

Is enough being done to preserve the legacy of contemporary garden design?

Will the work of today's garden designers be around for tomorrow's to appreciate and learn from?



Keep a hard copy of material

Campaigner: David Lambert is a director of the Parks Agency, which campaigns for better appreciation of parks and gardens

Comment: The period since the mid-90s is likely to prove bleak territory for future historians: electronic communication is wiping out their manuscript sources. The bike-courier is now one of London's lost trades. That disappearance is symptomatic of the disappearance of paper drawings, now zipped across the world as pdfs, and that in turn is part of a wider disappearance of the stuff of history — letters, accounts books, project folders, sketches, diaries. It is potentially an archival meltdown as we all turn to work not with pen and paper but with a screen and mouse.

For many years, there have been on-off discussions about a central archive of garden and landscape design, and if history teaches us anything it is that such ambitious schemes rarely come to fruition. But it is great news that the Landscape Institute has appointed an archivist and is now actively soliciting at least drawings from professionals (www.landscapeinstitute.org). It has already archived a treasure-trove of modern landscape and garden designs. But even they may not be able to house the full range of archival material, and the bet for a substantial office archive may still be the county

record office — as with solicitors' papers over the last two centuries, or with the archive of Thomas Mawson's practice at the Cumbria Record Office.

The temptation to leave photos on a hard-drive rather than print them off is great, but it should be a regular discipline to keep a hard-copy version of a project's photographic record. Likewise of significant documents, correspondence and drawings. The truth is that unless the practitioner keeps an eye on posterity no one else will. It is salutary to remember how important contemporary images and descriptions of now-historic gardens are to those looking back at them, and newspapers and journals also have a duty to preserve at least a fraction of the digital data that passes through their hands and — if not preserved on hard copy — away into the ether.

As for gardens themselves, the prospect of trying to prevent change in a contemporary garden by a famous designer other than voluntarily is a nightmare, and they will have to take their chances for at least the 30 years until they can be considered for registering by English Heritage.

"It is potentially an archival meltdown"
David Lambert



Stop being so modest!

Museum director: Christopher Woodward is director of the Museum of Garden History, London

Comment: The problem of preservation is a lot to do with the attitude of the profession to itself. The Landscape Institute has an excellent archive, with beautiful drawings by figures such as Sylvia Crowe and Geoffrey Jellicoe. But how many readers have been?

I am a newcomer to contemporary garden design, having worked much more in art and architecture. The comparison is startling. The artist is studied in retrospective exhibitions in galleries and museums. The architect will be knighted, his buildings listed in his lifetime, and his papers deposited with the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA). But garden designers?

I rang Penelope Hobhouse to ask what she will do with her papers. "I'm thinking about burning them," she said. "What if someone wants to write a book about your work?" "No will want to," she replied — but they will.

Modesty is attractive, but not necessarily good for posterity. Only four gardens created since the

1960s have been placed on the English Heritage Register of what should be preserved. However, more than 500 buildings from the same period have been listed. It is not just the ephemerality of the medium, it is because the profession does not lobby the authorities like architects do.

It is also not very good at analysing itself. Let's say that there is an institution which preserves the papers of significant contemporary designers. Who decides who will be considered important in 50 years' time? At present, no one. The profession has to start talking about that too.

As a museum we can contribute a little: in particular, we hope to become a venue for retrospective exhibitions of living designers. The public, I believe, wants to see more than glossy photographs of gardens. They want designers to share their creative lives with us, in the way that artists and writers do. They want to see their sketches, their travel diaries and snapshots. And they want garden designers to be a little less modest.

"Modesty is attractive, but not necessarily good for posterity"
Christopher Woodward



Time to establish an archive

Cultural historian: Sir Roy Strong is a cultural historian, author, landscape designer and owner of The Laskett, Herefordshire

Comment: I have written more than once over the last three decades on the absence in this country of any major repository or archive on this country's gardens. That is true and we should hang our heads in shame that the papers of our most important 20th-century garden designers are now abroad. It seems that no one cares, but they should.

So far no great national institution has set out to remedy that deficiency by laying claim to the territory. It is not too late for that to happen, for much is surely to be had for the asking. The problems inevitably centre on practicalities in terms of physical space and staff resources. Ideally, such a venture should come under the aegis of the Royal Horticultural Society and be run in tandem with the Lindley Library. What a splendid thing that would be, the literature and the documents together under one roof. But the likelihood of that occurring is extremely remote.

By documents I don't only mean the papers of the major designers but also the negatives of the most important garden photographers. The second half of the 20th century saw an unparalleled flowering of garden photography. Never before has there been so much stunning visual coverage. The cost of all this is miniscule when set against a garden industry which is a multi-billion pound operation but what hope they would step forward?

When it comes to the preservation of actual gardens from the late 20th century I feel that it would be difficult to move beyond a compiled list of those that are universally regarded as of great importance. It is one thing, however, to list a garden and quite another to guarantee its survival. I don't see any shift beyond the somewhat piecemeal, hand-to-mouth approach which pertains at present. But the listing would at least establish some icons to be fought for when the time came.

"It is one thing to list a garden and quite another to guarantee its survival"
Sir Roy Strong