

Dan Pearson Interview ahead of
Palmstead Nurseries Soft Landscape Workshop
Wednesday 24th January 2018



Palmstead's Workshop 2018 on Wednesday 24th January plans to throw a light on eco urban architecture and the rise of vertical forests and roof gardens.

Dan Pearson spoke to us about designing podium landscapes and plant selection.

London has led the world over the last fifteen years in creating public spaces that add real value to the community and the city at large. One of the leading designers at the heart of this renaissance is Dan Pearson. He has a working relationship with some of the best-known architects in the country and has been involved in headline grabbing projects in central London including: the King's Cross redevelopment, the Garden Museum and the Garden Bridge project.

The Garden Bridge became something of a hot potato politically this year and the decision to call time on the project has split opinion, with many in the design world sure that the Bridge would have cemented London's stance as the most innovative city in the world for garden design.

Dan Pearson was involved in the project from the very beginning and remains positive about the concept: "I think it really had its place in terms of an idea; it was a real opportunity to build something of horticultural excellence in the centre of the city and it would have become a focus for London and also an inspiration for other cities. The Bridge project was always about the garden and people forgot about that once it became political. If people had been allowed to be more excited about the garden then there would have been a groundswell of positive feeling. The public were gobsmacked by the planting of the Olympic Park, it was a major feel good project and I think the Bridge originally came out of that feeling. Projects like these provide ambition for London and also for other cities. An obvious example is the High Line in New York - that's been an inspiration around the world, regenerating many areas."

Even though the Garden Bridge will ultimately be relegated to a footnote in the history of London landscapes, Pearson is encouraged by the focus that's been placed on green spaces in our cities and the efforts being made to integrate vegetation into the master plan at the start of the build. He says: "I think there's a big focus and plenty of enthusiasm in London for the importance of greenery. There's always a battle between the infrastructure of the city and the desire to make it green but now we are seeing whole developments being sold on an image which includes vegetation. I live quite near to the Elephant and Castle in South London and the advertising hoardings for the new development there provide a promise of leafy idylls."

Pearson believes it's important to be fearless and champion new projects and green spaces, he says: "we should do this by biting the bullet and making sure that landscape is properly integrated at the beginning of the project."

Pearson's work on the King's Cross Development, one of the most significant regenerations projects in central London, saw him working with the construction team led by Argent from the beginning of the project where public realm landscape was very much a part of the brief. As the designer of Handyside Gardens, the first public garden to open on the King's Cross site, Pearson was able to make his mark by introducing his signature palette of plants and his love of natural planting. The geometry of the park reflects the pattern of the railway sidings that once ran through the site and the planting is inspired by plants found growing beside railway embankments.

It's worth considering the graceful use of the colours in Pearson's perennial planting plan as they move from one colour on the east to another on the west of the site providing a visual journey. The naturalistic planting consists of a large number of pioneer species which reference plants often found on railway embankments where wild plants mix with garden escapees. The planting provides year-round interest with seed heads and dried grasses being left through winter and only removed when spring comes. Underground tunnels at the site meant that there was only a shallow soil depth available, so Pearson's team created a series of raised beds made of Corten steel which reference the industrial materials of the former railway sidings once located there.

He says: "public spaces for buildings have to be shared by people, you have to know there's enough of a balance from the start - so that there are places for people to be, places for the greenery and space for the planting. My schemes are very plant focused so slivers of terraces just aren't enough in terms of a support to a bigger space."

Pearson's manipulation of space is achieved effortlessly and his landscapes often resemble pieces of art; his Chatsworth garden for RHS Chelsea in 2016 was worthy of the Turner Prize. The placement of the large Derbyshire stones within his Best In Show garden had a zen-like quality and the palette of plants had more romanticism than the Bronte's combined.

Pearson takes his inspiration from natural landscapes. He says: "for me it's about keying into the place and finding inspiration. Japan is very inspirational; I've been visiting the country since 1997 and have learned a lot from the placement of materials and the way this creates resonance. Every single component has been considered and it's been considered as an art form. There's an attention to detail and spatial awareness that's not found anywhere else. There's a spirituality in the materials, the energy of the stone and how that stone might direct you in the space, or hold you or provide focus which is inspiring. I've also learned a lot from working with the exceptional nurserymen in Japan; they're always able to expand my palette."

Pearson is revered for his innovative plant selections and his unusual choice of plant material - for Pearson it's always right plant, right place, but there's the essential added dimension of creating interest. He says: "the process is rather like creating a movie - you want to expand people's experience and find different ways of communicating an idea. The plant material

isn't there for the sake of being clever though, for example, in the Sackler Garden at the Garden Museum, the plants are all there because they are of horticultural merit, they've been singled out because they're a particularly good form revealing the richness of what planting can provide."

Pearson's plant lists are notoriously difficult to source and he often chooses plants that aren't always within commercial production. He uses a mix of both independent nurseries and larger suppliers and says: "you've got to know that you can get the plant material in good condition so you have to work with someone who can grow them for you; 90% of the plant material has to be easily accessible and easily sourced then it becomes more practical to source the 10% that give you the 'twist' in the plot in smaller numbers. These plants introduce something into a scheme which might not have been used in the public arena before. We will use a contract grower for this but we have to know that the people we work with can provide the material we are asking for. It's important to give the smaller growers the opportunity, they can often make the difference."

The role of the garden designer within the construction process has changed in the last decade as design of spaces within cityscapes becomes more structurally challenging. Greater thought is needed and is also given to plant materials so that they fit and enhance these spaces. Pearson says: "garden design no longer feels like an 'add-on', it feels much more integrated and we have projects coming our way that have landscape integrated in an interesting and intelligent fashion."

Nick Coslett says: "Dan is a true visionary; every time we work together we learn something new at the nursery. It's regrettable that the Garden Bridge project was terminated as it was innovative and would have been a site where horticulture would have taken the spotlight. However, the story of the last few years has been an interesting and positive one with key players like Dan showing how much they contribute to landscape. The quality of his work has taken landscaping and horticulture to new heights and pushed it up the development agenda."

To hear Dan Pearson speak at Palmstead Nurseries Soft Landscape Work Shop on Wednesday 24th January register here: www.palmstead.co.uk

Palmstead Soft Landscape Workshop: Wednesday 24th January