

Russ Canning, director of landscape at Scott Wilson for the past 21 years, met Joe Gardiner at the Barnes Wetland Centre, London, a multi-award winning project that he was closely involved with to talk about his recent retirement from a life in landscape architecture

**R**uss Canning retired as a director of Scott Wilson at the beginning of August and says that he is now looking forward to spending more time windsurfing and riding his motorbike as well as undertaking some consultancy. It'll be a change well earned as, over the past 30 years, he has worked as a landscape planner and designer in both local government and private practice. His wide-ranging worldwide experience in all aspects of landscape has been recognised in awards in the UK, Hong Kong and the USA.

The journey began in the early 1970s when, as a student at Leeds Polytechnic and Manchester University, Russ worked through the holiday in the London Borough of Harrow planning department. With dual academic qualifications in town planning and landscape architecture, he took up a position as senior landscape planner in the Department of Planning, Leeds City Council, upon graduation in 1975. Just three years later he was offered the position of principal landscape architect with West Yorkshire Metropolitan County Council.

His rapid rise continued and by 1980, he had moved back to Leeds City Department of Architecture and Landscape as chief landscape architect. It was during this time that he came to the attention of Brian Clouston and was invited to join Clouston and Partners in Hong Kong.

Russ spent a couple of years in the far east before returning to the UK to take up the position of associate with Cobham Resource Consultants (CRC) in Oxford with a remit to develop the landscape architecture services of the practice. In 1985, Russ was made a partner of CRC and by the mid-1990s the practice had 15 landscape architects and a total staff of over 60. In May 1996, when CRC joined the Scott Wilson group, Russ became a director of Scott Wilson. The practice now has 100 landscape staff based in 11 offices throughout the UK and China.



leaving it  
all behind

design into the practice, so specifically recruited me to build up that side of the business.

**How different was working in the US to your experience up to that point?**

You say to someone you meet in the US that you're a landscape architect and they instantly know what you're talking about. They don't think you're a gardener. There's a great level of awareness about the value of landscape architecture compared to the UK. Budgets are much more generous and as a result expectations are very high.

**Are the generous budgets a function of the understanding of the value of landscape architecture?**

Partly. But it's also partly to do with the quest for quality. They want the best. CRC got involved in the USA on the back of our heritage work. We'd always been very big in landscape restoration and through various connections we started to get involved in restoring the Olmsted parks on the Eastern seaboard. The American consultancies had very little experience of restoration because they've never had to do it. They had nothing to restore as it was all very contemporary, and in fact the landscapes we are restoring were turn of the 20th century landscapes. The skills that were needed, the attention to detail, meticulous research and a sympathetic approach to restoration were second nature to us.

**Given that there is a longer tradition of landscape architecture in the UK, why has the US overtaken the UK in terms of recognition and public perception of landscape architecture?**

I could speculate. It's similar in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa – the profile of landscape architecture is much more established. I'm a passionate believer in multidisciplinary working. Everything is so specialised these days that as a landscape architect you cannot pretend to be an ecologist, forester, landscape manager or water engineer. You need to recognise where your core skills are and hone those. I think where we've gone wrong in the Institute is that we over-reached ourselves in the 1980s. We tried to expand the

Institute to be all things to all people and lost the plot. I think the profession flourishes in America because it has a very clear image of itself.

I also think that we would be in a much better financial situation, and in a better education and recruitment position, if we'd built barriers up rather

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than taking them down. If you look at the professions that the top graduates want to get into their number one priority is keeping the barriers up to getting into their profession. Take accountants, doctors and lawyers – one of the reasons they command premium fee rates as opposed to landscape architects is that they keep the barriers up and they keep the quality up and they keep the intrinsic value of the product up. I'm not elitist, but I do feel that one of the reasons we're less well defined in this county is because of that.

**How do you approach a new project?**

I try to keep as open a mind as possible and try not to have any preconceived method or model that I will apply. The same goes for my staff. My philosophy is to employ the best possible designers I can and then really let them rip rather than dictating a corporate style or solution to them.

**That must be difficult to still do after 30 years**

That's the great benefit of getting raw graduates and year-out students because they bring the wacky and fresh ideas to the old hands. You blend that with experience and come up with a much better solution.



Barnes Wetland Centre was a clever solution to a series of disused reservoirs that provided an urban wildlife oasis funded in part by the sale of land for a housing development



## What state is landscape architecture in?

It's ironic that we are now in the healthiest environment in terms of the amount of work that's around since I've been in business and yet here we are in crisis in terms of being able to resource it. There's an unprecedented demand for landscape architects and an unprecedented restriction on supply.

There is a very serious situation facing the profession in terms of recruitment, partly of our own making and partly to do with the availability of grants for students. We're experiencing great difficulty in recruiting staff of the right calibre and as a result of that we are recruiting more and more overseas-trained landscape architects – in my case, a lot of very talented Chinese landscape architects through our connection in China.

## What would you do to convince a new school leaver to become a landscape architect?

It's not always practical but they should come and spend a day or two in the office and shadow the staff and really understand how diverse it is. Landscape architecture is the most diverse profession I've ever come across and it's that range of work that provides real challenge and excitement all the time. I've only had one work experience person come through the offices and decide that landscape architecture wasn't for them.

We're not actively involved in that sort of recruitment initiative. We're too busy trying to make a living, but it is something that I think we're going to have to address. It's becoming absolutely critical.

We all have a duty to tackle this. It's not just numbers, it's quality. The teaching is very good now, but we just don't seem to be attracting the highest calibre of students.

One of the biggest problems is the student grant. If you're going to come out of university with a debt of £12,000 and your first job only pays you £18,000, and five years later you're earning £30,000, you have to compare that to somebody in the finance sector

who'll probably get a golden handshake that pays off their student loan and start on £30–£40,000.

That's where I would attack politically, on the subject of grants.

I'm a great fan of postgraduate trained landscape architects because they have a perspective that the undergraduate trained landscape architects maybe don't have. There seems to be a move away from postgraduate courses, which I think is unfortunate, because if you've been through one degree you can learn much faster the second-time round.

## What other issues will become increasingly important for the profession in the next few years?

The agenda is changing towards a much more urban-oriented focus as a result of regeneration and the growth of urban design as a discipline in its own right. Landscape architects make very good urban designers. I think that's where the emphasis is going to lie in the next few years.

Sustainability is a very complex and sophisticated subject and landscape is a relatively modest part of it. At Scott Wilson we always try to be as sustainable as possible in our work. For example, we won't use peat-based products, we try to avoid the use of chemicals if at all possible, we recycle materials on site as much as possible, we plant anticipating climate change to avoid the need for irrigation, we plant to protect children from solar gain in play areas, and so on. There are a number of very practical things that you can do as a landscape architect that are in essence sustainable. But the much bigger issues, the development issues of sustainability are just that – much bigger issues. We can obviously contribute to them, but they are highly complex matters of society and economics at large. There are social implications of sustainability as well as the environmental. It's about getting a balance, but I do think there's an awful lot of nonsense talked about sustainability.

## How would you like to be remembered?

As a good boss and a good designer. ■



Visitors to Barnes Wetland Centre are hidden from view, from the birds and other visitors, by clever planting and routing. The full landscape becomes apparent only from the hides



## portfolio



**Biltmore Estate, North Carolina, USA** "This is the wine-tasting courtyard, where there was an existing plane tree, which we kept along with the breathing lawn around it. The detailing of the edging is all authentic Olmsted and the paving is Arizona slate. You could take any one of those paving stones and hang them on your wall, they're so full of colour."



**Barnes Wetland Centre** "This is the site before work started. The project took a series of disused reservoirs which were a liability to Thames Water under the Reservoirs Act and transformed them, fulfilling the dream of the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust founder Sir Peter Scott for a London centre, and creating a new Berkley Homes development."



**Worthing, West Sussex** "Our initial brief was to develop a simple greening strategy, but working with a very enlightened client, we developed this into a sophisticated strategy for improving the residents' quality of life and the sustainability of the town within a landscape strategy. The model is easily transferable to any urban environment."



**Haihe River, Tianjin, China** "China has the scale, opportunity and excitement that Hong Kong had in the 1980s. In this project for the regeneration of a riverside site and the creation of a cultural and leisure complex, we devised a traffic-free precinct by diverting traffic underneath in a tunnel."