

## **Elements of Visual Design in the Landscape**

By Simon Bell. 1993. E. & F.N. Spon, London. ISBN 0 419 22020 8. Paperback edition 1996. Stg£19.99.

Reviewed by J.F. Durand.

As may be inferred from the title, *Elements of Visual Design in the Landscape* is not a book for light reading, though the text reads easily indeed. Rather, it is a serious essay to bring visual design principles more readily into the realms of land management.

In the few lines of the foreword, Dame Sylvia Crowe, Landscape Consultant to the Forestry Commission from 1963 to 1975 – alas, now deceased after an inspired life which has benefited so many practitioners and users of the landscape – describes the task of landscape architecture as one of reconciling man's activities with the welfare of the landscape.

The author is eminently qualified to play a leading role in such pursuits. Simon Bell is qualified as both forester and landscape architect and is Chief Landscape Architect of the British Forestry Commission. His work in that role has been acclaimed and has in turn led to many assignments abroad in the area of landscaping and designing for recreation. He pays generous and ready tribute to former colleagues in forest landscaping, Duncan Campbell and Oliver Lucas, both of whom had trodden path-making trails before him. All three individuals have brought insights and skills to landscaping from the perspective of the professional forester.

The most recent work by Bell, *Design for Outdoor Recreation*, was reviewed in *Irish Forestry* 54(1). This work, also published by Spon, covers the approach to, and practicalities of, the provision of outdoor recreation. With Oliver Lucas' earlier work, *The Design of Forest Landscapes* (published by the Oxford University Press in 1991), the forester has been given consummate source books for inspiration and practical guidance.

In the book under review, Bell engagingly and with many examples illustrated by drawings and photographs, starts from the very basics of design - point, line, plane and volume - and then explores applications and introduces the many variables. The author draws easily on his wide experience at home and abroad and in a manner easily read and understood.

The public is increasingly aware of our environment and is more articulate in landscape matters. *Elements of Visual Design in the Landscape* seeks consciously to provide a vocabulary of visual taste. Such a vocabulary can only be of good, and will prove valuable in discussions of matters of concern, which the public will ultimately have to debate and also bear the cost.

What makes the book specifically interesting and apt to the Irish reader is its inclusion of Powerscourt, Co. Wicklow as one of three case studies, and its use of a view south over the estate's Triton fountain as its front cover illustration. The other two studies deal with the flowing, sinuous form of a National Museum in Ottawa, Canada and the natural landscape of Strathgry, Scotland, where forest operations are the principal landuse. The author appraises each, analysing the compositions that have led by design to masterly solutions of international significance.

The forester in a distant past was the guardian of the forest for a potentate's power and pleasure. In the modern age, the forester has become creator, as well as guardian, in managing a resource for multi-functional use. Bell's work is one of leadership by both word and deed. In the volume, he provides the descriptive and analytical words and terms and makes them all easily understandable. There is no doubt that foresters have become more aware of their landscape responsibilities, but there is no reason for complacency. In the discussion of what is desirable and what is attainable, Bell's words and examples can play an invaluable part in allowing the debate to be founded on sound rationale. This book is both a working manual and inspiring reference.

This reviewer was specially interested to read the author's appraisal of the alignment of the main garden axis at Powerscourt. He writes that placing the axis to the centre of the peak of the Sugarloaf, which dominates the setting, would have been too obvious a device. Perhaps the house front, which in turn was based on the fortress wall of centuries earlier, determined the axis for the redoubtable Daniel Robertson, the designer. We might think that Robertson, given half a chance, would have liked to have changed the alignment of the house or, indeed, move the Sugarloaf a few degrees to the east! The asymmetry of the hill itself is so well pronounced that it would have withstood any suggestions of being trite or twee.

Robertson could certainly echo the words quoted by Bell, that the ultimate objective in

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any design is to balance unity with diversity and to respect the spirit of the place. The magnificence of Powerscourt is indeed a fitting case study for so splendid a book as this, which will richly repay real and intense study by all landuse managers and planners.