



# Designing communal spaces

The brief to make space social is now common in all landscape design disciplines, from smaller gardens to street planning, but what makes a communal space work? asks **Jo Thompson**.

In my previous article (*GP October issue*), I used the Piazza del Campo in Siena as an example of a great outdoor public space. Why do spaces such as this one work, and what can we take from them to apply to the development of our own public or communal spaces, green or otherwise?

At this year's Palmstead Soft Landscaping workshop, Andrew Wilson spoke on the future of garden design. He outlined how, as his client base gets younger in relation to his career as a designer, the client brief is changing from a request for a place defined by plants to a request for an outdoor, multi-functioning space. He is being asked to design landscapes rather than gardens.

What we are now starting to demand of squares and parks is following the same pattern. They are gradually beginning to fulfil the same function: provision of a communal space. Green communal spaces are heavily defended, and rightly so, but we now need to start thinking about getting each square metre to work for its keep. This becomes trickier in parks where people often go simply for peace, tranquility and to be nearer nature as in the Olmsted vision; how do we successfully combine the needs of all in any new design?

Alternatives to the standard public park are appearing; Nigel Dunnett's Rain Garden at the London Wetland Centre, as well as being an 'aspirational' space, offers very real solutions for people looking for ideas that can be implemented in their own outdoor areas.

The Vauxhall Sky Gardens will provide the London Borough of Lambeth with 2500 square metres of communal space which can be shared by surrounding apartments. They will provide somewhere to meet and avoid the

anonymity inherent in large residential blocks. There are seating areas, larger areas for 'social passing trade', and for nine months of the year there is enough space to grow a weekly salad box for each household.

The Sky Gardens are an urban model of an integrated environmental-social sustainability, a concept now key to gaining any residential approval in densely-populated urban areas. Amin Taha Architects have provided here a series of significant garden spaces: similar to the Georgian and Victorian garden squares, the residents will, as a community, use these as their shared amenity.

I feel relieved when I see spaces such as these being designed and approved by local authorities: Richard Louv, in his *Last Child in the Woods*, describes a world in which we are detached from the source of food, where there is an ambivalent relationship between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom, in which new suburbs constantly shrink open space. He writes: 'A kid today can likely tell you about the Amazon rainforest – but not about the last time he or she explored the woods in solitude, or lay in a field listening to the wind and watching the clouds move...For a whole generation, nature is more abstraction than reality.'

But while painting this bleak picture, Louv is determinedly upbeat. He points to what he calls 'green urbanism' in western Europe, the creation of urban areas which foster rather than destroy wildlife.

London bristles with parks, bird sanctuaries, reservoirs and wetlands, and there are still other public areas which can be developed to achieve the same. Derelict land, community gardens, urban parks, play areas and even business frontages: these are all communal





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spaces. With a considered approach they can become great spaces with enormous uses and benefits that validate their existence in the face of looming financial cuts.

Public and communal spaces are being rediscovered as a powerful means of transforming communities. The benefits go far beyond just making better spaces for people: they spark private investment, they nurture community identity and draw a diverse population, be it in terms of age, gender, ethnicity or culture. These spaces are by definition a common ground.

## What makes a successful communal space?

As far as I can see, there are four key qualities: accessibility, activity, comfort and sociability.

Good public spaces have good, strong management. They have strategies for attracting visitors through the seasons ranging from

outdoor cafés, temporary or permanent art, right through to the street vendor selling ice cream. They have diverse funding sources, they feature well-designed flexible layouts and, most importantly, they demonstrate their own image and identity. Successful public and communal spaces must be a crossroads of peoples' lives.

To function successfully, great communal spaces have some obvious requirements. There needs to be seating, and this seating needs to be in the right place. Lighting should be used to create atmosphere as well as highlighting paths and entrances. We need to be able to get to these spaces easily, on foot. Surrounding streets should narrow to ensure that traffic moves slowly. A communal space surrounded by lanes of fast-moving traffic will be cut off from and deprived of its essential element: people.

The surroundings of a public space hugely affect its accessibility and use. Placemaking charity, the Project for Public Spaces, asks us

to ‘imagine a space fronted on each side by 15-foot blank walls...then imagine the same square situated next to a public library. The library steps open out onto the square; people sit outside and read on the steps. An active, welcoming outdoor square is essential to the well-being of the inner square’.

I'm going to end where I started, a place I have known well since childhood. The fan-shaped structure of the Piazza del Campo in Siena, Italy does not feature much green, but the principles it employs to be a great communal space, whether it be a park or a square, remain the same.

The Campo demonstrates in its layout Olmsted's belief in the importance of the inner and outer space. A strong, active outer edging of cafés and shops is broken up by narrow streets spilling out into the space. In front of these shops there is a clear area along which people can stroll. This then merges in to the inner ring of the piazza, where people



sit on the paved ground. It's a huge outdoor living room, where people hang out, have a drink, eat an ice cream, play music, talk and watch children play.

Glass-half empty types say the space's success is due to the climate, and that areas

like this would never work in the UK. This reminds me of clients who are adamant that they'll never use a bench I've specified in what starts off as a far-off inaccessible corner of the garden. Once it's there, once it's beautiful, and once they can get to it, they use it.

Kent-based garden designer Jo Thompson's first project, the development of a Docklands roof terrace, was featured in the 2006 *Garden Design Journal Review* and in *The Independent*. Since then her work, designing both public and private spaces, has been featured in a variety of publications. She is a guest lecturer at the London College of Garden Design and in 2010 she designed the RHS Chelsea Urban garden for Thrive, a charity that uses gardening to change the lives of disabled people. Amongst her current projects are the rooftop gardens of the new combined headquarters of the London Wildlife Trust and National Youth Theatre, for which she has planted a rooftop version of a native hedge.

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