3.5 LANDSCAPE

Parc de Bercy, Paris: Social housing of great quality where high quality modern buildings are complemented by parkland and allotments

Articulating the landscape strategy

A quality landscape and a sense of urbanism can, and should, go hand in hand. The landscape, development block, and movement framework are the three main design elements of an urban project of any scale. By landscape, we mean many things; it is the open spaces, water, movement corridors and way-leaves; it is parks, squares, and streets; it is the street furniture; it is hard and it is soft.

In design terms, there are distinct task areas, for example:
- the intrinsic landscape characteristics, for good or ill, of the site and its setting;
- open space planning, the typology hierarchy, function and frequency of existing and desirable facilities (see Tables 3.4 and 3.5);
- creating a landscape structure for the site as a whole; and then
- the detailed treatment of individual schemes and elements.

Landscape analysis and design skills are of key importance from the beginning of any project. At an early stage, it is also important to begin to consider the responsibilities for care and maintenance.

A key design principle is to treat everything as landscape; buildings define the edge of space; landscape occupies the space, whether it is a park, a street, a fence or a pavement. This means designing the landscape structure before the traffic engineer becomes involved and avoiding SLOAP (Space Left Over After Planning).

Landscaping and landscape go together
A basic tenet is to work with and value what is already there. Opportunities occur to use the intrinsic landscape positively in the design of new places. A fine tree can provide instant maturity in a new square. A copse of good trees or a fine old garden can provide the basis of a local park. Hedgerow trees and lanes can be used to line a new parallel road, and if there is an old lane, use this for access or a footpath. Visual links between say a hill, a fine building or historic feature beyond the site can be used to create 'view corridors', in which open space uses, pedestrian uses, or a new avenue can run. And conversely, certain areas of sites, skylines or overlooked areas for example, may be best left undeveloped. Think about the playing fields, parklands, schools and so on in these locations.

A scheme of a significant scale will involve the incorporation of open space facilities, for which there are likely to be planning standards in terms of type of facility, its extent and their catchment areas. But achieving safe and usable open space and maximising the benefit of looking onto it from adjacent buildings, for instance, should be more important than simply meeting prescriptive standards for provision. The urban design challenge is to design the scheme so that there is a cohesive landscape structure, within which these standards can be met while making a positive contribution to the sense of place, in both overall and local terms.

In creating the plan, adjust and iterate between considerations of this kind, together with the movement structure and development block forms, until it all begins to settle down, and to look and feel right.

At this stage, the scheme will require the production of a landscape strategy, as one of the main organising elements of the development.