

European Garden Heritage Network - Award 2013
Award ceremony at Schloss Dyck, 6th of September 2013

Laudation for category:

“Innovative contemporary concept or design of a park and garden”

By

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Member of the jury, EGHN**

Winner in the category: Queen Elisabeth Olympic Park, London

More and more people live in cities. Why? Because cities do have qualities and they give us great possibilities for a good life. Yet the growth of cities also gives us a lot of problems and challenges. So they have since the start of the industrial revolution. We see two sides of the coin. A good one and a bad one!

Or translated into terms of city planning and life in cities; we have the East end - West end phenomena. One end is healthy and wealthy with good housing, environment and services. We see another more poor, industrialized and often more densely populated part - with less good living conditions, lower level of education and so on. Those two faces of our cities are not located face to face – they tend to lie far away from each other located on each side of the booming life of the inner city.

Great urban thinkers as Ebenezer Howard, Lewis Mumford and, Christopher Alexander and others has more or less touched and analyzed it – and in theory or practice tried to find solutions for a more equal balance. In spite of today’s knowledge and competence the problem is not solved – we still face it, we are still trying to attack it.

There are one more phenomena of our time which is a rapidly growing. It's our escalating love for big events and especially for the crown jewel of them all: the Olympics. Every fourth year we see new interpretations of Lord Coubertin's original human think-tank. Bringing young people from all over the world together to share values and experience good sports. As you know Olympics today are like a mirror of society; reflecting and realizing visions and objectives which go far beyond sports. The London BID for 2012 Olympics stressed the fact more than seen before. It did face the necessity of thinking and acting in a sustainable way. It did face the East end / West end issue and regarded it as an important way towards sustainability.

When Ebenezer Howard, in his sky, looked upon London from above he got a great smile in his face. He saw that one tool in the BID was a vision of a new green urban landscape – and in 2012 he and we saw it all materialized. A great 2.5 square kilometer green park was the venue for 250 000 daily visitors from all over the world.

A long planning process has delivered the park. In regeneration work and context it sometimes is said that the way forward is as important as the result. Looking at the process of the Olympic park my first reaction is that the way forward really was something. For every normal planner or landscape architect (as me) it had been a way of immediate and fast return – almost a dead end.

There was an enormous amount, almost a “mountain” of plans, policies and guidance notes on both UK-national and local level. To bring order in all those, making it possible to bring action into the process was one of the first milestones reached by the organizations in charge. Important targets of green belts, biodiversity, and flooding have afterwards been realized during the design and constructing phase. The result is astonishing – especially knowing that time for planning, constructing and to assure future legacy was just six very, very short years

The design team behind the Olympic Park (George Hargreaves, John Hopkins and others) built the design concept on the tradition of English

public parks. They also wanted to create a new urban landscape using new aesthetical and architectural ideas. The challenge was to find a soul of green and blue features. The key was a system of large and bold, sculpted landforms, and in between, the creation of pathways, vistas, habitats, play and surprise for both visitors and wildlife. Frog ponds, love nests, picnic areas, fish canals, wetlands – you name it. Thanks to the system of landforms the park has got them all!

An important design principle was established by the smooth slopes down to the river Lea. The river valley has really been widened; this allows clear views both down to the river and along the river valley. The slopes have also got iconic, gently curved and terraced timber seating, thus increasing the social and emotional landscape.

Today we see a lot of parks created by stones, concrete, iron, rubber and plastic. Did I hear anyone say – get back to our roots. Parks are green spaces – they should be created with grass, bushes, flowers and trees. But still - those are not solemnly enough. Green plants also need the help and guidance of good design to give you the experience of beauty. The green in The Queen Elisabeth Park is based on clear ecological, structured and esthetical planting principles. Lovely flowering perennials are one feature in the park. Another is the large meadows with annuals showing of thousands and thousands of colorful flowers. Those iconic meadows really are large. But perhaps of greater interest – they give more visual and emotional impact than ever displayed before. Visiting the park you feel the greatness of nature and the competence of skilled landscape architects and garden designers.

Many have a lot to learn from the new innovative contemporary concept of this ecological, sustainable and aesthetical park. The Queen Elisabeth Olympic Park tells us a new green story which will be read by many and will inspire many to contribute to sustainability.

EGHN congratulate London Legacy Development Corporation (represented by landscape architect Phil Askew) now in response for the park. They and others before them show what teamwork and inclusion in complex planning

can be. This best practice also shows that parks and a green agenda can pave the way to a sustainable city-regeneration. But most of all we congratulate all those whom are living and working nearby. When they see and take the challenge and continue developing their new Royal neighborhood park they will be the true winners of the great London Olympics.

Congratulations!