



opinion

MARK MERER

A sculptor/designer whose previous work has included major landart projects. His recent work focuses on objects in landscape and housing designs for rural development

Integrating housing and the landscape

Green buildings should be defined not simply by measures of energy efficiency, but also by their form, or design quality. The focus of green builds, so far, has been exclusively on the technology, forgetting that the physical world we are aiming to protect, or enhance, is an art form in its own right. We need to apply the same awareness of form and landscape in the design of green buildings that we apply to its methods or materials of build.

Many developers are building with the honourable intent of being 'green' and 'sustainable' but with conventional, high impact design – generally traditional-looking structures using sustainable construction methods, but clad in

brick or reconstituted stone, or slate to mimic historical styles.

Perhaps developers fear potential buyers would be put off by new and different designs. This is short sighted and a little patronising to the house-buying public. My hope is that, if the construction industry is able or embrace technical innovation, it will, if challenged to do so, embrace visual innovation. Green (turf or sedum) roofing, for example, makes the environmental impact of a building negligible, while vastly improving the visual impact in a rural situation. When you think about it, where there are rolling hills, which form of roofing will have the lowest impact, stone triangles or undulating turf?



Theory into practice: a soft-build terrace designed by Mark Merer

High density housing is necessary, but the edges of our rural towns are becoming scars on the landscape, with crammed rows of terraced houses, straight lined, hard edged, high impact builds. Let's be imaginative about how these new green building developments integrate with the landscape, so at the very least they don't spoil it and at best they add something to the landscape.

In this respect, sculptors and artists have something unique to contribute. It's inherent within our perspective and training to think about how an object relates to its environment. My own work has

increasingly focused on combining my sculptor's perspective of form with green technologies in what we call 'soft builds' – low impact, well designed, high density or individual houses.

Some of the greatest architects have recognised the importance of this perspective. Le Corbusier, for example, was a sculptor and an artist first. Frank Lloyd Wright said that form and function should be one in a spiritual union. If form doesn't get the same attention and, indeed, reverence, as function then this is to go against the very spirit of what green movement is about.

Visit: www.markmerer.com



column

KATE ASHBROOK

General secretary of the Open Spaces Society, chairman of both the Council for National Parks and the Ramblers' Association's access committee, and a member of the Countryside Agency board

Completing the map

Inner Londoners are losing out. Everywhere in England and Wales, except for the 12 inner London Boroughs and the City, has to have an official map of public rights of way – known as the definitive map. The Natural Environment and Rural Communities Bill, currently before the House of Lords, is a fine opportunity to require the inner London boroughs also to prepare such maps.

Definitive maps first appeared in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, which required all rural surveying authorities to prepare them. Before that, recreational walks and rides

must have been chancy affairs, since it was hard to know if you were on a public highway or not. The 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act made definitive maps compulsory everywhere – except for inner London.

The benefits of such maps are legion. If public highways are not officially recorded, they can be built or encroached on, smuggled into someone's garden, or just lost. Unrecorded paths are unlikely to be shown on popular maps so people may not use them and users may be challenged and not know, or be able to prove, that they have the right to be there.

"If public highways are not officially recorded, they can be built or encroached on, smuggled into someone's garden, or just lost"

London is rich in the sort of public paths that ought to be recorded – alleyways, Dickensian passageways and Pepysian stairs. They may be valuable as traffic-free short cuts, or as access ways to the River Thames.

Sadly, even when the boroughs are aware of their paths, they may be eager to get rid of them. Lambeth Council wants to close Brooklands Passage, a useful link between Wandsworth Road and New Covent Garden, on alleged grounds of crime. Southwark Council allowed Belvedere Place, a short cut between Borough Road and Southwark Bridge Road, to be illegally blocked by adjoining landowners, and then tried to close it. Fortunately, it was forced both to drop the closure and to reopen the route, and has now



even erected bollards to prevent a neighbouring car company from parking on it (*above*).

Definitive maps should encourage the authorities to take more pride in their paths. If the law is amended, we shall play our part in undertaking surveys, submitting claims for public highways and checking the maps. It will be well worth it to ensure that London's historic path-network is properly recorded and protected.

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