

# “Landscape Conservation on Span Estates”

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### ABSTRACT

Span was the vision of the architect Eric Lyons (1912-80). His aim was to provide a new style of private estate development, ‘affordable, well-designed homes in landscape settings, which would foster a village community atmosphere’ (Simms, 2001: 54). Span was ‘a bridgehead’: it spanned, in Lyons’s words, ‘the gap between the suburban monotony of the typical spec’ development and the architecturally designed, individually built residence that has become, for all but a few ... financially unattainable’ (Span, 1960). Early 1960s promotional literature described his vision as follows:

Go to any Span development and you will discover ... what Span has to offer. Perfect settings, visually uncluttered; a sense of spaciousness and elegance totally unlike any modern speculative building you have ever seen ... A genuine twentieth century contribution to better living made for people who regard it as vitally important.

Span and Lyons’s concept were influential on estate design and management in the second part of the 20th century, but what is the situation in the twenty-first century? Because the estates were created between thirty and sixty years ago, it is inevitable that changes have taken place, particularly

in their communal landscapes. This paper, therefore, considers a number of issues concerned with the ethos, current situation and maintenance of Span estates. Most importantly it evaluates why (or, indeed, if) Span estates should be conserved and, if so, how this can best be achieved.

### THE DEVELOPMENT AND CHARACTERISTICS OF SPAN

After the Second World War, working with architect Geoffrey Townsend (1911-2002), Lyons started to build speculative group housing around Twickenham in south-west London. Townsend found the sites and acted as property developer, while Lyons did the designs. They set out plans to create ‘total environments’; buildings, planting, roads, car parks and children’s play spaces integrated within, to quote Townsend, ‘a pleasant and stimulating background for day-to-day living’ (Townsend, 1955: 72-3). Key to Lyons’s vision was the establishment of residents’ societies for the management and maintenance of each estate. He believed that this would preserve the visual unity of the houses and the integrity of the communal landscape, and would positively encourage interaction between residents. Between 1948 and 1984 Lyons and his colleagues built 63 developments in the south of England, from 1957 under the name

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Span Developments Ltd. The estates were in attractive suburbs, mostly near London, or towns such as Oxford and Cambridge. The housing design evolved as terraces or blocks of distinctive Scandinavian-style buildings with the landscape flowing 'around the buildings without the interruption of hedges or individual front gardens' (Edwards 1981, 176). Uniquely, to quote Lyons (1977: 495):

The architects designed the landscape hand-in-hand with the design of the dwelling; and it was the integration of roads, car-parks, children's play spaces etc – that created an ambience and scale hitherto unknown in housing for ordinary people.

Influenced by the Radburn concept of separation of cars and pedestrians, instead of parking outside each house, Span produced separate car parks and 'car squares' that were screened by planting (Figure 1). The design meant that residents walked through the communal gardens and this encouraged informal meetings and the opportunity for residents to get to know each other. Street furniture was carefully detailed; all features from signs, house/ flat number plates, lampposts, garden lamps and bollards were specifically selected or purposely designed to develop a sense of cohesion and belonging. The mushroom-shaped outdoor lamps became a signature of Span housing developments (Figure 2).

Early schemes were small two- and three-storey flats with densities of 50-80 persons per acre and little landscaping, as at Oaklands, Whitton (1948), but by the early 1960s, and in collaboration with the building



Fig. 1: Parking court at Fieldend, Teddington (Photo: author)



Fig. 2: Span signature mushroom lamp. Reproduced in Simms (2006: 120) (Photo: Tim Crocker)

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contractor, Leslie Bilsby, and the architect and landscape architect, Ivor Cunningham, this had been extended to larger schemes of courtyard flats such as at Parkleys, Ham Common (1956); The Priory, Blackheath (1956); and Highsett, Cambridge (1960) (Figures 3); and to single-family terraced housing with private and communal gardens, such as Fieldend, Teddington (1961) (Figure 4).

In the mid-1960s Lyons proposed a more ambitious project - 'a new kind of village in attractive surroundings ... [where] the architectural quality of the village will be achieved by a close relationship between buildings and landscape' (Span, 1962). This became New Ash Green in Kent, a community of neighbourhoods which Lyons saw as 'Designed for today, for a multitude of different ways of individual living' (Ambrose, 1967: 63). Lyons ended his association with Span in 1969 after New Ash Green suffered financial difficulties during a national economic slump and was eventually forced to sell to Bovis. He returned in 1976 to work on four housing schemes in Blackheath and to begin Span's last development, Mallard Place, on a riverside site at Twickenham.

### ARE SPAN ESTATES GOOD EXAMPLES OF POST-WAR DESIGN?

Although Lyons claimed to be proposing a 'new style' of private estate his vision was in tune with interwar thinking on the design of houses and housing developments. On 13 October 1938, the 'Small House' Exhibition had opened at the RIBA. Although primarily concerned with improving the design of

individual houses, its focus was also on estate layout (Howlet, 1938: 26). It condemned the 'vast streets of treeless land' of speculative houses interwar suburban development as well as local authority low-density estates of semi-detached houses or short terraces with private gardens. It proposed instead alternatives that were described as 'a true



Fig. 3: Highsett 1, Cambridge. Reproduced in Simms (2006: 148) (Photo: Tim Crocker).



Fig. 4: Terraced housing at Fieldend, Teddington (Photo: Nick Collins).

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expression of contemporary life, free from any mimicry of the past and yet worthy of our past tradition' (RIBA, 1938: 3).

Emphasis was on the house in its landscape, which was to be 'contented and intimate, the perfect background for a domestic architecture' (ibid.: 7). The layout of groups of housing merited particular attention, the suggestion being that instead of single units in their own plots of land, 'houses should be grouped in terraces and squares to take advantage of natural features and contours, trees and open views' (ibid.: 8). Small service roads to the houses and garages were recommended to give 'the front rooms a view of grass and trees instead of an expanse of asphalt'. The planting of new trees and the incorporation of existing mature trees into the layout of an estate were considered essential.

After the insecurity of the war years, the concept of community was also fundamental to government guidance on estate design (MOH, 1949). It was thought that a mix of private and communal gardens would encourage this sense of community, particularly if the houses or flats overlooked the communal areas. New thinking on housing in the post-war period, therefore, was based on these three key principles - an integrated design approach, the incorporation of existing landscape features, and the development of community. Lyons was well versed in this current thinking when he began work again with Geoffrey Townsend after the close of war.

The question, 'What is the essence of a Span estate?' was posed to Ivor Cunningham, who

worked with Lyons from 1955. It elicited the response that it is the total design concept – the relationship of the built form to the spaces (Cunningham, 2001). 1960s Span promotional literature expanded on this:

It is very pleasant to live in an environment in which proportion and harmony are acknowledged to be relevant, in which the site and its trees and the architecture achieve unity and in which no detail fails to contribute happily to the total effect ... Sites are not bulldozed into a drearily level conformity: established trees are retained, roads follow natural contours, lawns sweep naturally into vistas, planting enhances the spaces rather than merely fills them.

Both Lyons and Cunningham were convinced of the advantages of retaining existing landscape features, particularly mature trees, and this resulted in unique layouts, such as at Templemere, Weybridge (1965). Templemere is one of several Span schemes built on Lord Lincoln's 18th-century Oatlands Park, a landscape embellished by William Kent and Henry Holland. Special offset 'pavillion' houses with large picture windows were designed there to accommodate the existing mature cedars.

Landscape was the starting point for all Lyons's designs and Ivor Cunningham was the major contributor to this (Lyons, 1960). In an unexecuted design for a Coventry estate (1957) Cunningham described his approach as 'wall-to-wall landscape carpeting', conceived as a 'romantic layout of curving paths, free forming groups of plants and trees and grassed areas that

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overlapped and interlocked with each other; the whole composition framed by the house fronts and the screened car parking areas' (Cunningham, 1980) (Figure 5). He stated that 'By facing the houses onto a pedestrian-only green the landscape became the social as well as the spatial focus of the estate'. A few years later the design was incorporated into Corner Green, Blackheath (1959).

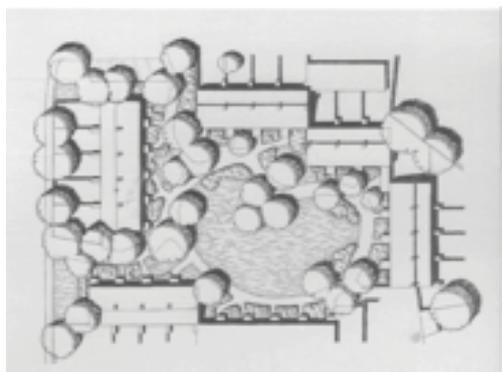


Fig. 5: Unexecuted design for St Nicholas Street, Coventry. Reproduced in Simms (2006: 41)

The early Span planting schemes were primarily concerned with functional issues (Woudstra, 2006). At Parkleys Geoffrey Townsend, a keen horticulturist, conceived the landscape design, but no formal planting plans were drawn up, leaving Cunningham to lay out the pre-ordered plants with the assistance of gardeners from the nursery on which the estate was built. At The Keep, Blackheath (1957) the small front gardens were divided from the communal space by low shrubs such as lavender (*Lavendula* 'Hidcote'), berberis (*Berberis verruculosa*) and cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster simonsii*). Strategic planting here and in other early schemes was used to soften the corners

of buildings and to screen car parks, as at Fieldend.

At Corner Green the planting was more informal, with smaller plant groupings reinforcing a sense of the domestic. At Fieldend the planting by Michael Brown and Cunningham was more naturalistic and included low plantings of *Hypericum* and ivy and *Vinca*, offset with strategically placed hardy shrubs to complement the sweeping areas of lawn and groups of tree. Jasmine and clematis covered the end walls of the terraces. There are detailed planting plans for a number of developments and these provide information on the palette of plants used. This included popular contemporary shrubs such as pampas grass (*Cortaderia*), *Fatsia japonica*, spirea, juniper, philadelphus, mahonia, phormium and roses (e.g. *Rosa rugosa*). Groupings were typically repeated throughout a scheme. The Dutchman Preben Jakobsen's who worked for Span 1961-69 increased the range of plants used as, for example, at Templemere (Figure 6). There swathes of veronica underplanted robinias, beds of shrub roses, lavender or *Bergenia* were planted alongside the houses and *Clematis Montana* covered the end walls.

### SPAN ESTATES TODAY

How then have Span estates fared over the 30-60 years since their construction and planting? Happily, the underlying design of the sites, in terms of the relationship of the buildings to the spaces, is still intact, as is the visual unity of the terraced houses and blocks of flats. However, the communal

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gardens have been affected by both maturity of the planting, particularly tree growth, and wear-and-tear on the hard landscaping.

Many Span estates were built on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gardenland and thirty or more years on many trees have outgrown their positions, overhanging roofs and tiles, obscuring entrances and their roots lifting/ cracking paving. They also reduce the light to flats and houses. In contrast, at Fieldend there were few existing trees and Cunningham and Brown planted nearly 400 trees including 240 silver birches (*Betula pendula*) and 30 semi-mature plane trees (*Platanus x acerifolia*). Although later described by Pevsner as 'the most sylvan of all Span developments in London' (Cherry and Pevsner, 1999: 552) the intention was to remove the silver birch trees when the plane trees had growth to create the ambience of a London square. This has been hampered by the Tree Preservation Orders (TPOs) now in force (Figure 7). In addition to the practical problems caused by tree growth, the imposing nature of many mature trees affects the sense of scale and proportion carefully detailed by Lyons.

As shrub and groundcover plants mature and outgrow their position their replacement is also a key issue. At New Ash Green there are good examples of the original shrub plantings in some areas but in others residents have created 'flowery incidents'. Also at New Ash Green, however, outgrown or neglected areas of planting have often been replaced by grass in the interests of low maintenance. Other examples of inappropriate planting include The Keep,

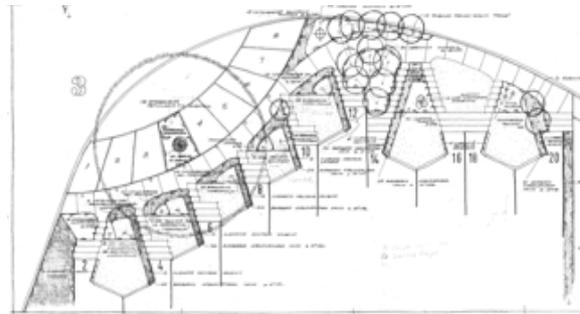


Fig. 6: Extract from Templerere landscaping plan by Preben Jakobsen (Ivor Cunningham, Landscape Design)



Fig. 7: Silver birch trees at Fieldend (Photo: author)

where new shrubs have been 'dotted' rather than being placed to create the masses typical of Cunningham's original plans. At Applecourt, Cambridge (1961) some of his defining shrub and tree planting (e.g. junipers, maples) have been replaced by decorative flower beds (Figure 8). On estates designed with picture-window houses and flats with open plan front gardens, permanently drawn curtains, blinds, shrubbery partitions and strategically placed plant pots indicate that many residents crave greater privacy than was originally intended. At New Ash Green, many residents use hedges and fences to obscure views to and from the communal green.



Fig. 8: Modern borders have replaced Span planting schemes at Applecourt, Cambridge (Photo: author)

Characteristic Span detailing included paving, cobbles, gravel, garden lights, and standard green lettering and numbering on the blocks of flats and window boxes. The hard landscaping, in particular the characteristic rectangular and hexagonal paving in the earlier estates, is in need of repair or replacement. At The Keep one of the car squares, originally of brushed aggregate with granite sett dividers and exposed aggregate bollards, has been resurfaced with concrete and new bollards installed. At Parkleys signage has been changed, mushroom lamps have been replaced with uplighters, and the council, which owns the road through the estate, has installed several street lights with modern designs. Road and pavement repairs have also been made using inappropriate materials.

### **CONSERVATION OF SPAN ESTATES**

Compared to the distressing states of some post-war landscapes the situation on Span estates may be seen as insignificant as both the buildings and the communal

gardens are well maintained. As private housing, decisions relating to issues such as tree growth, lighting replacement and shrub planting are the responsibility of the residents' societies committees established by Lyons as the means by which residents would be compelled to participate in management and maintain the integrity of Span estates. Is there, therefore, any justification for outside agencies to influence or attempt to influence their management? Are the landscapes sufficiently significant or 'at risk' to warrant statutory protection in a national context (listing or registration) or the local (conservation area, local list)?

Currently four Span developments have listed building status, all examples of Lyons's late 1950s flat-roofed low-rise blocks based on a courtyard design. One of these, Hallgate, Blackheath (1958), features Keith Godwin's sculpture, *The Architect in Society*, which commemorates Lyons's planning battles with Greenwich council. Listing safeguards the visual integrity of the building, but offers little, if any, protection to the landscape. Recent guidance in Planning Policy Statement 5 (PPS5) takes a more holistic approach to heritage assets focusing on value and character and whether the sum of the parts can transform the ordinary into something special.

Designation of a Span estate at a local level as a conservation area or protection within a conservation area might, therefore, be a more appropriate form of protection. Nineteen Span housing schemes are within the Blackheath Park Conservation Area in the London Borough of Greenwich; and

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in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames (LBRuT), Mallard Place, Fieldend and Parkleys have all been designated separate conservation areas. Richmond Conservation Area Statements for these indicate an awareness of the gradual erosion of the character of Span estates. This sounds promising but statutory protection is no guarantee for their safe future. Key to their successful management as acknowledged heritage assets is to 'get the residents and local authorities on board'.

Recent studies demonstrated that only a minority of present residents were aware of Span's philosophy and Lyons's vision of community identity and the 'sharing of responsibilities' (Simms, 2001). Few participated in estate management. Some attempts have been made to address this. For example, LB Richmond has recently drawn up 'a listed buildings guide for owners' although this does not address landscape issues. Most promising is a handbook for residents produced by the Residents' Society at The Lane, Blackheath (1964). This 'gives information about The Lane's architecture, landscape and management system, and offers advice to all those concerned in preserving its special character'. In line with the original Span ethos, it emphasizes the development of community, but also provides practical information on the repair and replacement of key features such as signage, windows and planters. It also confirms that:

In spite of inevitable changes over time, The Lane still has an attractive green setting though some of the variety and subtlety of

the original landscape designs have been lost. It is intended that, in replacing plants in future, the original plans will be followed as closely as is practicable so that as much as possible of the original 'atmosphere' of The Lane can be recovered.

The Lane Residents' Society has its original landscape plans and photographs, writings and the memories of early residents and promotes the uniqueness of Span by using this information. This must be the most effective method of ensuring the conservation of the estate.

### CONCLUSION

Management by residents was a key part of Lyons's vision as it encouraged a sense of community and ownership. This philosophy has been the basis of much government guidance on the funding and management of public spaces, such as urban parks, in recent years. Lyons's innovative designs are now recognised as part of the historic environment by architectural historians, practitioners and those in related fields. Statutory protection can only be a part solution to the conservation of Span estates. More effective will be raising the awareness of both residents and local authorities of the Span ethos and the provision of practical information to prevent unwelcome changes. How then can residents of all Span estates be encouraged to follow The Lane's example, with however the emphasis on landscape conservation? As a start the following could be considered:

- Provide residents with information on Span philosophy and its influence

on the design of the development. This understanding would hopefully encourage more residents to participate in the management scheme;

- A handbook with suggestions on appropriate repair and replacement of hard landscaping materials, tree management and soft landscaping maintenance could usefully guide the decision-making of residents' societies on all Span estates;
  - Information on Span planting concepts with examples of planting plans could be made available;
- Each scheme would benefit from a management plan to provide a statement of significance, a vision for the future and a planned scheme of conservation;
- Encourage liaison between representatives of Span management committees and relevant local authorities.

In the meantime Span housing estates are in danger of losing the landscape characteristics that make them unique post-war designs.

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