Green design expert

Randall Arendt is renowned throughout North America for his work on conservation design but his ideas remain firmly grounded in UK practice, Cliff Hague discovers.

Arendt: believes that adoption of his step-by-step approach to neighbourhood design should never result in inferior plans

Career details
Age: 59
Family: Married with two children. Education: BA degree from Wesleyan University; MPhil in urban design and regional planning, University of Edinburgh.

Peace Corps rather than the Vietnam draft and was assigned to the Kingston Urban Development Corporation in Jamaica. He worked closely with English landscape architect David Wassell, who fired his passion for environmental design. Inspired by Wassell, he hung on to his grasp of case law and the interplay between the rights of property owners and the community, but sought a more creative career.

He headed to Edinburgh, the city his grandfather had left in 1923 as a disabled war veteran. A previous scholarship year at the University of Edinburgh had already whetted his appetite for the Athenes of the north. "The topography, the vistas from Calton Hill and the castle, the man-made environment of bridges and classical architecture, the landscape coming right into the heart of the city in Princes Street Gardens," he enthuses. "What an inspiring, incredible city."

Newly qualified as a planner, Arendt went to Norfolk County Council, where he was assigned to the North Walsham area study. This examined the costs and benefits of alternative rural settlement strategies in the countryside, as well as informing the rural policies in Norfolk's structure plan. Looking at Arendt's work today, influences from those Norfolk years are still evident. His layouts are shaped by hedges, rows, country lanes are retained and hedges in narrow lots front onto greens.

Arendt regrets the extent to which design has been diluted in planning education on both sides of the Atlantic. "My hope is that the national professional bodies that represent planners, engineers, surveyors, architects and landscape architects will champion a multi-disciplinary educational approach to produce multi-disciplinary minds and not simply multi-disciplinary teams. Let's convene a symposium where people think across their professional boundaries and kick-start a fresh approach," he suggests.

As president of development design consultancy Greener Prospects, Arendt is concerned about the imbalance between abstract and applied research and has sought to reduce the pressure for writing for practitioners in his 20-plus publications. For UK readers, the volume that is perhaps most relevant is Crossroads, Hamlet, Village, Town. "All my books and articles are written in a common sense language that any intelligent lay person can understand," he claims.

Arendt relishes his membership of the RIPL and has never felt the need to join its transatlantic equivalent, the American Institute of Certified Planners. He has a deep respect for UK planning traditions stretching back to well before the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 and reflected in the townscape and green spaces of Edinburgh. "The countryside has been well protected and efficient urban densities and public transport have been achieved in the towns," he believes.

Could rising petrol prices and global warming finally be sowing the seeds of a green affair? Arendt can show them a greener path to a less sprawling suburbia. He calls his more compact layouts "conservation design".

‘It is impossible to understand properties by examining two-dimensional paper documents’

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