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A CASTLE IN THE AIR IN CHELTENHAM: THE REALISATION OF A LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE DREAM

1961. The year the Beatles first appeared in the Cavern Club in Liverpool. It was the year Spurs achieved the double: league title and FA cup. The farthing ceased to be legal tender in the UK. It was also the year that landscape architecture education began in makeshift studios in the Pump Room, Cheltenham, possibly the grandest of the town's Regency buildings.



But what were the beginnings of this course? Who were the major players in its creation? Why Cheltenham? What were the early years like? While over some time I have accumulated anecdotal evidence from former staff and students, notably John Simpson and Peter Boswell, it is really thanks to information revealed in Stuart Sutcliffe's letters that I am able to describe the context of the nascent course in landscape architecture in some detail.

Stuart Sutcliffe was, from September 1959, a member of staff at the Cheltenham College of Art, responsible with three others for the teaching of architecture there. Times were difficult for non-university-based courses and many, including Cheltenham, were threatened with closure, but the RIBA accreditation panel that year recommended a stay of execution if only the local authority (Gloucestershire) could guarantee a "great deal more in the way of resources". The buck got passed around between RIBA, the college and the authority – there were even suggestions for a new university to be built at Staverton Airport, but that faded – until the architecture staff themselves decided to grasp the nettle and make a case for developing a course that "did not ape other better endowed schools, but that had a uniqueness that grew from our surroundings and local resources: the art college, the technical college and schools, local skills and offices, and most of all the local environment of the Cotswolds" (1).

The curriculum was to be restructured and design projects would be focused on the rural (farmland and villages) and urban environments (parks and towns). Previously Stuart Sutcliffe had worked for Crawley Development Corporation where many housing developments involved contributions from landscape architects sometimes including Bodfan Gruffydd who had arrived at Crawley from Harlow to take over from Derek Lovejoy as chief landscape architect to the new town. "Whereas Derek had had an architectonic approach to landscape, Bodfan's was organic, building on landform and climate, creating place shelter and always providing *something for the eye*". This new insight into the relationship of architecture and its environment was to inspire Stuart to conclude "Who better to introduce this programme of relating building design to specific environments than Bodfan Gruffydd?"

So Bodfan was initially invited to give two introductory talks on the rural scene and urban landscapes. During his preparatory visits, evening discussions ranged widely and "expanded on the idea of architects learning through landscape to landscape architects sharing the same opportunities. Why not a full-time landscape course?" Realising that the landscape architecture course at Reading was winding down, Bodfan, as the then chairman of the education committee of the ILA under the presidency of Sylvia Crowe, was only too aware of the continuing need for official recognition of the profession through formal educational provision, certainly in a period of obvious expansion. (The employment of landscape architects in local authorities had trebled during the decade.)

Several meetings followed in November 1960, one in particular being held at Stuart's house in Charlton Kings. It was the first meeting of the key protagonists: Messrs Tolson (HMI), Reggie Dent (college principal), Ian Abbott (head of school), Bodfan Gruffydd and Stuart Sutcliffe. Bodfan recalls amusingly being greeted by the principal with "My God, a hooker in the scrum!" – an astonishing comment given that it was the one thing Bodfan excelled at at school. "How on earth did you know that?" "Oh I can pick 'em anywhere". With that the ice was broken, they chatted about rugby over coffee, the meeting progressed, the main agenda item expanded on their *castle in the air* and the "landscape school was born" (2) with Reggie Dent declaring that such a course "would go like a bomb in Cheltenham" (3).

With the decision confirmed to start a full-time course in landscape architecture in September 1961 ("only ten months away") and to integrate it with the architectural programme, the period that followed was a very active one in terms of further negotiations (with the local authority, the Institute of Landscape Architects and with the College of Horticulture at Pershore) which involved course planning, imperative publicity (there had to be a viable number of applicants, interviewed and places offered) and the appointment of qualified staff.

By good fortune, Bodfan's brother-in-law was director of education for Gloucestershire and it came to light that the local education authorities of

Gloucestershire and Worcestershire had a reciprocal sharing arrangement which meant the horticultural facilities at Pershore came under discussion in a mutually advantageous way. “Thus it seemed possible to marry the art of Gloucestershire to the science of Worcestershire” (2). Regarding staffing, Gordon Patterson (ex Stevenage) was approached to see if he would take charge of the landscape course from the second year onwards and John Ingleby, a landscape architect in private practice near Bristol, was appointed part-time.

By September 1961 the idea of a 3-year course had been dropped, replaced with a 4-year diploma. The concept of an integrated first-year for all students (architects, landscape architects and planners) was educationally sound: as Peter Boswell remarks, this was an “exciting vision of cognate subjects being taught side-by-side so that they might carry this interactive experience into their professional lives and hopefully break down perceived barriers”. For landscape architects, being educated in an art college also brought the benefits of an ambience of design and creativity (4).

The second year for the landscape students would be spent at Pershore, integrating horticultural aspects into design projects (plant knowledge, soil formation, ecological survey, drainage). The third year would comprise joint projects with the architects back in Pittville and the fourth year, the development of professional skills and a thesis. The upgrading of the architectural course was not forgotten and the equivalent technical input to that which the landscape architects got at Pershore was arranged with Loughborough and the local technical college.

In Stuart Sutcliffe’s words, “We launched this fragile craft in September 1961 with three first year architectural and 14 landscape students” and when the RIBA visiting board returned they were “impressed with the developments [and] impressed enough to say there was a great deal of potential in what we were proposing, but not enough evidence to see how it would work out in fact.”

Well it did work out in fact as its longevity confirms, and while the course has undergone many changes over the years, subjected to the inevitable vicissitudes of local and national educational policies, landscape architecture at Cheltenham has more than survived; indeed it has flourished, continuing a passion for the subject and vocation which reflects on its origins at the start of the Swinging Sixties and clearly augurs well for another 60 years...

Robert Moore

(1) private communication, Sutcliffe to Aylwin Sampson, 5th May 1982

(2) private communication, Gruffydd to John Simpson, undated

(3) private communication, Sutcliffe to Gruffydd, 11th November 1960

(4) private email, Peter Boswell 14th June 2021

(5) Roger Gill & Ianto Evans (1964) *Architects’ Journal* 15th April vol 139 p 841