

Interview

JANE DOBSON

CHARTERED LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT **JANE DOBSON** DISCUSSES FINDING DESIGN INSPIRATION EVERYWHERE, HOW HER EARLY YEARS AFFECTED HER CAREER PATH, AND MAKING THE TRANSITION FROM WORKING FOR A PRACTICE TO BECOMING SOLE PRINCIPAL AT HER OWN COMPANY



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How did you get started in landscape architecture?

I graduated from Edinburgh College of Art in 2007 and then completed a year in Newcastle at Colour Urban Design Ltd. That shaped my formative design principles and research skills, and was a very important part of my studies.

Straight out of university, I went to work for Brindley Associates, where I stayed for 10 years, reaching associate level. I gained fantastic experience in a broad range of landscape architecture aspects, such as landscape assessment, masterplanning, plant and design, and project management – not to mention everything that goes with running a company and managing staff.

I got into landscape architecture through a love of plants and gardening, and had a love of the outdoors from an early age. I grew up on the shores of Strangford Loch in County Down and always had a strong interest in architecture and design, particularly problem solving with what the environment had to offer. I had a desire to make a difference and create

places where people can enjoy living. That is what motivated me to get into the profession, and still motivates me to this day.

Were you aware of the profession at school?

I was very fortunate that my dad is an architect, so he had knowledge of landscape architecture. He could see that it was possibly a career option for me, but the school had no idea what it was. I just went for it and never looked back.

When did you start your own company, and what inspired you to take that step?

I started up as sole principal on 1 October this year, so I have not been going long. Before I started, I made the conscious decision to give it six months to see if I could make a success of trading solo. I suppose the hardest part has been deciding what services I can offer and what strengths set me apart.

Up until this point, I have been leading and managing a team of landscape architects. I felt →





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that I could take the experience I had and set myself up with new challenges, making a difference and exploring the direction I wanted to. A bonus is that it provides me with an opportunity to structure my working lifestyle differently – I am no longer tied to the nine-to-five.

That’s very recent – are you enjoying it?

It is a lot of front end stuff, a lot of meetings and networking where I’m just telling people what I am doing. I have a bit more flexibility in what I can do, being a sole trader as opposed to part of a company. It is an exciting time.

What are your main design inspirations?

I get my planting design inspiration from Piet Oudolf and his private gardens, and, more recently, from the High Line in New York. My design inspiration for large public parks comes from Michael Van Valkenburgh, particularly the Brooklyn Bridge Park – I really like that.

In terms of masterplanning and urban design, I have a lot of respect for the way the Dutch see the landscape and examine it. They have got a very

clinical, precise way of looking at the landscape and revealing what is there.

Recently, I was involved in a high density mixed use project in Glasgow, and a good bit of inspiration for that was the urban realm at St Pancras in London, which looks exciting. Ideas for a site often come from the site itself – the local surroundings and what grows well in the area, for example. I also like to consider the site’s past uses – what is its history? What was it used for? What is its heritage? Can any of that information be used in the design? Each site is different, so you must examine them on a case by case basis.

Ideas can come from all over the place – for example, I might see a planting scheme in Glasgow that works well, or a certain granite paving detail, or even, on a broader scale, something like the summer wildflower meadows at the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in London; they are inspirational. I love going to see tree nurseries in the Netherlands and Germany, just to see the trees and the plants themselves.

Traveling to Europe is also hugely influential for me – I love going to the classic destinations, such as Barcelona and Amsterdam, but also to more

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unusual places, such as Vienna and Hamburg. I am really keen to go and explore the Scandinavian countries next, as many of their outdoor spaces appear to be designed to be used all year round in a cooler climate.

What is the next step for you?

I am looking to grow my business based on my experience. I want to get involved in different types of projects, such as parks and recreation, and the interpretation of the landscape. I am also looking to take a more active role in the management of landscape, particularly post-completion. I want to go back after completion and discuss the management with the team. What's going well? Does the grass maintenance regime work? Are changes needed to suit the conditions? Is the design working? Is it sustainable for the long term? The aftercare and maintenance are such important parts of landscape architecture. It is something I am keen to champion where possible.

What makes you stand out?

I am always happy to turn my hand to any area of work, but I specialise in housing landscapes and care home landscapes, because I am interested in how they can contribute to wellbeing. I always try to put myself in the place of the resident, and imagine what it would be like to live there and what view you get from lying in bed.

I have built up a bit of a reputation for site contracts and supervision. Clients come to rely on me for getting what they pay for; things like making sure I am there when the soil goes in to make sure it is right. That sort of thing is important to me.

How has the role of landscape architects changed, over the years?

There is a much greater understanding of the profession now, which has led to the role growing. I would say that is largely down to projects such as the Olympic Park and the High Line in New York – those projects showcased landscape architecture to the public. It is still often the last discipline to be appointed in many traditional contracts, but developers and project managers are quickly realising the benefit of having a landscape architect on board at the outset, doing the initial site assessment and masterplanning. The public is also becoming more aware of the benefits of time spent outdoors, and certain stakeholders are starting to expect that their parks will be designed by landscape architects. Planning authorities and community councils have got their requirements and want us to be involved so that there is a connection with nature and urban life. We are being engaged earlier on.

Are you seeing any trends?

There is an encouraging trend for wildflower meadows. People are wanting to increase wildlife and are realising the benefit of attracting the birds and the bees and the butterflies, creating a habitat that doesn't require too much initial investment – although I am always keen to point out that they are not maintenance-free. We →



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shouldn't be afraid of species failure, we should learn from what works well on the site and enjoy the transient nature of the habitat.

There is an idea that they look fantastic all year round, but actually part of the ebb and flow is that they come and go.

Another encouraging trend is specification of indigenous plant species. That is great, especially when it comes to larger size tree species. More clients and stakeholders are appreciating the value of enhancing biodiversity, recognising that what is on our doorstep can be incorporated into the design. It is heading in the right direction.

What is the biggest issue in the industry at present?

Transportation strategies are long due an overhaul; the wider infrastructure of our towns and cities needs to be examined, and we need to try to move away from the heavy reliance on four wheels. That is particularly important in commercial housing projects that I have come across – urban and semi-urban situations where time, quality of space and landscape is dictated by roads, parking provision and out of date planning standards.

Finally, could you tell us about some of the projects you have worked on?

I was involved in the Commonwealth Games Athletes Village in Glasgow – I was the lead landscape architect, working as part of a team. That was a fantastic experience, working

collaboratively on 700 new homes, infrastructure, SUDS and cycleways, from design right through to implementation. It was a site with many challenges, from contaminated land to flood storage, which all made the landscape a crucial part of the project. We decided quite early on to make the public open spaces relate to the River Clyde, and to be for use not only by the residents, but also by the wider community; that made it a unique and exciting project to be involved in.

At the same site, there was a care home for dementia patients, and we created three self-contained outdoor courtyards that were accessed directly from the rooms. They were lovely, with individual seating and community seating, gravel gardens, and sensory planting that involved bamboos and grasses. We had to be careful about not attracting too many insects close to the building. That was a bit of a paradox for the assessor, who was an ecologist, but the compromise was to put the wildlife-attractive shrubs along the outer edge of the courtyard.

A more recent project was at Richmond Park in Glasgow. It was a regeneration and revitalisation of an 18th century urban park, with a boating pond and pavilion. There was substantial tree removal and stripping back of the park's layers to reveal its layout, as well as adapting it to its current use and thinking long term with new avenue tree planting. We are also making the most of the wildlife pond, which previously you couldn't access, or even see. That has only just started on-site, so it will be a fascinating journey to see that come to life before its opening day in 2020. Those are the highlights of my projects so far.

- 1 Glasgow Commonwealth Athletes Village ©City Legacy Ltd
- 2 Glasgow Commonwealth Village Care Home Courtyard ©Stewart Stevenson Architects
- 3 Richmond Park, Glasgow Model Boat Pond
- 4 Glasgow Commonwealth Village Care Home ©Stewart Stevenson Architects
- 5 Strangford Lough, County Down



JANE DOBSON

Jane is a Chartered landscape architect with more than 10 years' experience working in private practice with a commercial background. She holds an MA(hons) in Landscape Architecture from Edinburgh College of Art.

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