Planting design in urban public areas – The Good, the Bad and the Indifferent

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In 1999, the author presented the Ian Galloway Memorial Lecture to the Wellington Branch of the RNZIH entitled "Planting Design in Urban Public Areas – The Good, the Bad and the Indifferent". This article is a revision and summary of the main points covered in the lecture.

The religion of Municipal Horticulture

Few issues distinguish landscape architects from parks and reserves horticulturists more dramatically than our respective attitudes to plant material, and, in particular, our use of plant material in urban public spaces. In the nearly thirty years since I graduated as a landscape architect from (then) Lincoln College, I have been surprised at how little change we have seen to the basic tenets of what Professor Kevin O'Connor used to refer to as "the religion of Municipal Horticulture".

This approach, demonstrated so ubiquitously throughout New Zealand, relies heavily on the use of colourful beds of annuals and herbaceous perennials such as marigolds, begonias, salvias, primulas, impatiens, petunias and so on, which are lovingly propagated, transplanted, tended and eventually replaced. Recent variations on the theme expose a new cast of bedding roses, day lilies, succulents and ornamental grasses enjoying the limelight but essentially singing the same song. Overwhelmingly, the emphasis is on colour, colour and more colour.

Ninety-seven per cent of respondents can't be wrong, can they?

One might well ask, "What is so wrong with that?" Time after time, surveys of public satisfaction with the performance of municipal departments provide encouragement to parks and reserves managers, who see sometimes as much as 97% support amongst those surveyed for the philosophy and performance of their staff. Letters to the newspaper praising the prettiness and cheerfulness of our public open spaces and comments from the "average person in the street" serve to firm even more the attitude that "If the public says they like it, we'll keep giving it to them".

To answer the question one needs to look critically, from a design perspective, at the elements of the municipal horticulture approach, and also put forward credible alternatives that might be expected to achieve similar levels of popular public support. It is also important to point out that the issue is not solely about the use of colour as a design element per se: colour remains an important ingredient in any planting design palate. The issue is more about the reliance on colour used as an element at the expense of other equally valid considerations.

Traditional planting schemes

Traditional planting schemes have always been labour intensive, requiring propagation, planting, regular weeding and eventual replacement within a relatively short time span. In addition, planting beds require nourishment and regular irrigation in drought-prone areas for the plants to look their best. The replacement programme carries with it the inevitability of times when beds are in their non-flowering phase.

The colour-oriented basis to the design ignores the other plant characteristics of form, texture, scale and, above all, context that other approaches do offer. Furthermore, many traditional planting schemes lack a sense of integrity either to the composition of planting areas within

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a public space, or the relationship of planting to surrounding hard landscape elements. How often, for example, do we see the pinks of impatiens or begonias clashing vividly with their terracotta paved or brick surrounds.

Spatial context, scale, climate and opportunities for historical, cultural or regional expression tend to be completely overlooked in the pursuit of giving the public more of what it believes is good for it!

The development of an appropriate design philosophy

Underpinning all good landscape design is the development of what Charlie Challenger, founding Head of the Landscape Architecture Section at Lincoln College, used to call "an appropriate design philosophy". Design should be driven less by what has always happened in the past, or what public expectations might be, and more about what is right for a particular site.

Soil type, climate, aspect, the size of the space, the scale of the elements that form the space, the nature of any existing vegetation, the type and number of users, the presence or otherwise of overhead or underground services, and so on, all need to be considered carefully before conclusions are reached, even in a conceptual form as to what sort of planting arrangement would best fit the site.

The placement of planting areas themselves is part of that site analysis and design process. Too often one sees sadly misplaced planting beds providing "a splash of colour" where other options such as retaining the integrity of a grassy bank, a tree or a paved surface would have been infinitely more appropriate.

Recent trends

There are some signs that municipal authorities are beginning to break out of their planting design mould. This may be more a result of the increasing influence of landscape architects and urban designers giving downtown areas "makeovers", with greater emphasis on hard landscape combined with trees and prostrate perennials, than an indication of any fundamental shift in the mindset. It may also reflect the increasingly popular trend internationally in favour of a bolder, more romantic design style featuring broader sweeps of more permanent, though still colourful, plant compositions. It may also be a result of greater interaction between municipal departments, allowing, for example, the consideration of planting possibilities at the same time as the layout of a street or the placement of underground services rather than being the last step in the chain.

Regional distinctiveness

One consequence of the old adherence to the municipal horticulture dogma was the sameness of our city landscapes throughout New Zealand, regardless of the wide range of climates, soils and population bases in various centres. The gardens of Invercargill, Blenheim, Palmerston North and Whangarei all had a similar look to them as if there were a requirement to use the same ingredients and recipe. Thankfully, this has begun to change as parks staff and landscape architects employed by territorial authorities are being given the licence to develop their own regionally distinctive landscapes.

How much further this new, more creative approach develops is largely in the hands of the personnel involved. Trendsetters like Grant Porteous (former Parks Manager in New Plymouth) need to be congratulated and encouraged for their innovativeness and confidence in trying new approaches, and in employing the appropriate resources to get things done.

Planting associations such as those proposed by Di Lucas for Christchurch, based on historical layers of former vegetative cover also offer a chance to re-establish the landscapes of old, or at least modern equivalents based on what was there before.

I was interested to observe in the urban areas of Japan the almost total reliance on indigenous plant material: azaleas, camellias, maples, cherries, witch hazels and zelkovas were all put to good use in creating a distinctively Japanese landscape. On the other hand, the Japanese tendency to either over-maintain their plant material (as in the fastidiously clipped azalea beds of the Imperial Palace gardens), or to leave their plants completely to their own devices (as in so many of their roadside plantings) leaves a little to be desired, at least to Western perceptions.

Other planting design considerations

I have already touched on the desirability of an integrated approach to urban design and the planting that is part of that. Putting in place systems and personnel with the skills, vision and determination to allow those systems to be implemented to achieve optimum outcomes is the key.

Scale is still the most frequently misunderstood principle of planting design. I still see numerous examples of pretty beds of petunias cringing self-consciously at the base of multi-storey buildings. This can be overcome, to some extent, by

broadening the horizontal base of the planting to compensate for the lack of height.

Integrity of plant material, both within a planting composition and in relation to the prevailing site conditions and associated structures is also widely misunderstood. Mixes of plants from widely disparate parts of the world is inevitably a recipe for visual disharmony. Having said that, a planting design with a strong unifying theme and structure can serve as a basis for a supporting cast with variations in colour and texture.

Simplicity is, as always, a virtue in planting design. Historically, our horticultural credibility has been strengthened by our ability to grow unusual plants or a wide variety of plants. The search is always on for a newer, more fabulous version of the more commonplace varieties. This is not a bad thing in itself, except when it expresses itself in the public domain as a hotchpotch of individuals all competing for the viewer's attention. How often do we see planting beds on all four corners of an intersection, for example, planted up with four completely different types of plant with no thought given to the bigger picture.

Maintenance of public planting areas also needs to be considered in the selection of plant material. There is a terrific palate of native plant material that is now beginning to be exploited in public areas to good effect: plants such as pimelea, pratia, many of the coprosmas, scleranthus, and some of the hebes to name a few (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A choice from the palate of native plant material used to good effect in a very public, private area. Colin and Pat Stuart's front garden. Photo courtesy of Alan Titchener.

Conclusion

I have presented a case for a move away from our historical love affair with the gardenesque approach of the British-derived religion of Municipal Horticulture. What I am saying is not particularly new. That it still needs to be said is perhaps a measure of the continuing popularity of the traditional colour-dominated style and an unwillingness of those in positions of responsibility to make change.

Examples of a more creative, integrated, regionally distinctive approach to planting design are beginning to appear. For more of this sort of development to happen, people in positions of responsibility will need to have the confidence to pursue new, more appropriate ways of dressing our towns and cities.

More and more I am coming to realise that it is by using our indigenous plant material that we will achieve that level of appropriateness that is so apparent in a place such as Japan, which hasn't experienced the overlay of an imported mindset, and public expectation born of repetition and a lack of effective alternatives.

Other elements and principles of good design, such as an understanding of scale, context, site constraints and opportunities, simplicity and integrity all need to be considered carefully in our planting designs.

In the end, our enjoyment of our public urban areas is going to depend on how well we integrate all these factors together in firstly, creating opportunities to soften our built environments, and secondly, achieving satisfying and memorable results.

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