New frontiers
The emergence of landscape architecture in Iran

Taking the weight off
Does public seating work?

Schwartz v Alsop
Debating the value of landscape

NORTHALA FIELDS
A new model for the development of sustainable public spaces
The heartland of Northala Fields marks a new gateway to west London. They are landmarks for the largest new park in the city for a century and symbols of a momentous struggle that took place for the scheme ever to become a reality. As well as providing a valuable new amenity for residents in nearby Northolt and Ealing, Northala Fields represents proof of an ecologically sound, financially robust model for the creation of a major new green space.

Lead designer ForBM Associates (formerly AECArchitects) has seen the project through an eight-year journey, working in a project team that also included EDEN, ecologist Peter Neal and design and build support from LDA Design. During that period, ForBM has been cast variously as designer, mediator, agitator and saviour, but has emerged vindicated for its passion and persistence.

Northala Fields lies at the heart of the Northolt and Greenford Countryside Park, a network of open spaces covering 100ha, from Northolt village in the north to Ruislip Road in the south and flanked by the busy A40. The new park occupies an 8.5ha plot that was first acquired by Ealing Borough in 1987 from Kensington and Chelsea, which had previously used it for sports pitches for schools. The site lay dormant until 2009, when Ealing launched a competition for ideas for uses for the land, which had started to attract anti-social behaviour and was prone to flooding, a threat to nearby housing. Rob Cairns, who at the time was Ealing’s project manager, said the brief concentrated on the practical requirements for incorporating the necessary earth filling, using water, offering flood defences and featuring an ecological focus. There was a general feeling that there should be an artistic approach to the earth forming, but the direction was not specified in terms of competition entrants. Cairns says that the entry led by ForBM was the “obvious choice”: “They responded best to the brief, incorporating all of the elements in a meaningful way.”

Black and white photography dating back to the 1960s provided the spark of inspiration for ForBM partner Peter Fink. One particular shot of a naked woman had particular resonance for Fink, who was struck by “the emotive connection between the female form and landscape.”

ForBM’s proposals for Northala Fields represented a dramatic move away from the conventional British notion of parks, both in design and implementation. The dominant forms are four conical mounds of heights of 15m, 20m, 25m and 30m that screen the border of the site. They are both playful and functional, acting as an extremely efficient noise screen from the adjacent A40. For Fink, the forms have a very clear effect on visitors. “We were trying to find a resolution that doesn’t overwhelm the urban rim, I was fascinated about creating a landscape in a city on a scale that doesn’t exist. I had this...”
"I was fascinated about creating a landscape in a city on a scale that doesn’t exist."

Idea of propelling people into movement and that is what happens here – they get up out of the mounds and move around. It’s big enough to have that effect.

The smaller mounds are turf-covered and planted with wildflowers to add seasonal vibrance, while the largest mound features seating and a spiral path that leads to the peak. From there, the view back across the city makes Canary Wharf visible, creating an unprecedented link between east and west. Looking away from the city, the Chilterns are visible on a clear day. To the delight of the designers, the mounds are already being absorbed into the social and cultural functions of the surrounding community. Some uses are unsurprising – they are a wonderful spot for sledging during snow. But others have been totally unexpected – on certain holy days, hundreds of Hindus come to the eastern mound to pray at sunrise.

There are further instances that reinforce the powerful effect of landscape on emotion and behaviour, says Pink. "The local school has autistic children, who are often very sensitive to open space. But for some reason, they really took to this mound, and when they get disturbed or upset, they bring them here and walk round the path. The kids recently designed their uniforms and have included the mound and path on the badge."

The build-up of the mounds was critical to unlocking the financial and ecological benefits of the project. It is entirely self-financing by using inert waste from building projects around the South East. The construction of the mounds ultimately used 100,000m³ of imported material, much of it from some of the region’s best-known projects. As we walk up the largest mound, Pink reveals that beneath our feet is the recycled rubble from Wembley Stadium’s legendary twin towers and material displaced for Terminal 5 at Heathrow. It would eventually take about 65,000 lorry loads of waste to create the park, and it is estimated that if the clean construction spoil was not utilised here, then 13,000 journeys of several hundred miles to tippling sites would have been necessary, in addition to the embodied energy used for the passive processing of the waste material.

The earth forms have been delivered almost as they were originally conceived, but it is the other aspects of the original concept that have been compromised. In developing the plans and accompanying funding model, FoRM developed two options of varying degree of ambition. Northala Fields could develop as either a financially neutral project – solely funded by £6m of soil generated income, delivering a park with a functioning urban fishery and a limited range of local sport, art and play facilities; or an inspirational project – a sustainable exemplar 21st-century park with a wide range of facilities supported by a long-term endowment fund for maintenance and the provision of free inclusive..."
eductional, arts and sports programmes. To meet these objectives, FollM proposed a visitor centre housing educational facilities, a café, a park ranger office and toilets. This would be set in a fully wireless internet-connected park, with an environmental education programme, based on open-air accessibility through mobile phones and virtual databases designed to bring the connections between people and their local, regional and global environment.

There would also be a programme of vocational training to deliver skills required to maintain and manage this type of park; innovative play facilities exploring water; a central core designed as a demonstration landscape environment exploring the value and meaning of water through play, education and water preservation-focused design; and a new pediment and cycle bridge.

The regrettable loss of this more ambitious option certainly cannot be blamed on the designer, who from the outset had embarked on an extensive period of public research and consultations to create passionate support and establish trust among the politicians.

As happens too often on major landscape schemes, the budget fell foul of political upheaval as, in 2006, the incoming Conservative administration in Failing reappropriated a significant part of the previously ring-fenced funding and downsized the park.

“The cultural services people who were put in charge of the park took a look at the accounts for this project, saw the money sitting there waiting for the work to continue and said they would take the money for other uses and downgrade this project — do the minimum here,” says Fink. “But the public was so committed to it that they had a demonstration of 1,000 people in front of the town hall, which almost never happens.

At this point, feeling there was no other option, FollM spoke out publicly against the council and was fired from the project. A media row ensued, in which the public champions of the scheme had their say.“The public’s understanding of the issues was so clear that the people could argue on behalf of the project almost as if they were landscape architects,” says Fink.

Ultimately, the council relented and the public had the park it wanted, albeit the less ambitious version first proposed. Fink is now philosophical about the negative response of the council, which has subsequently brought him back on board. “People at the council genuinely didn’t understand what was happening in this project, but they have now changed their views,” he says.

There is still hope that a second phase can deliver some of those extra features, but even now what has been delivered is a huge asset for the area. While the earth mounds dominate visually, further design features add to the range of activities possible in the park. Fishing is a major new recreation provision not only for the

The professional’s view

Phil Newton
(Vice President, FollM Landscape Architects, London)

Northala Fields is a work of genius that merits more than a factual analysis. The project is religious in character and an essential monument in scale, very 21st century in its construction and yet virtually unknown. Visiting the park is an unforgettable experience.

Like some great jokes, some of the best ideas are obvious in hindsight. Northala Fields is built from a single, genius idea of funding and building a park by charging for tipping construction waste on a flat site. No others in the UK have been built in such a daring, single-minded and sustainable way (we can exclude the greening of former waste tips, which has a different motive.)

In projects that claim to be ‘sustainable’, there is often a lot of fluff to get through, but Northala’s claim is indisputable. While the park is the sustainable economically, generating 100 per cent of its own capital costs including a small surplus and an endowment fund for maintenance, the park is also sustainable environmentally, a dump for 65,000 tons of construction waste. The design team’s fastidious commitment to building a zero-carbon park is in evidence everywhere. Seats and retaining walls are made from baskets of waste rubble, play equipment from timber logs not new steel, paths are made from rubber, even the signage in recycled plastic, not softwood.

If you’ve never heard of Northala Fields, you would be forgiven for missing the five years of its development, unless you travelled along the A40 wondering what the line of four growing hills was going to be. There was very little PR material for the project, a real missed opportunity. FollM Associates is busy promoting the next phase of the park’s development, a £2m visitor centre that sensitivity was supposed to have been
The new idea offers an interesting resource and will soon be tested for fishing. New play equipment has been provided for the adjacent children. Opposite page: the scale of the earth mound is designed to create a movement of people into view.

Northala Fields

1. A new network of lakes and channels provides fishing, support sites and enhance flood risk.
2. New play planting will ultimately develop into avenues to shelter the main of the park.

The hills also have an eerie, dulling effect on the traffic noise of the A40, the open space behind them is tranquil and restful with lakes, play areas and wildlife. The park layout is logical and offers a comfortable mix of recreation, celebration, art, biodiversity, cultivation and innovative environmental education. Personally, I struggle with the raw aesthetic of pure geometry in landscape design; to me, it sometimes appears unnatural and therefore unremarkable or unrefined. I believe a little less gone and a few more feministic curves and carefully placed tree groups would have helped the landscape to resonate with the deep-rooted appeal of the maternal English landscape, without diluting the esoteric impact of the geometry.

Concur with the app, the delivery of this ‘big idea’ was often entrusted to a single artist creator – an equivalent for Northala must have been Brunel or Hepworth. Today, we have evolved through political correctness and risk avarice [many would disagree], and use small armies to guide our strokes of genius. The construction is usually the time when the original concept gets watered down, committees are formed to reexamine the thing, practical and cost issues lead to compromises, and so on ad nauseam.

It is common for artists and designers to have great ideas, we all do during our careers, but then we struggle to carry it off, especially for public sector clients. As the artist, you must not spend the past 13 years pushing park projects solely for the public sector. I am full of admiration for the tenacity of the Northala Fields team, not only in delivering the design exactly but also for this project.
as originally drawn, but in spending three years (on low fees) to drive the concept forward through local opposition. When the client, Ealing Borough Council, lost faith during a change of administration, and at one point nearly slapped off the Eden capital, it seemed Ealing's new leaders were less keen to shout about the success of their predecessor's grand proj ect, so Fink's design team worked hard to show Ealing the strength of local support and get it back on track.

Children in the West grow up today fearing for the Earth, not helped by the stream of media rhetoric about global disaster. To children or passengers among the relentless traffic of the A40, there can be no stronger message than that of Northala Fields, about the magic of building responsibly, with this planet in mind, hand-on-heart.

Northala Fields now needs to prove it is sustainable socially, adding a visitor centre that will allow it to tell the story of the park's development and wildlife. If the £12m funding can be raised, the centre will spread the word about the importance of building responsibly. As I expected, Fink has some 100 ideas for how this might be done in 21st century ways. Good luck to him.

PROJECT PROFILE
NORTHALA FIELDS

Lead designers: FinkM Architecture Ltd
(formerly Art2Architecture Ltd)

Ecology: Peter Neal

Engineering: Technik Ltd and Peter Brett Associates

Landscape design: FinkM Architecture Ltd and FoRM Associates Ltd

Project management: GRAHAM

Design and build team: C&J Pye (main contractor) and CRBwith (landscape contractor) with LDA Design

1 This scale of the largest mound has created unobstructed views in all directions

2 Nighttime brings a changing small street-lit scene inside nearby street lights

existing watercourse lying to the south of the park site.

wherever possible, materials utilised in the landscape details are sourced from re- used or recycled materials. Crushed concrete, mainly produced on site from imported demolition material, is used extensively for gabion retaining walls and structural fill, sub-base and wearing course material for most paths. Timber for seats and bins is from reclaimed railway sleepers; path edging and fishing platforms are constructed from recycled plastic paving materials are reclaimed granite cobble, kerbs, or new materials constructed with a high proportion of recycled material.

Despite its troubled birth, Northala Fields now stands as a fine example of what can be achieved when passionate designers, public support and political will coincide to attempt projects on a grand scale. For Fink, it was a long but rewarding process. "When we won the competition, everyone said you can't build that on people's doorsteps," he says. "At that point we went into a two-year consultation with the public. We were not paid for that, but we slowly saw people buy into it until they became the project's greatest supporters."

Rob Cairns, who still maintains a project management role, despite leaving Fink's, believes Northala Fields offers valuable lessons for other authorities. "As a template for creating public space, it is something everyone should look at."