



Urban viewpoints – citylife meets wildlife

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Introduction

In March 2007 I presented to an invited audience the results of an innovative research project into the issues surrounding city dwellers and their engagement with the biodiversity around them. This research into urban viewpoints is part of Bright Sparks, a funding scheme for arts and design led research and development projects which explore the physical and social aspects of public open space in both urban and rural contexts run by Gunpowder Park in Essex.

Original inspiration



The journey started with a visit to the Hide 2 event at Gunpowder Park in 2005 where the artist Anita Rivera presented her beautiful wing design for a bird hide in the Lea Valley Park. This gorgeous structure made an enormous impression on me as did the courage of the Gunpowder Park commissioners who supported such an unorthodox approach.

This inspired me to apply for the Bright Sparks research grant to look at hides in urban spaces and rethink the traditional structure. The submission was assessed and working with the Gunpowder Park team the following objectives were drawn up:

- Address the nature of these structures
- What is currently of benefit from the user perspective
- What still needs to be offered
- Common areas of concern
- Identify creative options

Intensely excited by the prospect of designing a fabulous structure for viewing wildlife in cities I commenced exploration of the subject. I decided that I would use London as my test city, not only for practical purposes but for the diverse range of problems that would present themselves in such an urban sprawl.

Research – nature of structures



The first humbling experience of this process was to acknowledge that I am no wildlife expert and had much to learn. Extensive desk research was conducted on current practice for hide design and the codes of conduct for observation across many wildlife organisations, mostly in rural areas. There was definitely a sense of a standard wooden shed type design that was constantly regurgitated and the interesting acknowledgement in some circles that the only valid experience was a cold and draughty one. There was much scope for introducing a more innovative design that had appeal beyond that commonly used by the dedicated core of hardy wildlife enthusiasts.

There were notable exceptions but mostly I was somewhat depressed by the average bird hide design. I did however have a better understanding of the practical requirements of the viewer and viewee and a basis on which to start considering design. Given that the remit was to create specifically an urban structure I wanted to explore contemporary materials and fabrication. The desk research shifted to explore the nature of structures in other industries such as retail and exhibition design. I started to get very excited about the possibility of crossing over disciplines and using a new aesthetic for creating a striking viewing point in an urban context. The design started to take shape in my mind of a modular, multi faceted space with low maintenance materials and scalability.



Getting out and about

The next stage was to go out and directly experience existing structures in wildlife organisations. Visiting places such as RSPB Rainham and touring the Lee Valley Parks I not only engaged with the experience of being in a traditional bird hide, I also began to understand some of the issues facing managed wildlife spaces such as:

- Who currently goes?
- Who is missing and why?
- How do we broaden appeal?



There was a universal aspiration within these organisations to get more people to make the effort to visit these amazing spaces. A day touring the Lee Valley Parks with bird photographer and artist David Cottridge was not only fantastically entertaining but also gave me a sense of the very specific needs of a wildlife professional when it comes to hides. From this I started to understand that such professionals are generally very organised, ensure that their needs are met and that this was not the demographic for which I needed to design.

An uncomfortable realisation emerged from this encounter. David described how in certain areas of his work he arrived at a situation where familiarity between himself and the subject he was photographing was so skilfully established that there was no need for him to use a hide at all.

Now this is not what I wanted to hear.

This realisation was underpinned by a conversation with Ian Kendall in one of the Lee Valley Parks where a viewpoint had been constructed. It was simply a seat facing a wooded area in which bird food was regularly placed. The principle here was establishing a boundary between viewer and subject. Again no need for a dedicated enclosed space and I had this nagging sense that the necessity for my gorgeous structure was becoming somewhat undermined. This was again reinforced during my participation with the Wednesday walk group at RSPB Rainham and the fact that their use of the shipping container hides on offer was pretty tokenistic, even in chilly December.



Current user benefits

Ongoing exploration of more urban green and wildlife spaces continued with visits to Camley Street, Sunnyside Gardens, London Wetland Centre and Freightliners Farm, further helping to embed for me the user benefits of these spaces:

- Sense of event when visiting
- Most traditional viewpoints are in organised destinations
- Hides offered shelter and interpretation of biodiversity
- Interesting and innovative structures do exist
- Social event
- Anticipation of a rewarding spectacle
- Awareness of climate change and it's effect on wildlife
- Understand benefits of key initiatives in sustainable design practice i.e. green roofs
- Health benefits of getting out and being active

However it is worth noting that one often has to pay for the privilege of visiting the larger wildlife spaces, but it is always the case that the incentive to go has first to be kindled.

Urban Space Experts



Running in parallel to the research with wildlife organisations was an exploration of the need for hides from the perspective of the architects who design urban space. The following questions were put to a number of architectural and landscape architectural practices:

- What methods do you employ to evaluate the need or desire for people to view or engage with wildlife in your projects?
- If the desire is established, what is your approach for enabling this to happen?
- Do you have any examples of structures for viewing wildlife that you have included in your projects and what has the response been to them?

The feedback did not identify specific needs for viewing point structures within their projects. Did this mean that there was no demand for hides in cities? Again a bit worrying. I decided to bore a little deeper into those who influenced public space in Greater London. I had a number of conversations with professionals in the field and arranged a meeting with Martin Rodman of the Open Spaces department for the City of London. He was very enthusiastic about the principle of engaging people with the biodiversity that shares our cities. He referred me to Victor Callister in the City of London Planning department to present my ideas.

To this point I had only engaged with people who were extremely enthusiastic about the project. The meeting with Victor was a pivotal one as it outlined to me that the City of London would not entertain the building of a dedicated structure for viewing wildlife as they have very specific issues with regards to the throughput of the 300,000 commuters who pour into City every day to work. The priority was maintaining clear circulation of these masses in an essentially medieval street layout. There was therefore a policy of no interpretation on any subject on the streets of the City.

This juxtaposition of the responses of the Open Spaces and the Planning departments led me to investigate what was happening in other Boroughs. Was there any evidence in planning policy to encourage public engagement with biodiversity? This question was emailed to 3 public space influencers in each of the 33 Greater London local authorities, mostly directed at planning officers but all derived from the Planning for London Yearbook 2007. There was a limited response mostly coming from biodiversity officers within Boroughs with established and dynamic Biodiversity Action Plans (BAPs) but responses came from Barking and Dagenham, Lewisham, Lambeth, Camden, Tower Hamlets, Islington, Croydon and Richmond.

A common aim embedded in all the BAPs is to provide education and awareness for all sectors of the community and cite the importance of BAP's being considered at the early stages of developments, planning applications and issues relating to the Boroughs sites of importance to conservation (Ref: BAP Barking and Dagenham). The London Biodiversity Action Plan co-ordinated by the London Biodiversity Partnership and The GLA's Development Plan Policies for Biodiversity all drive forward the need for awareness and action but it is the local authorities

and regional development agencies that are ultimately charged with managing or endorsing use of much of the publicly accessible green space in our cities.

Emerging issues



An ongoing outcome of this research was an overview of certain issues concerning the following areas:

Urban space

- Different issues in different locations from urban to suburban
- Private space, permission maybe difficult to obtain for projects
- Street clutter policies may restrict new installations
- Temporary projects may better reflect the seasonal nature of species activity
- Blocked access to green space by transport links
- Brownfield areas often not valued as rich in biodiversity
- Difficult to hear wildlife in noisy cities

People

- 4 out of 5 people live in cities
- Insular communities don't like to leave their neighbourhoods
- Many people have no interest in visiting organised wildlife spaces
- Busy people in familiar places stop looking around them
- Sense of disconnection with nature in urban spaces
- Biodiversity illiteracy – widespread ignorance of common species
- Need to keep the message simple and accessible

Biodiversity

- Non traditional seasonal weather
- Decreasing hibernation
- Mis-timed migration means nature is out of sync
- Ephemeral nature of wildlife activity
- Loss of gardens = loss of habitat
- Flooding creates habitats
- Engaging the public mustn't put wildlife at risk
- Unnoticed subterranean habitats beneath the streets
- Unpopular species still need to be valued
- Wildlife chooses to live in cities
- 'Rustic aesthetic' not essential for attracting urbanite nature in cities
- Internet creates opportunities to view nature remotely

Turning Point

A chance encounter I had with a group of twitchers near the wildlife reserve at the East India Basin provided a project turning point for me. I happened to be walking by and noticed a group of men with binoculars who it transpired had responded to a rare bird alert and had travelled to see the nest site. When I asked them why they didn't use the hides which were provided, I was told that they were quite simply in the wrong place and they never used them. The guys just stood on the pavement and politely took turns observing the bird through the fence. At this point I finally accepted the basic principles of viewing wildlife:

- Identify interesting subject
- Establish place to see it from

The fact that the twitchers used the pavement underlined to me that dedicated structures were rarely necessary. The key fact here was that these enthusiasts knew what they were looking for and knew where to find it. I realised then that the main issue was finding my subject and then designing for it.



Ego versus research

To this point my meetings with the Gunpowder Park mentoring team had been focussing on my original objective of creating a structure. This massive shift of direction was an enormous personal struggle and one that was more problematic for me than Gunpowder Park team who maintained a flexible approach throughout. There was no doubt that my original aspiration of designing a sexy structure to adorn the front covers of the glossies was slipping away and this was quite a growing up process for me. At this point I had a reaffirmation of the project objectives:

- Don't duplicate the fine work of existing wildlife organisations
- Consult first – design later
- Talk to biodiversity experts to identify existing areas of interest
- Locate place from which to view it
- Get people to notice it – markers and interpretation.
- Bring nature to people in their local neighbourhoods
- Address issue of biodiversity illiteracy

My current practice within Mooch made me appreciate that the public realm is controlled by policy and various organisation's objectives, such as major regeneration projects and ongoing Government and local authority policy. All public bodies are obliged to regard biodiversity on their actions following the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (NERC) of 2006

My extensive mail shot to planners and urban space influencers as part of this research had made me more profoundly appreciate that connecting people and nature in cities may well be

an over arching policy objective but it was often down to the dynamism of gifted and determined individuals to make it happen. I wanted to impress them and I needed back up.

Bring on the wildlife experts

Through my investigation to date I had been given contact details for a number of respected biodiversity experts. After my meetings with people like David Cottridge I found that there is an enormous generosity of spirit within this field of expertise. I followed up on some leads to invite participation in a walking audit of urban space, simply in order to listen and understand what the experts considered to be of value.

Tour One:



The first of these journeys was conducted with David Bevan a leading plant specialist with many years of experience. Previously responsible for developing the Railway Fields nature reserve as conservation Officer for the London Borough of Haringey, he is now retired but still lecturing and a highly respected practitioner in his field. We took a tour in the Bounds Green area of North London a relatively suburban and leafy neighbourhood. A number of issues were thrown up as result of this very pleasurable chilly January stroll:

- Climate change is affecting early flowering
- Highlighting of the native versus exotic species debate
- Understanding that untidiness is good for nature
- Noticing everyday events and also rare events i.e. jewel beetle habitat
- Empty houses are rarely empty

Tour Two:

The next adventure was a little more central. Sheppard Robson Architects had participated in the questionnaire about dedicated structures and it was they who referred me to Richard Collingridge, previously of English Nature and now a freelance consultant advising on ecological issues for new build sites. We took a bustling, noisy walk from our meeting place at Waterloo Station and meandered towards the Elephant & Castle, culminating in a brilliant chat in a pub, a common activity for biodiversity aficionados. From this tour the following points were noted:



- Understanding that nature has chosen cities
- Many species are not shy (co-exist with people)

- Exploring undervalued green spaces
- Keeping your eyes open brings rewards
- Maintenance of structures can destroy habitats
- Food chains exist in unexpected places

Tour Three:

The hoot continued as I managed to nail down the legendary Dusty Gedge, a London based ecology expert leading in amongst other things bringing green roofs to London. We actually went out on two days in the Newham, Greenwich, Lewisham and Tower Hamlets areas looking at flood plains, rivers, brownfield habitats and existing ad hoc viewing points. This full on expedition highlighted the following issues:

- Biodiversity value of brownfield sites is an issue
- East London is rich in opportunity for observing wildlife
- A lot of unsung interest in nature amongst working class people
- Pre-conceptions of working class not valuing biodiversity challenged by Kidbrooke Estate
- Newham wasteland is an 'ecological gem'
- Wildlife is moving into man-made structures
- Flood alleviation of river Quaggy is prompting new habitats and access for people



Creative Responses

Throughout all of these tours I listened and photographed the various sites and opportunities as they were revealed to me. Each area had its own flavour and atmosphere but the key objective remained to consider the unique qualities from a biodiversity perspective to enable people to engage with and enjoy this amazing world. Again certain issues became consolidated:

- Site specific issues offer great opportunities
- Consider nick-ability – sensible advice from Tom at Camley Street Natural Park
- Consider ideas that can be easily piloted
- Tailor to specific needs of different boroughs
- Use existing routes and journeys to highlight the value of nature
- Tap into programmes of public information i.e. DLR local notice boards
- Change perceptions of public signage – i.e. 'No Ball Games' attitude
- Use existing marker formats i.e. rethinking tree tags
- Consider scale i.e. big sites need big signs
- Pique curiosity to nurture interest in the natural world around us
- Offer opportunity for engagement within the wildlife community

A series of concepts emerged from this process as a first response to these issues. It was also apparent that there's very little work outside of organised green spaces i.e. parks, reserves and

city farms, connecting people and nature. My objective is now to create a process using the wealth of expertise in the biodiversity community to inform the creative response that unites nature with people in their everyday lives.



Where do participants take this new interest?

One of the issues that had been niggling in the back of my mind was that it was all very well creating this egalitarian aspiration of accessibility to the natural world but:

- Is it working?
- Are people responding?
- How can we take them forward in their understanding?

The answer to this tricky question came in the form of a conversation at the London Wildlife Trust with Kate Mitchell of the London Biodiversity Partnership and Mandy Rudd of Greenspace Information for Greater London or GIGL. The GIGL website offers users the opportunity to log the sighting of particular plant or animal and also lists information to help identify various species. This growing database of information informs our understanding of changing species behaviour, highlights areas of biodiversity deficiency thereby underpinning biodiversity and planning policy. Mandy was more than happy for the GIGL website to be used on any markers in the public realm thereby starting to close the loop of public feedback and education.

Into the future

There was enormous enthusiasm for the principles of this research project from the vast majority of the participants and a number of opportunities presented themselves for example:

- GLA's areas of deficiency research
- The Green Grid project
- TFL
- RSPB innovative viewing points
- Partnerships with other Bright Sparks research projects

In March 2007 I presented the results of the research to date with much valued input on the day from David Cottridge, Kate Mitchell, Dusty Gedge and Mandy Rudd. There was very much a sense of this being a point in time for an ongoing journey of realisation of this work. There had been an uneasy reconciliation with the turning point in my research but once this pain barrier had been conquered the project started to fly with a new energy and sense of purpose. The opportunity to engage a wider audience in their everyday lives with the kind of experiences that had been enriching my life throughout this process, added a depth of satisfaction and wider value than that not been contained in the original aspiration.

Mooch is currently exploring interpretation of the wildlife occupying the nature reserve between the tracks of Hither Green station in Lewisham. This important green space often goes completely unnoticed by the commuters on the platforms and Mooch is working with Network Rail, the London Borough of Lewisham's Biodiversity department and leading botanist Nick Bertrand to encourage appreciation and understanding of this amazing resource.

Opportunities are now sought to further develop the principles that have been refined during this research. Looking at fresh ways to switch people onto nature, encourage public interest and education and support the biodiversity aspirations of those who shape our cities.

Contributing partners to Bright Sparks – www.gunpowderpark.org

- Landscape+Arts Network Services (LANS) in partnership with Lee Valley Regional Park Authority.
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- Green Places, the journal of the Landscape Design Trust is the media partner.

Organisations consulted:

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Individuals consulted:

- Eileen Woods – Creative Director – www.gunpowderpark.org
- Tony Beckwith – Artistic Director – www.gunpowderpark.org
- Gerry Pittaway – Project Manager – www.rspb.org.uk
- Dusty Gedge – Biodiversity consultant – www.livingroofs.org
- David Bevan – Botanist
- Nick Spawl – Urban Design Director – www.sheppardrobson.com
- Nick Bertrand – Botanist – www.creekside.org.uk
- Richard Collingridge – Ecology Consultant – www.collingridge.com
- David Cottridge – Wildlife Photographer & Artist – davidcottridge@blueyonder.co.uk

- Martin Kelly – Managing Director of Lovejoy – www.lovejoylondon.uk.com
- Richard Barnes – Biodiversity Manager – www.london.gov.uk
- Martin Rodman – Openspaces Manager – www.cityoflondon.gov.uk
- Victor Callister – Senior Planner at the City of London – www.cityoflondon.gov.uk
- Iain Boulton – Parks Projects Officer – www.lambeth.gov.uk
- Nick Pond – Biodiversity Officer – www.lewisham.gov.uk
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