

# Opening Address: The Urban Forest: Integrating Approaches

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The timing of the Trees, People and the Built Environment II conference had real significance for Farrells as a practice, as it brought together so many different professions and practitioners concerned with the built environment. The emphasis of the conference on cross-disciplinary collaboration and dialogue, aimed at creating a richer and more complex urban environment, is at the heart of what was proposed in the recently published Farrell Review.

The Farrell Review, officially launched in March 2014, is an independent review of architecture and the built environment led by Sir Terry Farrell with a panel of leading industry figures. It is perhaps no accident that Sir Terry was invited by the Culture Minister Ed Vaizey to undertake this review, because throughout his career Terry has consistently advocated the view that we need to be more joined up. I think Farrells' work has always exemplified the best of what can happen when professionals actually work together.

There is already a terrific interest in architecture and the built environment in today's society, and we must find ways to further build on this through educating our young people in schools. Starting early and extending learning into later life is absolutely fundamental. In this context, the Review promotes the creation of 'urban rooms' in our villages, towns and cities to inform and provoke debate about our urban environment. London already has a tremendous resource in New London Architecture, and around the country architecture centres and urban rooms are educating and informing people about what is happening in and around their own city.

Another aspect of widening the debate about the built environment and democratising architecture proposed in the Farrell Review is the idea of a more inclusive form of design review for the new proposals emerging for our towns and cities, as well as existing places like high streets, housing estates and parks. The Farrell Review promotes the idea of adopting a more broadly based *PLACE* review, an acronym for Planning, Landscape, Architecture, Conservation and Engineering. The key objective is to enable a more holistic overview of how our towns and cities are shaped, and to promote more joined-up thinking between professions and professional bodies such as the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Landscape Institute, the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Institute of Civil Engineers, as well as English Heritage, who are a hugely important body in the conservation of our cities.

As part of the Review process, Farrells held a number of workshops around the country, including a landscape and urban design workshop, where a number of important people from the world of landscape contributed very effectively.

Nick Grayson, a key player at Birmingham City Council, was part of the Birmingham workshop and is quoted specifically in the Farrell Review:

*Nowhere else in the world understands ecosystems the way that we do in the UK. Birmingham is the first city in the country to map its ecosystems and the impact that is having on the economy. It fundamentally shifts your view of the city and it also shifts your view of what needs to be changed.*

**John Letherland<sup>1</sup>**  
(on behalf of Sir Terry Farrell)

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Also included in the Review is this quote from Sue Illman, immediate Past President of the Landscape Institute,

*There must be a focus on 'liveability' when discussing cities.*

This statement is absolutely key to the kind of work that we engage in as a practice. It has led us into all kinds of avenues of research and exploration into what makes great 'places' and how to make our towns and cities more sustainable and more liveable. As Sir Terry notes in the Review:

*It has become clear from our work and experience that the design and stewardship of streets and pavements are the most highly valued part of the built environment by the majority of the public. Ironically, these priorities are very often completely the reverse of those of the development community and the built environment professionals, whose real focus is on the building, the object, and not the spaces between the objects.*

This is the key issue that differentiates good urban design from architecture, and we must begin by focussing on the spaces between the buildings in our urban design work, as well as in our architecture, when designing our towns and cities.

We are an urban species, and *liveability* is the key to making the successful transition from the rural species that we once were. Worldwide, more of us now live in cities than in the countryside, and what is more we are now living in cities of immense size and scale; 20 million people is now commonplace in many cities in Asia, and it is expected that cities in excess of 40 million population will exist in the not too distant future. Clearly, the issue that we need to address is how we make those places decent places for people to live.

We need more *planning* before *design*, and what is more it needs to be the right kind of planning. Crucially, the work that Farrells has done over the years has deliberately explored beyond the red line of the site into bigger-picture thinking. You would think this was the province of town planners; however, for a variety of reasons town planners do not seem to do much planning these days and are more focussed on 'development control'. Very often they make the excuse that there is a lack of funding to enable this, but actually it is a false economy *not* to plan.

I think we know instinctively what good places are; we value and cherish them, we make laws to protect and preserve them, and more likely than not we go on holiday to these places. We train our architects for seven years before they are allowed to practice, yet compare the city plans by the eminent architect Corbusier with the wonderful spaces and places in Parma and Bologna that are created unselfconsciously when architects are not necessarily involved. So why don't we get the places that we deserve?

The critical difference, of course, is between object-positive thinking and space-positive thinking. Architects are trained to focus on the object, the thing, the building; in contrast urbanists and landscape architects focus on the spaces between them.

The great urbanist Jane Jacobs, in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, described this notion very coherently as something called 'organised complexity'. This expression captures the really liveable part of what cities are all about; it is the complexity and diversity of activity of what happens in the streets and spaces between buildings that is crucially important.

Darwin wrote about it and described his notion of the '*entangled bank*'. He put forward the view that what we see in nature may look like random chaos, but is in fact *organised complexity*. The complex interdependency or ecosystem that exists in nature also exists in our towns and cities, and this concept of natural order in urbanism has been described as *urbiculture*. It is crucially important that our city designers in all their various disciplines – the planners, architects, landscape architects and engineers – understand the need to work together create a richness and diversity in the urban environment.

The trees in the sketches below are a way of describing what I mean. When single trees are planted in grassland in isolation, they are very beautiful in themselves as objects, but they do not create the rich and diverse natural environment that Jacobs or Darwin described.

However, when they are grouped into a self-ordering collective or woodland, all kinds of other things are found to be going on. The trees in the upper canopy reach upwards towards the light, whereas the trees at the side are much smaller and reach outwards, trying to get as much light as they can. The smaller plants in the undergrowth in the midst of these trees are



**Figure 1:** Trees planted in isolation do not create a rich and diverse natural environment

competing for the reduced amount of light filtering through the canopy, yet nevertheless they thrive because the imperative to grow upward is replaced by the incentive to spread sideways. When the seasonal cycle is complete, the leaves fall and create humus that enriches the soil and allows the next generation of growth to take place.

It is clear that there is growing importance in landscape thinking in the built environment, and in the role of people like Monty Don and Dan Pearson in spreading the word about the importance of gardens and food production at a very accessible level to most people. We worked with Dan recently on a master plan for Earls Court and were impressed with his focus on place making and continuity in the landscape. In a recent article that Dan published, he made a very interesting comment:

*I like the idea of planting for longevity and find myself increasingly drawn to the idea of planting for the future.*

If you transpose the word 'planting' for 'planning', that pretty much summarises the way we could and should approach the design of our towns and cities. They are exactly the same principles as master planning, and there is a strong relationship between urban design and landscape in that respect.

The crucial connection between natural history and the places we make is well known, and summarised very well in these two books: *The Making of the English Landscape* by W.G. Hoskins and the more recent book by Harry Mount, *How England Made the English*. To quote from the introduction to Mount's book:

*In an island made of coal and surrounded by fish, you're never going to get cold or starve.*

This to me summarises how landscape and landscape character have such an impact on our lives and the places we create, and it brings me to the importance of landscape, and the spaces between buildings, in relation to place making.

To conclude, our research work and exploration into what makes great 'places' and how to make our communities more sustainable and more liveable continues unabated. Farrells is in the process of establishing a new study centre at Great Maytham in Kent, where we intend to establish and grow an archive of Landscape Character and Urban Typologies. It is intended that the archive will become a centre of excellence that will continue to contribute towards thought leadership in place making and place shaping in the South East.

I hope I have been able to articulate something of the importance of space-positive thinking in the design of our towns and our cities, and the absolute imperative of cross-discipline collaboration to achieve this.