

# place-keeping - responsive, long-term open space management

In the first of a short series of three articles on place-keeping and open space management, **Nicola Dempsey**, **Mel Burton** and **Alice Mathers** argue that, in contrast to the short-termism often found in urban planning, design and management, we need to apply a long-term approach of 'place-keeping' to our green and open spaces



Nicola Dempsey

**Above**

An example of open space improvement funded in the early 2000s - Peace Gardens, Sheffield

In the 1850s, John Ruskin said that '*a measure of a city's greatness is to be found in the quality of its public spaces, its parks and squares*' – illustrating how long high-quality urban green spaces have been considered a crucial component in our increasingly urbanised landscapes. Funding shortages in the 1970s-1990s led to a long period of significant decline in quality,<sup>1</sup> but the change in government in the late 1990s sparked a shift towards public-sector-led urban regeneration, of which green and open space improvement was an important part. This included the revival of parks and open and green spaces under different funding programmes.

While this revival is to be applauded, we would argue that it was largely based on a 'place-making' approach, with large-scale capital funding spent on the shaping and making of high-profile places in towns and cities.<sup>2</sup> The resultant high-quality public spaces have been described as having economic, environmental and social benefits for local communities, contributing positively to their quality of life and wellbeing.<sup>3</sup> However, there has been no evaluation examining the impacts of these improvements, and we do not know the extent to which this is truly the case. Neither is it clear to what extent this widespread approach of place-making is successful in sustaining the quality of urban green space over the long term.

### **The focus on short-term place-making**

The focus on place-making is deeply ingrained with policy-makers and practitioners. The wealth of design and planning guidance disproportionately focuses on place-making and tends to consider what comes after implementation as a postscript.

## **'A lack of priority is given to long-term and responsive management once place-making has occurred'**

There are two reasons for this short-term approach to design, planning and management: local authority budgets are annual, which precludes a long-term view; and the management of green and open spaces is not a statutory obligation. In reality, this means that when budgetary constraints are imposed, public space management and maintenance suffer. The late Alan Barber also highlighted a breakdown in the understanding of the park tradition, resulting in the imposition of routine maintenance practices which cannot permit a long-term vision.<sup>4</sup> We therefore believe that a lack of priority is given to long-term and responsive management once place-making has occurred.

### **Doing more with less in the current economic climate**

Our green and open spaces are again under threat. The Coalition Government's public spending cuts have significantly worsened their provision and long-term management, putting local authorities under considerable pressure to continue working effectively with fewer resources.<sup>5</sup> Whether this is an opportunity or simply a matter of 'no choice but' to adopt new models of open/green space management (or indeed to simply do less), the economic climate provides a new impetus for action. We would argue that a model for meaningful design, management and maintenance is 'place-keeping', not place-making.

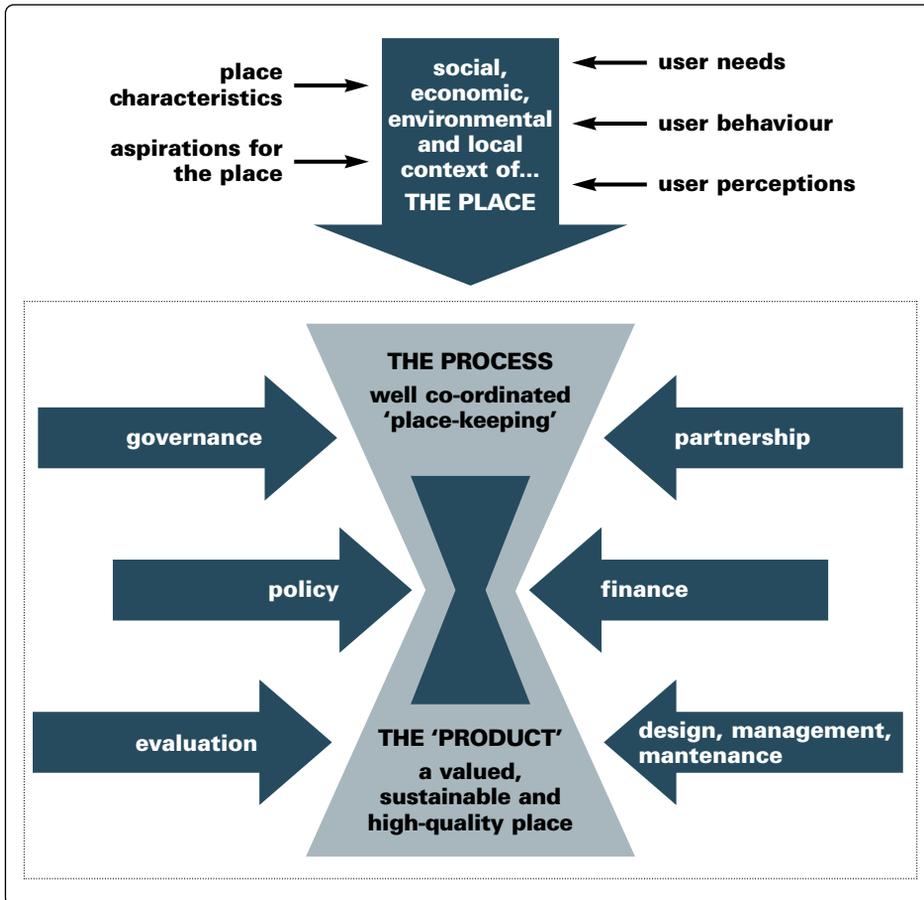
### **From place-making to place-keeping**

*Place-keeping* embodies a sustainable approach and describes the long-term and responsive management which ensures that the social, environmental and economic quality and benefits a place brings can be enjoyed now and in the future.<sup>6</sup> This is not a new idea: the original parks movement was based on making places publicly accessible in perpetuity, so we can assume that when Victorian philanthropists donated parks to towns and cities, they believed that long-term management and maintenance would occur.

The overall aspiration of place-keeping is clearly long-term: to develop, retain and enhance high-quality, sustainable places, valued by users who want to continue using them. Many aspects of place take time to develop and mature: trees which grow to maturity bring increased benefits for biodiversity (for example habitats, food and shelter); and a sense of community and place attachment can strengthen over time when a place is used for particular events. We therefore use the term 'place', rather than 'space', in acknowledgement of the *social* meanings, values and attachments that are associated with the *physical* which, as we shall show, are crucial for place-keeping.

It is often assumed that some sort of management will happen without adequate consideration of how this is to be manifested in practice. Put starkly, revenue funding for ongoing maintenance and management is a less exciting and attractive option for funders than capital funding which pays for a tangible outcome – such as a new playground or a water feature.

We would also argue that there is a stranglehold on place-keeping in practice, partly due to the culture of funding bodies prioritising capital works, with limited attention paid to revenue funding for ongoing maintenance and management beyond establishment. This means that there is no financial impetus to pursue place-keeping over place-making. But ongoing place-keeping can be crucial in the success or failure of a space, as we



Left

Fig. 1 The dimensions of place-keeping

learn from experience in the 1970s-1990s. Thirty years on, we have reinstated, if not improved on, that quality of green and open spaces, but the future is looking uncertain if we are to retain and enhance quality.

### Dimensions of place-keeping

Studies conducted as part of the MP4: Making Places Profitable, Public and Private Spaces project<sup>5</sup> found that the extent to which place-keeping is achieved depends on a number of overlapping dimensions (see Fig. 1):

- **Policy:** Place-keeping is not well-addressed in policy, tending to be written into guidance rather than statutory legislation, although related aspects are often covered by specific legislation (for example health and safety regulations). However, the political context does have a profound influence on place-keeping, as we have seen over time, underpinned by the (triple-whammy) effect of:
  - the large proportion of state-owned and state-managed public realm;
  - the non-statutory nature of green and open space management; and
  - short-term political goals and funding cycles.

- **Governance:** Place-keeping governance reflects a shift from government acting as the primary decision-maker to a collaborative relationship between cross-sector stakeholders. Community engagement is an important aspect of governance in place-keeping, acknowledging the importance of a user-centred approach, building on the local knowledge of public realm users. For example, conducting the design, planning and implementation of a space (place-making) without any long-term community involvement may lead to residents feeling detached from the site, or, worse, misuse and vandalism, making place-keeping difficult. However, we cannot assume that community involvement alone is the solution: private sector involvement is limited in public realm management, although public-private partnerships are becoming more popular.
- **Partnership:** Partnership describes an association of two or more partners with agreed shared place-keeping responsibilities. We found that place-keeping depends on strong cross-sector partnerships. Partners bring different interests and motivations to place-keeping, which ideally lead to complementarity but can lead to conflict. Procurement is an example which captures this

conflict. Local authorities have to keep costs down and contract out to the lowest bidder to achieve this. However, this is often not the most sustainable solution and may involve using resources from outside the local area, and a lack of knowledge of, attachment to or due regard for the local context – *caring* is often what brings partnerships together.

- **Finance:** Funding for place-keeping mainly comes from the traditional public sector, with funding allocations via the relevant central government departments (operational budgets). Other funds exist (for example the Heritage Lottery) but are not available to local authorities, providing strong impetus for cross-sector partnerships.

Across the countries studied, funding streams are dominated by capital-intensive place-making, not revenue management activities, compounding the difficulty of funding long-term and responsive place-keeping. Ideally, secured long-term funding would be in place from the outset. However, in practice, this is often not the case. Private sector involvement is increasing – for example Business Improvement Districts in the UK and financial contributions from the private sector to public realm management in Germany. This can reduce pressure on the public sector to finance large-scale projects alone, but scrutiny of private finance initiatives has been critical over value for

money, and concerns have been expressed over the privatisation of public space.

- **Design, management and maintenance:** These are essential and inter-related components of place-keeping. The design of a place will influence the level and type of maintenance and management required. For urban green spaces that require more sustained and regular management and maintenance than, say, woodland, standardised management practices have increasingly been introduced which aim to *maintain* landscape elements such as grass and shrubs *in the same condition* over time.

This standardised approach, often taken by local authorities as landowners/managers, is based on hours worked and annual work cycles, exacerbated by the increasing practice of contracting-out maintenance tasks. This has a detrimental impact on the quality of place-keeping, because 'payments [are] relatively independent of performance'.<sup>7</sup> It has also caused, or been compounded by, a de-skilled and de-valued workforce, and a lack of awareness and understanding by decision-makers of alternative management approaches.

Place-keeping acknowledges that the management, maintenance and design requirements of a place change over time, reflecting seasonal change, plant growth and how



Alice Mathers

#### Above

Place-making without place-keeping? An uncompleted and abandoned water feature and piece of public art in Clapton Square, Hackney



## Above

### Sense of community in Emmen, the Netherlands

people use the place. Intuitively, such an approach would involve a skilled workforce and inclusive participatory approach in design and management processes.

- **Evaluation:** There are many awards, competitions and measures of quality for green and open spaces, including the international 'Nations in Bloom' award, the Entente Florale, the Nordic Green Space Award and the UK's Green Flag, measuring good practice in management and maintenance. At the other end of the spectrum, informal communication from local users is an effective method of reporting maintenance issues to land managers.

Other aspects also measured, but not as regularly, include attitudes, satisfaction, provision of services and facilities, and community involvement and use – but these are often called on to strengthen the case for capital funding and are not common in long-term place-keeping. Other aspects considered in place-keeping might include staff retention, skills development, cost-benefit analysis of different land management techniques, and procurement and contracting-out processes.

Place-keeping evaluation would also extend to understanding less tangible aspects such as user experience and the role that different stakeholders have in the place-keeping process, with methodologies under development (such as partnership capacity evaluation, explored in an forthcoming article in this journal).

### The ongoing process of place-keeping

It is helpful to think about place-making and place-keeping together as part of a dynamic and continuous process: the ongoing *process* of place-keeping maintains, enhances and responds to the *product* of place-making as a valued, sustainable and high-quality place.

To consider one aspect of place-keeping in isolation is impossible. For example, day-to-day place maintenance will involve various land management techniques, a range of stakeholders and varying levels of available resources; there will also be a need to follow specific regulations and undertake some form of evaluation, however minor. All these elements require co-ordination, which may manifest itself in a long-term strategy document or management plan.

What is unclear is how effectively such strategies and plans are put into practice on the ground. This brings us back to the current budget cuts faced now by local authorities and the part that place-keeping can play.

### Place-keeping challenges – changing mindsets?

Some challenges have already been set out, but we would argue that there is a need for a fundamental change in the mindsets of both professionals and the wider public on what is expected from green and open spaces and what is achievable:

- Given the non-statutory nature of place-keeping activities and non-ring-fenced funding, political lobbying could raise the profile of place-keeping, locally and nationally, especially in view of the relative success of recent high-profile campaigns, notably 'Save Our Forests'.
- The local authority's role may have to change. Does it make sense for the local authority to be the principal landowner and manager? Should it

## 'Does it make sense for the local authority to be the principal landowner and manager? Should it take a stewardship role, while other organisations own and manage publicly accessible land?'

take a stewardship role, while other organisations own and manage publicly accessible land?

- There is a need to involve not just landowners and managers, but also those who pay for and, ultimately, care about green and open spaces. This involves a wider range of public, private and civic stakeholders, and necessarily different – potentially conflicting – interests. But it brings skills, knowledge and resources which would otherwise be missing in a unilateral or bilateral partnership (such as in current maintenance contracts awarded to the lowest bidder).
- As communities become more involved, are there knock-on effects for design? How are community-managed places different from public sector-managed places? And exactly what do we want from our green and open spaces? Tidy, messy, managed, wild? What is acceptable and what is achievable within available resources?
- Would changes in partnerships and governance models allow for integrated, reliable and long-term funding streams? Perhaps then the emphasis would shift from the need to make an *immediate*

*impact* through capital funding to an *outcome-based approach* and the *long-term legacy* that we all want our green and open spaces to be.

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### Notes

- 1 *Public Park Assessment: A Survey of Local Authority Owned Parks Focusing on Parks of Historic Interest.* Urban Parks Forum, 2001
- 2 P. Roberts: 'Shaping, making and managing places: creating and maintaining sustainable communities through the delivery of enhanced skills and knowledge'. *Town Planning Review*, 2009, Vol. 80 (4-5), 437-53
- 3 *World Class Places: The Government's Strategy for Improving Quality of Place.* Department for Communities and Local Government. HM Government, 2009. [www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/worldclassplaces](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/worldclassplaces)
- 4 S. Jackson: *Alan Barber: Champion of the People's Parks.* Parks and Gardens UK. Parks and Gardens Data Services, 2011. [www.parksandgardens.ac.uk/274/explore-31/contemporary-profiles-175/alan-barber-champion-of-the-peoples-parks-366.html](http://www.parksandgardens.ac.uk/274/explore-31/contemporary-profiles-175/alan-barber-champion-of-the-peoples-parks-366.html)
- 5 A. Mathers, M. Burton, S. Creevey, R. O'Riordan and E. Whitaker: *Community Capacity: A Case Study Investigation of Open Space Resourcing through Partnership Capacity.* Research findings from the INTERREG IVB MP4 Work Package 1 communicated to MP4 partners, 2011. Available at [www.mp4-interreg.eu/page/29/Evaluation+%26+Monitoring.html](http://www.mp4-interreg.eu/page/29/Evaluation+%26+Monitoring.html)
- 6 N. Dempsey and M. Burton: 'Defining place-keeping: the long-term management of public spaces'. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 2012, Vol. 11 (1), 11-21
- 7 A.C. Lindholst: 'Contracting-out in urban green-space management: instruments, approaches and arrangements'. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 2009, Vol. 8 (4), 257-68. Lindholst examined a total of 14 cases in Denmark, Sweden, the UK and New Zealand