

# A word...

By **Tim Waterman**

## Greenspace

It is commonly assumed, and often dogmatically trumpeted, that our cities will be better places with greater quantities of 'green space'. 'Green' is a word as replete with positive associations as 'space' but each as woolly and nebulous as the other. We now inelegantly mash the two words together to form 'greenspace' — which then becomes further devoid of meaning. The reality of 'greenspace' in most of the UK is actually a legacy of SLOAP (Space Left Over After Planning), those bits of gristle in the urban tissue exemplified by an unusable plot of unkempt lawn, surrounded by fencing, punctuated with beer cans, and festooned with flapping Tesco bags.

But what about that great object of our affection, the park? A good public park is a symbol of our collective wealth and the benevolence of government. Look at the Royal Parks, for example. They are beacons, not just to the British citizenry, but to the world, of the wealth and well-being of our nation. Elsewhere, though, some towns are simply shot through with holes of neglect masquerading as parks that are wells of unease and disease.

I went to Rio de Janeiro recently, interested to learn what I could from the public spaces of a country that is burgeoning. I found some mixed messages, but on the whole cause for optimism. Rio's great parks and squares are largely the legacy of either



colonial times or of heavy government investment in the 1960s, Roberto Burle Marx's Copacabana Beach being the most visible and memorable example.

I walked through another remarkable park, the northernmost area of the beautiful Flamengo Park, on a Sunday. Native species that were dear to Roberto Burle Marx are planted there, by his hand, and the precise geometries of modernist buildings float above the greensward. The historic centre of Rio is adjacent, with a range of fine buildings of different ages (but with notably execrable contemporary buildings), but, like the City of London, it is empty and desolate on weekends.

The sense of threat and abandonment that was evident in the city centre spilled over into the park. Human figures were barely visible in the dark under a pedestrian bridge, and a too-ripe human smell issued forth. Groups of indigents occupied groups of benches. Even a great park in a booming city can become emblematic of failure.

What perhaps impressed me most about Rio was the way the parks melded with the streets. Green infrastructure is absolutely everywhere in Rio, at least in the more salubrious neighbourhoods. Even simple tree pits do double duty as homes for both trees and vines, and plants are squeezed into every possible niche. Ipanema, particularly, is punctuated with squares that are full of life and just the right size, and the tree-lined streets make seamless links with the surrounding city. The whole city feels like a park. This is the best way for us to envision the future of landscape practice. Rather than marking out discrete sites for 'greening' we should see our task not as filling a void within a masterplan, but as an act of facilitation that is integrative, connective, and communicative. ●

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