

The Critically Designed Garden

Jeff Adams and Wendy Hyde

Abstract

This article is concerned with design applied to gardens, using examples from the Chelsea Flower Show in London. There is a discussion of those show gardens that represented Syrian refugees' gardens in Iraq and the Windrush generation immigration to the UK. The garden designs combine the aesthetics of organic materials and spatial architecture with an implicit critique of topical contemporary social issues. The article concludes by commenting on the risks posed by the reduced and impoverished UK arts education policies for producing the next generation of applied design practitioners.

Keywords

art education, garden design, Chelsea Flower Show, refugees, immigration, applied arts

We attended this year's Chelsea Flower Show (RHS 2018) in London recently, on a warm but breezy morning, entering under the canopies of a majestic avenue of Plane trees. From here we explored the thoroughfares of the showground, and were struck by the importance of design education to almost every aspect of the experience: for example there were the show gardens, which necessarily feature cutting-edge garden design. Design education has always been characterised by the tensions between form and function, or between the aesthetic ideas of the designer and the political or commercial purposes of the client or patron. Although this interrelation has been embraced and valued by art schools since the Victorian era (MacDonald 2004), these tensions still emerge, although sometimes to good effect, where the designer is forced to think inventively to accommodate sometimes conflicting aims. In the show gardens the design processes are often explicit, with the garden designer as artist marshalling the layout, space, sculpture and architecture in addition to the planting. The relationship between these aspects is key, and is manifest explicitly in the criteria by which competition judgements are made. At their best they are a fine balance between

meticulous spatial organisation and the vagaries of nature, in addition to which the designers frequently address an issue that is important to them and their sponsor.

The gardens that caught our attention most were those that had fully engaged with a contentious topical subject and created organic and sculptural allegories to elucidate their thinking. One such example was the Lemon Tree Trust Garden (designed by Tom Massey) which was based on the Trust's work in Domiz refugee camp in northern Iraq, where thousands of people forced to flee from the wars in Syria have made their homes (Lemon Tree Trust 2018) (Figure 1). We were interested to see how the designer/gardener attempted to offer an insight into the experiences and occupations of people who have had to hastily leave their homes and start new lives in unfamiliar places not of their choosing, and who find themselves living in such places and designated as refugees. In this case, as Montiel explains, the plants and flowers of their homes were of great concern to many of the Syrians, and often seeds were included amongst the few precious belongings that they carried with them (quoted in Briggs 2018). Addressing this issue artistically through the medium of the garden is an interesting example of a combination of aesthetics and pedagogy: on the one hand it draws on the symbolism of regional cultural features and attributes in combination with the materiality of garden structures and flora, and on the other it adapts pedagogical devices to raise awareness of the political and cultural situation in Syria and Iraq. The pedagogy of the garden comes into play as a means to proselytise the misfortune of displacement and diaspora, and is achieved by a juxtaposition of features: the fine precision of the engineering of central well, a reference to skills of the refugee engineers and designers, in contrast to the organic profusion of plants lovingly nurtured in the hostile desert environment. Some of the materials used by the refugees in their gardens, and represented in the show garden, are recycled, particularly the plastics, another reminder of the features of life as a refugee in the preciousness of even the most basic of substances. Just as important is the symbolic power of the plants for displaced people. As Briggs explains (2018), the refugees would frequently bring seeds for plants that have cultural, personal or romantic symbolism, such as roses, as well as functional plants that could provide food or medicines. Pedagogically then, the designer's inclusion of symbolic and decorative plants amongst a variety of vegetables, roots and herbs, instructs us on the emotional and nostalgic depth of feeling in the camps.

A similar exploration of people's profound changes of life experiences was to be found in

the work of a garden design based on the experiences of the Windrush generation, the Empire Windrush being famous in the UK as the ship which provided the transport for the ex-servicemen and workers from the Caribbean in 1948, then under British rule, to increase and enhance the British labour force. This display is particularly poignant in Britain at the moment since marks the seventieth anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush, and also coincides with scandalous revelations about the government's 'hostile environment' policy that was aimed at deterring immigration into the UK, and which resulted in the disgraceful treatment of many members of the Windrush generation who were harassed, detained and even targeted for deportation (Carter 2018). The garden at Chelsea, designed by Floella Benjamin for Birmingham City Council, attempted to restore some dignity and respect to these people who have contributed so much to British life and culture over the last seventy years. This contribution includes art education, significantly, as the artist and educator Paul Dash (himself a member of the Windrush generation) has pointed out, where the work of Black artists/educators like himself have helped reshape art education and its histories (Dash 2002, 2007).

The Windrush garden incorporated a model of the ship including small figures on the deck, surrounded by shrubs trees and flowers which in different ways symbolised the culture, life and work experiences of the Caribbean families arriving in the UK (Figures 2 and 3). The garden also incorporated textual biographies as well as some of the objects that symbolised the kinds of work in which they found themselves engaged, such as bus driving and nursing. Benjamin cleverly designed the colour layout of the garden, with hot fiery flowers representing the Caribbean contrasting with the cool blues and whites of hydrangeas representing the thousands of miles of ocean over which the people had to travel, and also the temperate damp climate of Britain. Overall the combination of structural and colour design attempted to illustrate a life-changing experience for the original participants and at the same time draw our attention to the cultural and economic richness that resulted from this immigration. Through this sensitive and critically aware design Benjamin has balanced the organic materiality of the plants, the structural devices and the underlying social issue to create an insightful and prescient artwork that speaks to us across generations and cultures.

In the UK celebrity gardener Carol Klein was previously an art and design teacher, and Monty Don a jewellery designer, before they both moved into gardening and garden

design. However, these artistic social mobility pathways look less possible at this moment in our society. A particular problem that England has is that its schools have been under pressure from increased government control of the curriculum for a number of years, resulting in a decline in the take-up of arts subjects in senior schools along with the abandonment of the idea of a balanced curriculum and the devaluing of the arts as essential subjects of study. As recent research has demonstrated, entries to arts subjects at GCSE (examinations at 16 years) have declined significantly in recent years (Johnes 2017, p. 7). The exercise of state control driven by neoliberal orthodoxies has inevitably led to a reductive overemphasis on exam performance, with the corresponding neglect of critical thinking, expression and reflection (Giroux 2014; McGimpsey 2017). In this rather hostile environment for the arts in schools it is difficult to see how school-age young people could engage with the issues and the design problems based on our experience of these gardens at Chelsea, much less see themselves as potential garden designers of the future. It would seem to us to be an educational imperative to restore arts education, and the applied arts especially, to a central role in the curriculum, so that future garden designers can be drawn from all social and cultural backgrounds of society, be nurtured with the resources and opportunities to practise and critically reflect on their world as those at Chelsea have done to such powerful effect.

References

- Briggs, H. (2018) Seeds of hope: the gardens springing up in refugee camps, BBC (online). Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-44174865> (accessed 14 May 2018).
- Carter, R. (2018) Environment policies and shifting attitudes to immigration (online). Available at: <https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/2018/05/21/windrush-hostile-environment-policies-shifting-attitudes-immigration/> (accessed 7 June 2018).
- Dash, P. (2002) *Foreday Morning*. London: Black Amber Books. Dash, P. (2007) Black history month and African Caribbean student learning in art, *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, Vol. 26, No. 3, pp. 345–53. Giroux, H. (2014) Austerity and the poison of neoliberal

miseducation, *sympleke*, Vol. 22, Nos. 1–2, pp. 9–21 (online). Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/566830> (accessed 14 May 2018). Johnes, R. (2017) Entries to Arts Subjects at Key Stage 4. London, Education Policy Institute (online). Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/>

[publications-and-research/entries-arts-subjects-key-stage-4/](#) (accessed 4 June 2018). Lemon Tree Trust (2018) The Lemon Tree Trust (online). Available at: <http://lemontreetrust.org/> (accessed 25 May 2018). Macdonald, S. (2004) *The History and Philosophy of Art Education*. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, first published 1970. McGimpsey, I. (2017) Late neoliberalism: delineating a policy regime, *Critical Social Policy*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 64–84. RHS (2018) Royal Horticultural Society (online). Available at: <https://www.rhs.org.uk/shows-events/rhs-chelsea-flower-show/Gardens/2018/the-lemon-tree-trust-garden> (accessed 25 May 2018).

Jeff Adams is a Professor of Education at the University of Chester, and Principal Editor of the *International Journal of Art & Design Education*. At Chester he is leader of the Doctorate in Education (EdD) programme, and co-director of the centre for Research into Education, Creativity and the Arts through Practice (RECAP). Jeff is currently carrying out funded research into: creative pedagogies in Palestine and the UK; arts based practices in educational doctoral research, and 'Beyond Text', an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnerships Project. He previously led the Artist-Teacher MA programme at Goldsmiths, University of London, and he has worked at the Open University, Liverpool JMU and Edge Hill University. Prior to that he taught in art in state schools in Yorkshire and Cumbria. Jeff has published widely in academic journals, and his books include *Creativity and Democracy in Education* (with Allan Owens, Routledge 2016,); *Applying Theory to Educational Research* (with Cochrane and Dunne [Eds], Wiley-Blackwell 2012); *Documentary Graphic Novels and Social Realism* (Peter Lang 2008). Contact address: University of Chester, Faculty of Education and Children's Services, Parkgate Road, Chester CH1 4BJ, UK. Email: j.adams@chester.ac.uk

Wendy Hyde is a visual artist and a keen gardener. She is a freelance academic and a regular contributor to the *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, a former

editorial team member. She obtained her PhD in gender and art education from Goldsmiths College, and is currently a visiting lecturer at the University of Chester. Her published research interests in gender, contemporary art education and policy include: 'But it's not real art is it? Transformative encounters with contemporary art', Engage 27: The International Journal of Visual Arts and Gallery Education and 'A stitch in time: gender issues explored through contemporary textiles practice in a sixth form college', International Journal of Art & Design Education 26.3. Contact address: Birkenhead Sixth Form College, Art and Design, Park Road West, Claughton, Wirral, Merseyside CH43 8SQ, UK. Email: w.hyde@talktalk.net



Figure 1. The Lemon Tree Trust Garden draws inspiration from the gardens people have created in Domiz, a refugee camp in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The garden has been designed using materials that are widely available in the camp, such as concrete and steel. Breeze block planters and shelving form an ‘innovation wall’ for vertical planting, filled with everyday objects such as tin cans and plastic bottles, ideal for gardening in limited spaces. Designer Tom Massey, photograph Britt Willoughby Dyer.



Figure 2. Representation of the ship the Empire Windrush which brought people from the Caribbean to the UK, in the Windrush Garden, commissioned by Birmingham City Council, Chelsea Flower Show 2018, designed by Floella Benjamin. Photograph by the authors.



Figure 3. The suitcases representing the experience of immigration of the Windrush generation in the Windrush Garden, commissioned by Birmingham City Council, Chelsea Flower Show 2018, designed by Floella Benjamin. Photograph by the authors.