

NZILA Sustainability Award 2006
Craig Pocock

Opening

After many years of living and practicing landscape architecture overseas I can say with confidence and pride that the top landscape designs being recognized here tonight for excellence would easily stack up against, and compete with, any of the best landscapes I have seen internationally. However, I would not have the confidence to make the same claim about NZ landscape and sustainability.

New Zealand, in 2006, was ranked at the top position of the world in the Environmental Performance Index at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland. India was right near the bottom of the 133 countries reviewed. What is ironic about this rating is that I do not believe that New Zealand would be able to compete with India in sustainable design and green infrastructure initiatives.

In India, necessity is great motivator, and we in the New Zealand landscape industry seem comfortable and far from motivated to create a sustainable approach to our work. At the conference in 2004 we acknowledged that we had a long way to go, but we would do better; in the conference summary we said that we would:

“Take responsibility – We are all part of the urban sustainability problem- we all have to be part of the solution”; and

Intervene selectively through design- make the most of opportunities for creative change whenever and wherever they occur”.

There is little evidence in the projects received this year for the 2006 awards that sustainability was of any significant focus in New Zealand. This year, the sustainability award will not be presented.

The award is about recognizing excellence, work that helps to move the industry as a whole ahead in the field in sustainable design, that breaks new ground and pushes forward our understandings of environmentally responsive design and planning.

Though none of the projects submitted this year would fall into the category of excellence in sustainable design; the following 3 projects deserve an honorable mention for their work in best practice:

Megan Wraight 's use of swales and wetland to strengthen her cultural heritage design approach at the Whitireia Polytechnic;

Boffa and Miskel's use of wetland as an educational resource at the Kristin School; and

Isthmus' use of recycled materials at the Matakana Market

...are all positive steps in the right direction and justly deserve mentioning.

Materials

As an industry we still have a long way to go. We need to start focusing on and understanding the cost of our work to the environment. As designers we need to understand the embodied energy of the materials we use. For every one ton of concrete we specify on our plans we are responsible for at least 4 tons of carbon dioxide produced that ends up in our atmosphere.

NZ currently suffers from 40% more UV than the United States and the second highest rate of skin cancer rate in the world. We as an industry have the power to partially control the annual carbon dioxide emissions in New Zealand through the way we specify materials.

Each landscape architect in this room will be responsible for specifying thousands of tons of carbon dioxide during the course of their career. We can not avoid the use of materials but it is important that we do it carefully, with an understanding of the materials that we use and their environmental cost.

We need to understand the difference between sustainability and "greenwash". Specifying eco source hardwood timber from small pacific islands such as Papa New Guinea and Australia is not a sustainable approach. No matter how ecologically the timber plantation was managed and harvested it does not balance the huge embodied energy and the consumption of fossil fuels used to ship it 4-6000 km across the Pacific Ocean.

As landscape architects we continue to design as if we will always have access to the same materials. The World Resource Institute in 1992 created a list of existing reserves of raw material estimating that there were 55 years of nickel and 105 years of Chrome left in the world reserves.

This is relevant because stainless steel is composed of 18% Chrome, 10% nickel. As landscape architects this only gives us only 41 years left to use trendy stainless details. The other option is that we could start reconsidering the way we detail our work.

As they say in law "ignorance of the law is not a defense". We work within the structure of the ecological law and information is readily available on all these

issues of embodied energy and materials. Google could become a primary tool of landscape architects and that may benefit the New Zealand environment.

Design

Understanding the issues of sustainability and applying them may not be enough. I think we, as an institute, need to address deeper issues in design that have a secondary and very real flow on effect upon sustainability. What determines the life expectancy of a landscape or urban design and what impacts does a design with a short shelf life have on the environment?

In 1988 the judges had this to say about the winner of the George Malcolm award, the supreme design award:

“The design approach was particularly sensitive and appropriate to its cultural setting philosophically and formally derive from a combination of natural and cultural forms they acknowledge, explicitly and appropriately the substantial Maori and Pacific island Polynesian populations that live in Manakua city they establish landscape architecture as a strong and relevant force in the making of public spaces and heralds its emergence in what may become a uniquely New Zealand urban design expression”

Tonight the same site, Manakua Square, won one of New Zealand’s highest landscape design awards but what is interesting is that the 1988 description could applied equally to the 2006 design. They are both great designs but it begs the question: how does a landscape design, considered to be the best in NZ at the time require being replaced after only 15 years?

What I do know is that in 1988 the Manakua site cost the community at least two thousand five hundred tons of carbon dioxides, for the concrete pavers alone, and that is only one of many costs. This figure does not consider the cost of the other materials such as timber and steel or the financial cost to Manakua’s rate payers. What is it about our design approach that has created a situation where a high profile design such as Manakua square had such a short life expectancy?

Manakua square is only but one example, there are many others we could focus on such as Cathedral Square or The Cashel Street mall, New Brighton in Christchurch alone or many other rapidly dating pedestrian malls or main street developments around the country.

Where are our 100 year iconic urban landscapes and what is the environmental cost to New Zealand and her communities both present and future?

Closing

It is difficult to stand here tonight and not present the award, this decision that was not made lightly by the judges. In saying that, we hope this decision will spark thoughtful and professional debate with a positive outcome for the New Zealand environment that the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects, if audited, could stand proud of the decisions made.

I also hope that my daughter can enjoy the same quality of environment and precious landscapes that I had as a child growing up here. This is not about us but the future, it is about caring for our Tūrangawaewae, our place to stand. The place that represents us in this world.

Thank you.