

FIRST LIFE  
THEN SPACES,  
THEN BUILDINGS.

A short essay about landscape-led development  
for St William, by Selina Mason and Andrew Harland of LDA Design



# L A N D S C A P E

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Origin

*land*, old English, meaning 'home territory' or a place where people belonged.

*scape*, from the German *schaffen* and old English *scapan*, meaning to create or make.



# LEADING WITH LANDSCAPE

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Masterplanning is a social endeavour. It is not about creating a place for buildings but creating a place for people. Landscape is about how people and place belong together, and how each has shaped the other.

In Old English, the word *land* meant 'home territory', a place where people belong. *Scape*, meanwhile, comes from the German word *schaffen* and Old English *scapan*, meaning to create or make.

Put them together and they describe the process of creating a place where people belong. That is the meaning of land-scape.

Landscape as defined here is very purposeful. It is not some remote vista or backdrop to our lives: it is where we are and what we are. It's an attitude and an approach that makes places safer, more sociable and sustainable.

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LANDSCAPE DESIGN  
IS THE PROCESS OF  
CREATING A PLACE  
WHERE PEOPLE BELONG.

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If that sounds obvious, then why does new development sometimes get it wrong? What leads to windy spaces with dead edges and chilly seating; public space used as a depository for plant and ventilation shafts; and service routes for vehicular access which cut awkwardly through a site, creating ramps and squeezing space for gardens?

What we need wherever new homes are being built is to prioritise a sense of community. And the truth is, this can only really happen if we lead with the landscape.

Jan Gehl, the Danish urban designer, neatly summarised the landscape-led approach as: "First life, then spaces, then buildings." In other words, start with people and how they live, next work on the spaces and places that support this, and only then sort out the buildings.

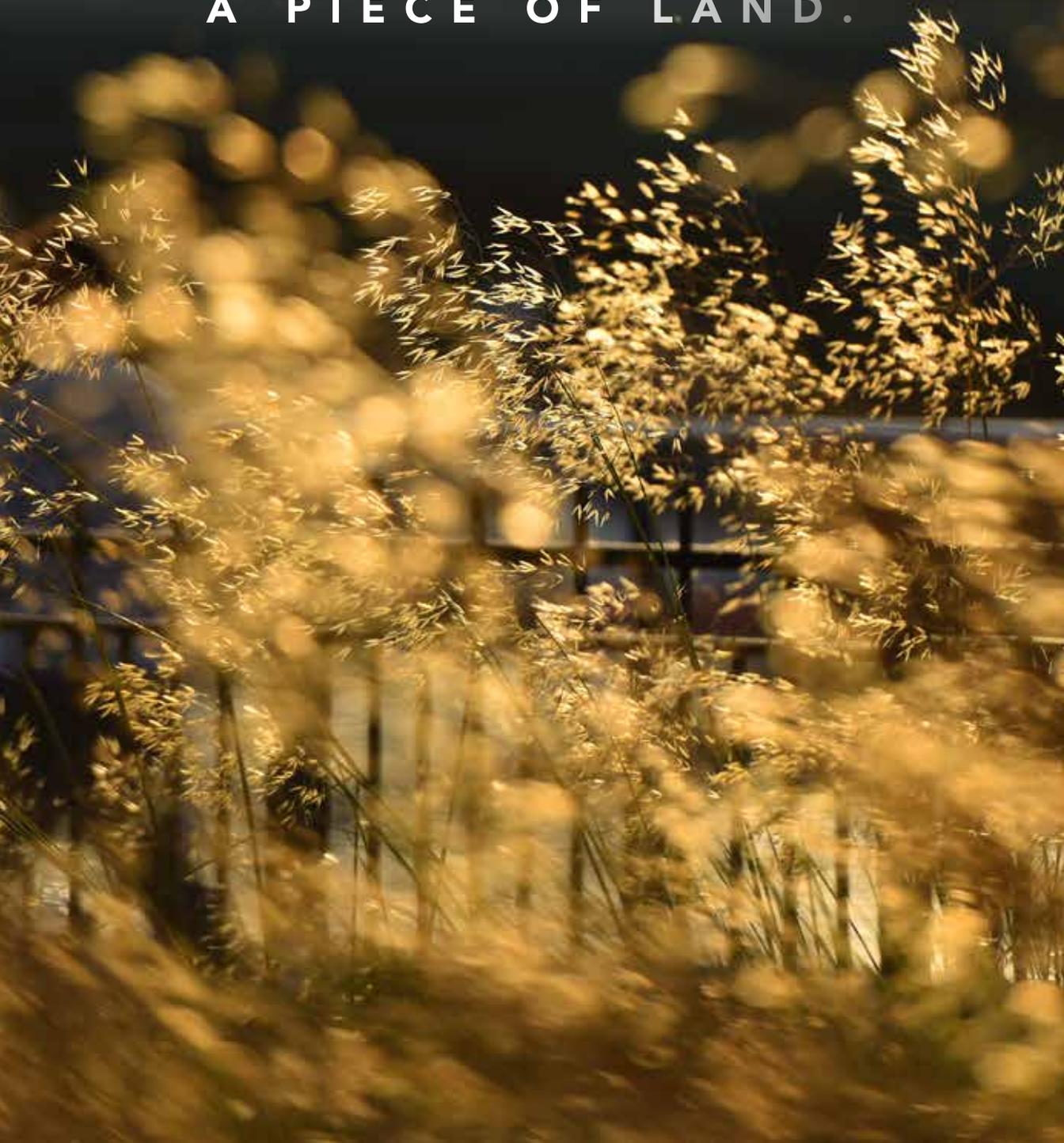
What does this mean in practice?

HOW THE

# SUN MOVES

ACROSS A SITE,

A PIECE OF LAND.



# FIRST LIFE

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Starting with people means having a clear vision for the community that will live in each development. What will they hope for from their homes and what will they value most? The better balanced the community, the better it will integrate into the surrounding area. Everyone can sense straight away whether a place is welcoming or exclusive.

This kind of forward planning requires particular imagination when it comes to people relatively new to the market. Take Generation Y, for example, the demographic who reached adulthood at the turn of the Millennium and now want a foothold on the housing ladder. The research tells us that Generation Y is likely to favour a car club over a car park, provided there is good public transport.<sup>1</sup> Having experienced climate change as a backdrop to their entire adult lives, they are also likely to favour a low carbon home in a walkable place.<sup>2</sup> Our thinking about new development should evolve to reflect the generational shift taking place in society.

Then it is time to explore how the qualities of each site shape the way it will be used and function. When a design team considers, for example, how the sun moves across a site, a piece of land which had appeared peripheral might become pivotal because it gets the evening light. It can become a destination, a place for people to have a drink or a meal, and routes in and around the site can then support that use.

This might seem like common sense but more often than not masterplanning starts with the buildings instead. It assumes that the left-over space will take care of itself and be a meaningful backdrop to our daily lives. Which of course it never is.

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THIS IS ABOUT MUCH MORE  
THAN GOOD PUBLIC REALM.  
IT IS ABOUT CHANGING THE  
ORDER OF OUR THINKING.

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MAKING PLACES

SAFER,

MORE SOCIABLE

AND SUSTAINABLE.



# THEN SPACES

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It may seem easier to conceptualise space when it is defined in relation to buildings but this approach is really all about shape-making, rather than placemaking.

When you put shapes on the site plan first and everything else has to fit around them, the fitting becomes the purpose of design.

What also happens when the approach to the site is led by buildings is that critical issues belonging to the spaces in-between are shuffled down the schedule. So although the complexity and multi-functionality of public space demands a holistic approach from the start, the design of public realm is reduced to resolving whichever technical issue is paramount, like meeting highway standards. Then we wonder why our streets feel uncivilised.

This can be seen with green infrastructure too: a shape-led approach will rarely have considered topography, remediation and drainage and the organisation of trees from the outset. So instead of creating a comprehensive solution, a pale approximation of green infrastructure will be squeezed into a few small pockets on the site.

# THEN BUILDINGS

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The quality and design of the buildings should be determined by the needs of the people who will live there. Make no mistake, good architecture is essential to the success of the place and it generates commercial value. But the design of the buildings should be determined by the ability of the landscape to create a sociable environment. The landscape should drive the layout of buildings rather than the other way round.

The site itself will suggest how buildings should be massed to protect the tranquillity of the site from a railway line or busy road, and how to improve wind flow patterns. It is the landscape that reveals which orientations will best draw attention to a special view or landmark, a natural destination beside the water's edge, or a stand of mature trees to picnic under.

A landscape-led approach creates added value by finding the right balance between spaces and buildings, often revealing new opportunities for energy generation or turning an apparent negative, like mudflats, into something of beauty and interest.

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BUILDINGS  
SHOULD BE MASSED  
TO PROTECT THE  
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OF THE SITE.

# A PLACE TO BELONG

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Good community engagement helps to uncover what is precious about an area and the memories and resonance it carries, as well as the amenities and connections that people want from a new settlement.

The character of the development, or its *genius loci*, is taken in part from the history of the site and also from its function. This function may be new, where a brownfield site is being transformed into a residential neighbourhood, or it may involve intensifying an existing site. The original landscape of post-industrial sites is often heavily disguised, yet there will be something that is both derived from the site and can transform it as an agent of change, of re-making.

Development brings irrevocable change and has to be done in a way that resonates with what is to come as well as with the past. It is easy to be nostalgic for our lost industrial heritage and either retain a few tokens amidst the new, or try to recreate an imagined pastoral idyll. But that may not resolve the serious contemporary challenge of making ever more intense use of ever smaller spaces, in ever more densely populated environments.

London's population, for example, is rising by 100,000 a year. The city is likely to get denser, hotter and more congested over the next 15 years. Liveability will be at a premium.

An effective response will need real imagination. In the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, for instance, the landscape design rooted the park in its setting through the rediscovery of its waterways, which had been neglected for decades. The river valley was improved by turning steep banks into gentle slopes, creating new views to the river together with wetlands that enriched biodiversity.

The beauty of a landscape-led approach is that it tackles these strategic and specific issues together. With soil remediation, for example, taking a landscape-led approach to the engineering solutions and soil science will ensure that cut and fill can be used to create a strong landscape character.

This approach will also expose potential conflicts of use at an early stage. What if the obvious main entrance to the site is also the natural place for play space which could be shared with an adjacent school? By starting with the landscape, it becomes much easier to identify all the key opportunities and arrive at the best solution.

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Landscape also encourages a more intuitive approach towards creating feelings of safety and a sense of belonging. We all know that safety is not really about the locks on your front door but the experience of walking from the station or the bus stop to your home. It's to be found in places that are activated by everyday life going on at ground level and by creating interesting and inviting public space where people happily spend their time living and conversing.

Safety is about more than well-lit walks and a convenient bike park: it is about being recognised and known. You feel safe in a place where you feel like you belong.



*Granary Square, London*

# WORKING WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

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The ecological function of a development needs to be integrated with its social life, so that they support each other.

Nature in a new development may not look very naturalistic. It may even be used in quite a contrived way. But that does not reduce it to an urban lifestyle accessory. A stand of birch trees may be at home in Norway but it can be equally lovely in East London. A wildflower meadow with straight edges will feed butterflies just the same.

We all like to catch a spring scent and hear birdsong, and research confirms the value of nature in terms of emotional and mental health. Natural systems also tap into our curiosity, from bee hives and bioswales to garden composting and ponds. Making space for them creates a more equitable relationship with nature and is evidence of genuine environmental awareness.

What is more, people value places that feel authentic. Before they part with their money, they look for evidence of that authenticity.<sup>3</sup>



*Allotments at the Golden Lane estate in London*

# THE CURATION OF PUBLIC SPACE

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Developers and designers talk more and more these days about 'curating' public space. This partly reflects an emerging anxiety about activated space, now that the old planning certainty of boundaries between where we live, work and play no longer exists.

In the past, social exchange and interaction seemed to occur spontaneously. So why is so much management needed now? Is the act of curation another example of papering over the cracks of our failure to create places that really work well?

There are two ways to curate: actively and passively. The first involves creating a programme of events. This might be essential to kick-start the process of social exchange in places where a new community needs to come together. It also has a particular value given the current head-winds against community emerging in our society: we all seem time-poor and hardly ever at home, while stranger danger means that few children have the freedom their parents had when they were young.



*Pilestredet Park, Oslo. Landscape architects: Bjørbekk & Lindheim*

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However, most encounters just need passive curation. That means designing in the opportunities for social interaction and arranging spaces to encourage them, starting with an understanding of where people will be walking and the best place for entrances. It means seeing where activity will condense on routes and using broader paths which allow people to pause en route; and creating natural anchors in sunny areas with groups of benches, a long communal table, or a swing seat.

If you are designing for Generation Y, whose work life merges with their home life, smart outdoor seating with power sockets and wifi is one way to accommodate flexible working and contribute to a sense of community.<sup>4</sup>

Even when space is tight, there is a strong argument for planting food crops, not just shrubs. While some people leap at the chance of communal gardening, others simply feel better and more engaged by noticing fruit ripen.

Children, teenagers and older people are instinctively more at home in a landscape which they have inspired. Playful features running through the site in a naturalistic way and informal areas with wall seats can be complemented by tranquil green corners. A barbeque in regular use does not even need to be lit to speak of sociable evenings.

Multifunctional spaces can accommodate multicultural activity, and when the spaces are used by the surrounding communities, they start to bring newcomers and neighbours together. Once this passive curation is working, a natural social calendar will emerge as it does in any established community. From street parties to harvest suppers and Diwali celebrations, book clubs to outdoor yoga, all this activity will add to the story of a place.

# THE POWER OF LANDSCAPE

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If masterplanning is to succeed in its social purpose, it needs the power of synthesis that landscape brings. There is no point at which masterplanning ends and landscape architecture begins: each is integral to the other. First life, then spaces, then buildings.

Two thirds of people polled in a recent survey in Britain felt that a sense of community has declined in their lifetime.<sup>5</sup> The way we masterplan new homes presents an incredible opportunity to reverse this trend.

Development itself is becoming ever more intensive, whether on post-industrial sites, via tall buildings or through the intensification of high streets and suburban neighbourhoods. We need this increase in density to tackle the shortage of housing. But it needs to be done in a way that makes places more sociable and sustainable.

A landscape-led approach to masterplanning creates specific kinds of value. It creates an extraordinary environment. It elevates respectable architecture. It produces welcoming, civil spaces that work for a more diverse society. It heightens the senses, whether by unearthing the layers of local history or through sound, sight, smell and touch.

Leading with the landscape is about much more than good public realm. It is different from most current development. It is about changing the order of our thinking, to create places where people love to live.

# HOW DO YOU PUT THIS INTO PRACTICE?

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## 1 WRITE A GOOD BRIEF

Describe the kind of place you want. What will make the residents and surrounding communities happy? What will any community need to integrate and flourish? Commit to clear placemaking objectives.

## 2 APPOINT THE LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT FIRST

Ensure the masterplanning process is led jointly from the start by a landscape architect, working collaboratively with the client and the rest of the design team.

## 3 MASTERPLAN USING LANDSCAPE AS THE DETERMINING THEME

Use the landscape to direct thinking about the space and requirements of the site, including access, connections, topography, orientation and function.

## 4 LEARN FROM THE SITE AND ITS CONTEXT

Explore the challenges and the opportunities, from a major road to an adjacent school. Work with the grain. Root the visioning work for a scheme in the local context.

## 5 FOCUS ON MAKING A SOCIABLE PLACE

Reinforce the relationship between landscape and buildings by designing in convivial centres of gravity and opportunities for chance encounters. Design spaces to be diverse and multifunctional, capable of hosting a range of activities.

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## 6 LEAD WITH THE LANDSCAPE IN PUBLIC CONSULTATION

People enjoy talking about how a place will be used, rather than what the buildings will look like. Landscape gets public support because it captures the imagination and suggests clear local benefits.

## 7 IMPROVE ENVIRONMENTAL SECURITY THROUGH THE LANDSCAPE

Functional green infrastructure will minimise flood risk through planting and bioswales absorbing storm water. Orientate buildings for solar gain in winter and plant deciduous trees to shade them in summer and offset the urban heat island effect. Create, enhance and improve biodiversity and wildlife habitats.

## 8 COMMISSION THE SKILLS YOU NEED TO MAKE THE RIGHT DECISIONS

To achieve all this, you need a team that understands the linkages between strategic planning, design and delivery, and low cost management and maintenance. You want them to bring expertise in urban and landscape design, natural sciences, ecology, environmental law and planning policy.

Putting these principles into practice allows the development team to optimise value from the site; recognise the economic opportunities in good time; respond intelligently to the market; and support brand leadership through high quality placemaking.

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WE NEED TO INCREASE DENSITIES TO TACKLE THE SHORTAGE OF HOUSING. BUT IT NEEDS TO BE DONE IN A WAY THAT MAKES PLACES WHICH ARE SOCIABLE AND SUSTAINABLE.

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# BIOGRAPHIES

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**Selina Mason** is a masterplanner and architect. She joined LDA Design as a Board Director in 2014. She has commissioned and delivered complex urban masterplans, including the post Games transformation for the Olympic Delivery Authority (ODA) and then the London Legacy Development Corporation.

Selina has significant experience in leading large consultant teams of masterplanners, architects, engineers, landscape architects, sustainability and planning consultants. Her knowledge of both front end masterplanning and detailed design of streets and buildings helped to ensure that the Olympic masterplans provided a deliverable framework for investment.

Before joining the ODA in 2007, Selina was Director of Design Review at the Government's advisor CABI, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and provided leadership and advice on national urban design and architecture policy and planning.

**Andrew Harland** is a landscape architect and a Senior Board Director of LDA Design where he has worked for many years. He has a broad range of experience in residential and commercial development and is currently researching the implications of London's increasing density through his work on mixed use developments for the Perfume Factory, North Acton; Meridian Water, Enfield and residential towers at Skyline, South Quay.

Andrew has led public realm regeneration including for Wood Lane in west London. Andrew jointly led the masterplanning and detailed design of the London 2012 Olympic Park, one of the UK's most complex landscape projects, and transformation for the Legacy. Andrew also took lead responsibility for the design and delivery of London's three other large new parks, Gunpowder Park, Northala Fields and Burgess Park; and for Royal Parks projects such as Kensington Gardens and St James's Park.

Both Selina and Andrew are working on the masterplan for University College London East campus in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park.

**LDA Design** is an independent creative consultancy helping clients to deliver places which work well. We provide landscape-led masterplanning, design and planning services to developers, landowners, communities, universities and government. We have 150 people working across England and Scotland. [www.lda-design.co.uk](http://www.lda-design.co.uk)

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ST WILLIAM IS A JOINT VENTURE BETWEEN NATIONAL GRID AND THE BERKELEY GROUP. OUR GOAL IS TO TRANSFORM INDUSTRIAL SITES FROM A BYGONE AGE INTO BEAUTIFUL PLACES WHICH PEOPLE CALL HOME.

WE DEVELOP GAS WORKS SITES THAT HAVE BEEN CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC FOR DECADES AND RECONNECT THEM TO THE COMMUNITY. THIS RESTORES THE LAND, DRIVES THE LOCAL ECONOMY AND HELPS TO REGENERATE EACH AREA.

WE WANT THE PLACES BUILT BY ST WILLIAM TO BE RENOWNED FOR THE QUALITY OF THE LANDSCAPE AND THE OPEN SPACE.



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