

The Rolling Road of an Academic Career in Landscape

By Maggie Roe

An Explanatory Note:

When I first met Diedrich, not only was I impressed by his academic stature (and of course he is about 2ft taller than me), but I was impressed by his ability to make sense of difficult concepts and take knowledge from his large scale cross-disciplinary research and put it into meaningful presentations for his audiences. It seemed to me he was working at the ‘pointy end’ of landscape planning research and it was clear that he was both a good researcher and a good teacher. Over the years, our interests have converged and our paths have criss-crossed through ECLAS and LE:NOTRE events, and publication projects (e.g. Roe, 2012a; 2017a). This short piece reflects on an area that we have long had mutual interest – participatory landscape planning.

The Rolling English Road (1914)

*Before the Roman came to Rye or out to Severn strode,
The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road.
A reeling road, a rolling road, that rambles round the shire,
And after him the parson ran, the sexton and the squire;
A merry road, a mazy road, and such as we did tread
The night we went to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head.*

*I knew no harm of Bonaparte and plenty of the Squire,
And for to fight the Frenchman I did not much desire;
But I did bash their baggonets because they came arrayed
To straighten out the crooked road an English drunkard made,
Where you and I went down the lane with ale-mugs in our hands,
The night we went to Glastonbury by way of Goodwin Sands.*

*His sins they were forgiven him; or why do flowers run
Behind him; and the hedges all strengthening in the sun?
The wild thing went from left to right and knew not which was which,
But the wild rose was above him when they found him in the ditch.
God pardon us, nor harden us; we did not see so clear
The night we went to Bannockburn by way of Brighton Pier.*

*My friends, we will not go again or ape an ancient rage,
Or stretch the folly of our youth to be the shame of age,
But walk with clearer eyes and ears this path that wandereth,
And see undrugged in evening light the decent inn of death;
For there is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen,
Before we go to Paradise by way of Kensal Green.*

G.K.Chesterton, 1874-1936

Introduction

Chesterton's (1914) poem 'The Rolling English Road' is usually understood as a ballad written to express opposition to the introduction of alcoholic Prohibition into Britain. It was one that I first read as a child, and later, when I came back to it as a landscape planner, this poem meant something quite different to me. I was attracted by the landscape allusions and I understood it in a number of different ways, but primarily it made me realise that you get to where you are, not by a straight Roman-like route, but often by a meandering and, what initially seems to be, the wrong road. In a strange way, it also very much suggested what I had felt for a long time, that participation in landscape was not just about some kind of standard idea of allowing and encouraging people to take part in decisions relating to landscape planning, design and management, but something much deeper, much more visceral and fundamental, also much more random and unpredictable. It had resonance for me in terms of the way landscape can be studied as well as experienced, and my own knowledge and understanding of landscape had similarly been arrived at by an apparently haphazard route.

The Education of a Landscape Architect in Three Lessons

In 1994 I started a half-time job as a Lecturer at Newcastle University in the North-East of England. Some of the first projects that I took part in were the development of three Estuary Management Plans, based around the main rivers in Northumberland – The River Aln, the River Coquet and the River Tweed. These three projects were my 'teething' projects relating to the experience of public participatory working. In collaboration with a planner and an environmental scientist we took the first steps towards the understanding that sustainable landscape planning requires the participation of local communities and stakeholders in collaboration with decision-makers and experts – who may also be academics.

We learned several important lessons from this work. I remember clearly producing a plan for a public exhibition. On the plan was what I thought were to be discussion points and solutions related to the estuary – but of course the community didn't see it like that at all. And here was the first lesson: Anything set down on paper in this way is regarded by communities as something that has already been decided and is therefore a threat to real participatory working; so, they thought, what was the point of this so-called participatory meeting anyway? We learned our lessons well. This is not to say that there hadn't been much good academic study and on-the-ground work already done in this area, and this was the second lesson: before you start, find out what has already been done, not

only in terms of methodologies for successful participatory working, but also it is important to understand the culture of participation in a particular place.

Arnstein (1969) was perhaps the first academic in the built environment disciplines to articulate a theoretical understanding of participation. Her 'ladder of participation' is still one that students return to and academics frequently reference. However, the concept of participation is now understood to be much more slippery, but also fundamental to landscape planning, management and design, as set out and endorsed in the European Landscape Convention (Article 5c) which states that States Parties should 'establish procedures for the participation of the general public, local and regional authorities, and other parties with an interest in the definition and implementation of the landscape policies' (CoE, 2000). Michael Jones (2011) identifies useful examples of the general development of participatory approaches in different aspects of landscape planning since the advent of the ELC: in Germany (Luz, 2000), Switzerland (Buchecker et al, 2003; Hoppner et al, 2007), Denmark (Tress and Tress, 2003; Caspersen, 2009), Ireland (O'Rourke, 2005), England (James and Gittins, 2007), in Italy (Borsotto et al, 2008), in Norway (Daugstad et al, 2006), in Sweden (Stenseke, 2009) and more generally throughout Europe (Selman, 2004). However, the desire by ordinary people for some kind of participation in landscape decisions has a much longer history, as was demonstrated in the UK by the mass trespass of Kinder Scout, that partially led to the establishment of National Parks in England. MacEwen & MacEwen (1982:3) identify Olmsted, the 'father of landscape architecture and one of the least recognised geniuses of the USA', as being the first to 'formulate both the political philosophy and practical policies for national parks' in his report of 1865. His 'central idea was a democratic one', where not only access would be provided but the character of the landscape would be protected for the benefit of future generations; he linked this to the happiness and enjoyment of the whole community. This sounds very familiar to anyone who worked on the explosion of interest and real desire by governments for participatory working which came with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 (Roe, 2007). Experimentations in participatory working and landscapes and the development of methods can be found from the 1960s onward, but it was the principles embedded within Agenda 21 that emerged from UNCED that really identified the links between sustainable development and the rights and responsibilities of ordinary people in relation to environmental decision-making and policy.

The picture that has emerged since then and since the considerable amount of participatory work carried out, particularly in developing countries, is complex (Roe, 2012b). It is recognised that

participation in landscape can not only change landscapes, but also peoples' lives, as Jones (2011:28) suggests: 'Successful participation involves sharing knowledge and negotiating power relations, and can challenge oppression and injustice'. A key issue from much work in developing countries and with indigenous peoples is the importance of recognising different types of landscape knowledge(s), such as that expressed by Jules Pretty in work carried out over many years (e.g. Pretty, 1995; 2007a). This introduces the third lesson in my own realisation about participatory working which was: Do not underestimate the relevance and extent of local knowledge or the difficulty in extracting this as an 'expert' outsider. An outsider will never have this local knowledge as it is built of deep experience and understanding of place. An outside expert may have good knowledge, but it will be 'different' knowledge. So as a professional and/or academic working in this field, it is important to know your limitations in the process, and have a clear understanding of your role. In my experience the roles of insider, outsider, expert, local and policy-maker often become blurred, particularly if you are working in landscapes that you also live in or know well. While this used to bother me, it no longer does. I see participatory processes in relation to landscape planning as much more fluid than I used to. In recent years I have worked increasingly in the blurry area of intangibility in landscape planning; particularly in trying to capture through participatory methods how ordinary people can express their feelings, values, associations and perceptions of their ordinary landscapes. I'm interested in pulling out – of what sometimes feels like people's souls – the deep meanings of landscapes. This has coincided with an increasing emphasis in cross-disciplinary working by research funders and a realisation in policy circles in the UK that 'hard' science may tell us what the problems are, but not how to solve those problems, particularly when people's views, desires and values are concerned.

Interactions with Landscape and the Gift of Fantasy

'When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than any talent for absorbing positive knowledge.' ⁱ Albert Einstein, 1879-1955

In *New Cultural Landscapes* (Roe and Taylor, 2014) I explored the idea of interaction as a concept that extended the idea of participation in landscapes and how that could change our understanding of the way landscape planners could create new landscapes that would evolve to be highly valued by those who lived within or had some stake in those landscapes. Thinking in terms of interaction encourages a holistic approach that includes thinking about human and non-human species and

processes (Roe, 2016). This took me back to my roots in landscape ecology, while an increasing interest in new creative ways of working with communities sprang partly from my old interests in the arts and was very much influenced by the academic team then at Leeds Polytechnic, where I did my first degrees. My tutors there were Chris Royffe, Alistair Taylor, Martin Madders, John Kirkman and Kevin Thwaites (who is now at Sheffield University). It is easy to see now how their work was instrumental in my development. A third of the final year marks in the degree programme for landscape architecture was for a project within the pioneering ‘design and community’ programme’ (see Thwaites, 2015). As described by Madders and Royffe (1989:9): ‘involving both design and implementation, this project gives Landscape Architecture students the opportunity to explore, in response to contemporary pressures, alternative ways of improving landscape through the encouragement of community action and responsibility.’ In the case I worked on, our group designed a demonstration garden for the local William Merritt Disabled Living Centre in Leedsⁱⁱ and constructed it with the help of the local ex-offenders’ organisation, NACRO. At the time I did not realise what an enormous influence this work was to have on my career and on my subsequent research interests. In addition, a number of the Leeds staff had been involved in the innovative redevelopment of the housing in Byker in Newcastle upon Tyne. The Byker design approach, led by Ralph Erskine, was based on an understanding of the dynamics of the community and the strong connection local people had with the physical landscape. A multi-disciplinary team of architects and landscape architects set up office on the site and worked with the community to provide a network of private, semi-private and public spaces which could be policed by the community and were low-rise enough so that children could play within what was considered a safe distance from their homes.

More recently the focus on global warming impacts on landscape in policy and practice has also encouraged an interest in participation in landscape matters and in the mechanisms to effect behavioural change. There is often an assumption that knowledge is all that is needed for behaviour change – but perhaps not so. People’s behaviour in relation to landscapes is often difficult to predict: there is much personal denial when it comes to behaviour towards the environment generally, and knowledge doesn’t necessarily encourage a response that might lead to more environmentally responsible behaviour. A survey in American found that the more scientifically informed respondents felt less personally responsible for global warming and showed less concern about it. There seems to be co-denial going on. Denial involves self-censoring or ‘knowing what not to know’ (see Washington, 2013 p.92). It is important to develop methods in participatory working that addresses such complex behavioural issues. Being able to envision consequences, have visions and use imagination may be important, therefore the means to encourage this or facilitate it is also

important in participatory and collaborative working. As Julie Crawshaw (2018) has recently suggested, artistic work can be an important ingredient of landscape planning. Creative activities and artist-facilitators can provide help in engaging communities and policy-makers with landscapes in an embodied approach to helping people understand what Ingold (2000) and others describe as the immediacy of the lived experience. It allows for exploration of the meanings and associations that people have with the landscape (Roe, 2017b). This may sound obvious to academics working with landscape – even those in a so-called ivory towers - but it is far from being obvious to policy-makers stuck in a bubble of regulation and political expediency.

In my own experience, a reflective process over time that is freely given and enjoyable can both break down barriers and reveal other alternatives to both community members and policy-makers in relation to landscape problems. Creative practice can also provide space to consider other points of view; it can sharpen our senses to what dwelling in the landscape means; but it is also perhaps, and most importantly, about exploring and potentially transforming the way we think about living in the landscape and what that really means. After many years of participatory working with a range of stakeholders and communities, I would also suggest that participatory research needs to be carried out over a long time frame with a variety of approaches, and above all, it needs to be fun for communities. This is particularly important when working with children, but also for researchers in order for the processes to be truly engaging (see Roe, 2006; 2007b).

Chesterton's poem is full of fantasy and humour – finding oneself at one end of the country in order to get to another – it reminds me not only of days spent ambling in the landscape, but also of the nature of landscape studies themselves. I used to worry about those outside the discipline thinking that I was hopelessly distracted by many different interests, but I now consider this a strength of working in this field. Consistently interesting, distracting, often frustrating and always fascinating, I believe those working in landscape studies never fully retire and, luckily for those like me who still have some years to work, there is still plenty to research and numerous students to engage in the endlessly fascinating subject of landscape.

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ⁱ Cited as conversation between Einstein and János Plesch in Plesch, J. (1947) *János: The Story of a Doctor* (translated by Edward FitzGerald). London, Gollancz. p.207.

ⁱⁱ William Merritt Disabled Living Centre in Leeds see <http://www.wmdlc.org/>