought picnics and rated the relaxing and social aspects most highly. Chinese people, however, were significantly absent from the parks, despite the many Chinese living locally. In discussion with the few Chinese users, the researchers found a discrepancy between the existing park design and the Chinese perception of an ideal park as an exquisite, beautiful space.

To acknowledge that cultural expectations of parks can influence both the value people place on different park attributes and patterns of preferred use is of vital importance to landscape architects. This may be a case of addressing specific barriers to full use and enjoyment of urban open space, or taking positive steps to allow multi-cultural influences to break into public spaces!

In recent years a number of programmes have addressed the issues of barriers to use of the countryside and of environmental activities in the UK by ethnic minority groups. A number of factors are cited, among them:

- low socio-economic factors, particularly the need to work long hours and low car ownership;
- negative experience of the British weather. This may seem a facile statement, but climate underpins the pattern of outdoor activities:
- a lack of information and awareness about the countryside;
- worries about getting lost and coming into contact with animals.

Black Environmental Network (BEN) has been instrumental in developing programmes in partnership with bodies such as the National Parks and the Youth Hostel Association to provide positive experiences of outdoor activities in the countryside.<sup>5</sup>

Anecdotal evidence seems to be variable regarding the use of urban parks by ethnic minority groups, and there has been no comprehensive study to help identify key issues. Some parks do attract a good range of users across ethnic groups, though the pattern and time of use may vary between these. Studies into issues of fear in urban settings point to higher levels of fear being expressed by ethnic minority groups, especially by women. Fear of racial attack or harassment cause people to modify their behaviour and may limit park use. For Muslims, there is also a need to avoid contact with dogs, a practical disincentive to using many parks. Wider themes regarding territory and sense of ownership - of articulating inclusion rather than taking it for granted - must also be regarded as important.

### **Design and management for a multi-cultural society**

With regard to design style and activity provision, what aspects of today's parks and urban spaces need to evolve to better reflect the needs and aspirations of a multi-cultural society? The most obvious way by which landscape architects may try and be 'multi-cultural' is by the use of symbols in the landscape. Designers can create landscapes or landscape elements that identify a particular culture in a form that is open to a single interpretation. As a society, people are very adept at recognising a shape or pattern as representative of a culture or country, so we easily identify a Chinese pagoda, a mogul arch or a national flag. The most extreme form of this is epitomised by the theme park, which plays a facile game of 'spot the stereotype'. Creation of cultural landscapes in this way often exaggerates in order to communicate difference.

One urban example are Chinatowns - streets which are a collection of pagoda, ceremonial arches, dragon litter bins and pagoda telephone boxes. They are not realistic - streets are not actually like those in China - but a combination of effects signals 'China'. In parks and community gardens influences are often interpreted by artists, using mosaics, sculptures or patterns, which can be read as an emblem of a multi-cultural society, or reflect a nationality which is of particular significance. Designs which seek to recreate a traditional garden - for example Mogul or Japanese - also draw on our recognition of symbolic 'types', rather than reflect everyday landscapes in the respective countries.

Positive aspects of this approach are the ease of recognition and the clear message to members of the ethnic community concerned that they are acknowledged and welcome in the area. Skilled community artists or landscape architects can involve local people and draw on their interpretation of the forms and symbols which are important to them. Interventions can be made on a range of scales such as Victoria Park in Bradford - a mogul garden - or the plaques depicting different countries in pavement mosaics around Cardiff Arms Park Stadium, Wales. The difference between symbols which are 'self-produced' by ethnic groups or those which are produced by outsiders is a question relevant to the wider debate on the link between participation and successful design.

However, use of symbols and the construction of visual 'identities' is potentially problematic because of the literal nature of the cultural interpretation. They can re-enforce stereotypes and provide a caricature of a complex identity. Attention is focused on the superficial likeness of objects which can jar both with the original culture and local distinctiveness. Use of symbols can provoke strong emotional responses, and though this may increase a feeling of inclusion for some, other ethnic

groups may feel excluded or marginalised (especially if there has been a tense history between the groups). Trying to articulate a multi-cultural situation (rather than one particular influence) requires particular skill to avoid a visually chaotic result.

### **Planting character**

It is important not to limit our response to a multi-cultural society to the level of theme park design, and there are more subtle approaches that may effectively be used in landscape design and management. One is that of reflecting landscape character through planting - capturing an essence of a world region through selected plants. This is achieved most dramatically in the Eden Project, Cornwall and because a variety of non-native plants grow happily in Britain, multi-million pound biomes are not a necessity for a smaller scale effect. Plants can capture the character, scent and touch of another land, can tune into nostalgia and recognition as well as being enjoyable irrespective of these things. Good interpretation can have an educational importance, recognising that there is much in our soft landscape that is 'ethnically diverse'. Black Environmental Network has carried out projects with schools to create multi-cultural gardens through planting, and has compiled a list of suitable plants.

Recognising the diversity of park use could also be thought through with reference to the leisure patterns of ethnic minority groups. In many cities, successful allotment projects have been particularly set up for the use of different ethnic groups. As well as having nutritional and health benefits, food growing can echo use of open space in the home country and provide a stake of ownership in the new environment. Should sports facilities reflect national interests (cricket or football, tai-chi or rambling)? If many locals prefer to use parks in large groups eating picnics this should be reflected in the design of the space and seating provision Holding large and noisy multi-cultural music events in parks, and ensuring a range of food from different countries is available in park cafés, have both proved to be popular park management measures to attract more park use among ethnic minority groups. It is important to remember that there is no simple pattern of acculturation by ethnic groups, and the strength of this approach is that it can be inclusive and flexible.

Ethnic diversity is not evident in the landscape professions. British students from ethnic minority groups are under-represented in landscape courses. No figures are available for the profession as a whole, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the vast majority of British practitioners are also white, though individual practices may be exceptions to this.

However, it is important that landscapes are designed and managed for a multi-cultural society. Compared to the medical, law and education sectors, the debate regarding inclusiveness of the landscape profession and its work is happily less prone to political flagwaving. That does not diminish its importance. The ethnic diversity of British citizens should be an opportunity for exciting new approaches which lead to stimulating and unusual public environments. If we dismiss it as tokenism, we may miss the chance to engage and contribute to an invigorating discussion regarding multi-cultural urban renewal.

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5. Black Environment Network Website [www.ben-network.org.uk](http://www.ben-network.org.uk)

### **Recommended case studies and visits**

- Chumleigh Multicultural Gardens, Burgess Park, London. A series of small mini-gardens in Mediterranean, Chinese, Islamic styles among others - a mixture of symbolic and planting references.
- Victoria Park, Bradford. A grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund was used to create a recreation of a mogul garden within the structure of a Victorian park.
- RootsCultureFest, Northamptonshire. An annual multi-cultural festival which has been developed as a means of encouraging ethnic minority groups to use Northampton's Country Parks. Details from Northamptonshire Countryside Services.
- Green Connection, Groundwork Greater Nottingham, Nottingham. An initiative focused on supporting local ethnic communities to be involved in a range of practical environmental projects. Projects include Khlasa Wood, involving the Sikh community in planting woodland and creating culture-related trails and recreational areas.
- Chelsea Physic Gardens, London. Includes a Garden of World Medicine which promotes the study of the botany of different ethnic groups and indigenous peoples. Their educational department has supported ethnic community groups in local planting projects, for example assisting a Moroccan group to access medicinal plants which the community were able to use for cosmetic and medicinal purposes.

Note: Projects involving Chumleigh Multicultural Gardens, Khlasa Wood, and Chelsea Physic Gardens are featured in the Green Spaces feature of the BEN website under the section Participation.

[www.ben-network.org.uk](http://www.ben-network.org.uk)