

LIVING IN YOUR LANDSCAPE

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Well-designed spaces offer opportunities for ‘landships’ and a genuine sense of place and belonging, says **Tim Waterman**



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A DOZEN YEARS ago I added British citizenship to my US citizenship, trading up from a work visa when I entered into a civil partnership with my partner Jason. Jason was born and raised in Hong Kong, educated in Derbyshire and Nottingham, and he gained his British citizenship in 1997 when the colony was handed back to China. I grew up in a US Navy family, living in various ports all over the world. I no longer feel as though I belong to the USA (especially not to its current government) but neither do I feel quite British or English. ‘Londoner’ perhaps fits me best, and with my background I’m quite typical. I am a citizen of London.

I know how to dwell in London.

I can operate its landscape. I have

learned its people and its customs. I stand aside and let people off the Tube before I board. I know all the shortcuts through my surrounding neighbourhoods. I’ve teased out plant roots to tuck them into London soil, and I’ve traded seeds and tools with other allotmenters. I’ve acquired the habits that allow me to fit in here and that allow others to accept me as a Londoner. When people ask me where I’m from – and it’s a hard question to answer – it’s not with the assumption I’ll return there.

All places should be this way, offering legible and substantive landscape relationships that are local, regional and particular, and that give human transplants a chance to root – belonging not just as lip service or abstract allegiance, but to a genuine sense of place. In the past 20 years, the idea of landscape has grown in various disciplines, such as geography and anthropology, and through the influence of the European Landscape Convention, to express a relationship – a *landship* – in which people are products of their places, and those places are their products. Thus the word ‘landscape’ has come to hold deeper and richer meaning than simply the description of a view.

The richness of this idea also holds the sense that landscape is something mutually constructed and shared, which has sparked powerful new discourses around the ideas of landscape justice and landscape democracy – there is now even a Centre for Landscape Democracy in Norway. What is desired is that people, as part of their existences and as a way of connecting to each other, learn the plants and animals and topography of their places.

Of course, these ideas have particular purchase in larger landscapes with clear identities, such as the North York Moors or the Highlands, and in urban landscapes like Exeter or West Glasgow. However, there is also an important link to the garden, particularly those gardens that are shared, such as allotments, community gardens and parks. Even private gardens, which taken collectively form a larger landscape, can be considered landscapes to which we belong, and in which we might find citizenship.

A place to grow

Last year I visited a beautiful community garden called Parckfarm (www.parckfarm.be) in the tough Brussels neighbourhood Molenbeek. Its construction, by the community with the cutting-edge landscape practice Taktyk and Alive Architecture, made a once derelict landscape available and legible to its very mixed and multi-ethnic community. How this garden is a community practice and how it has shaped shared identities is a more powerful and grounded form of citizenship than anything the pomp and circumstance of the Belgian state could provide. And in a time of rising nationalism and increasing migration, it’s a practice of belonging that is true and real and necessary – and rooted in the garden.

Even the small private garden offers opportunities to provide engaging relationships with landscape, and this can be realised through an approach to design which, instead of simply employing geometric strategies for scenic spacemaking, actively invites people to interact. Some of this may be accomplished by working through imaginative scenarios for how the garden might be used by people, particularly by children. Plants, especially edible plants, particular to a region, might be used, and natural processes can be invited in – allowing frost to accentuate a slope, or water to pool after a rain, for example. Focusing garden design on use, action, and interaction is, perhaps, a first step to inviting people more fully into the rest of their immediate world as active participants – as citizens. ○

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