

Politics and

The story of Northala Fields, Ealing, is one of aspirational hopes, dashed by political expediency, writes **Peter Fink** of Art2Architecture

Far right: An artist's impression of Northala Fields created at the start of the project

Below: There were environmental gains in the construction of Northala

Fields since the construction spoil used from other London-wide developments was no longer trucked long distances for disposal

THE WESTERN AVENUE, in west London, has often been considered, at best, a means to another destination and, at worst, a traffic-congested and unattractive route through the heart of Ealing. Yet this gateway to both the centre of London and westwards is undergoing a dramatic change.

Seizing a strategic opportunity in 1997, the London Borough of Ealing acquired the 18.5ha of Northala Fields as the last and central piece of the Northolt and Greenford Countryside Park, completing a network of over 100ha of connected green spaces. The completed park will link Northolt

Village to the north with the Ruislip Road in the south and provide almost two kilometres of green edge to the A40 Western Avenue.

In the autumn of 2000, the London Borough of Ealing through open invitation sought design proposals from land artists for a limited restoration of Northala Fields. Following a shortlisted competition and a public exhibition, the winning team – led by artist Peter Fink and architect Igor Marko of Art2Architecture London, working jointly with Peter Neal (now of CABA Space) – was chosen to further develop its proposals.

Rather than simply responding to the land-art aspirations of the original brief, Art2Architecture, working in partnership with the local council and surrounding neighbourhoods, has chosen to take the project beyond the confines of a traditional land forming exercise and develop it as a brand new park for the new millennium.

The initial competition-winning proposal was enhanced through a year-long series of collaborative design exercises with local schools and community groups, weaving together a number of complementary strands – recreation, celebration, art, social



the park

participation, biodiversity, cultivation and environmental tuition.

The importation of a significant quantity of inert fill material onto the site from a pool of London-wide development projects was proposed as a possible way of funding the Northala Fields project. This innovative suggestion is now delivering a £6m park at no cost to the council taxpayer, as well as helping to shrink the ecological footprint of London by actively recycling its construction spoil instead of trucking it hundreds of miles for disposal.

During the extensive consultative process, involving literally thousands of

residents, clear undertakings were given to the local community by the design team, local MP, the mayor of Ealing, and officers and members of the council, pledging that:

- all the income generated will be reinvested in the park; and
- stringent procedures will be put in place to prevent importation of contaminated spoil.

Following a strong community endorsement of the main design principles and priorities, in 2001 Ealing Council authorised an extended team, now also including EDAW, to proceed with detail design and secure planning. ▶



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All images: Art2Architecture London



“A genuinely sustainable park can only be developed through a bi-partisan commitment lasting beyond a single political cycle”

All images: Views of the landforms which comprise four conical hills. The hills provide great views of London and act as acoustic and environmental barriers from the adjacent A40

Project team

Principal design/
masterplan:

**Art2Architecture
London and
Peter Neal**

Scheme
development to
planning:

**Art2Architecture
London and
EDAW**

Detailed design,
under design and
build contract:

LDA

Project

management:

**EDAW and Ealing
Borough Council**

Contractor:

Pryor

◀ The preliminary economic income modelling stipulated 750,000m³ as the optimum quantity of imported fill and the concept designs explored different variants of how to sculpt this into a landform without visually overwhelming the surrounding residential estates. The resulting topology and massing of the four conical hills succeeds in creating a new identity for the area as well as a visible landmark for west London from which to view London in an unparallel 360° panoramic view. The landform design also delivers an environmental/acoustic buffer for the hinterland of the park against the busy A40.

The second component of the park involves the creation of a new and diverse structure of habitats that will significantly enhance the ecological integrity of the site. In the Northala Fields, the landforms provide a context for a series of biotic zones exploring the transition of environments from open water, through meadowlands and grasslands to mixed woodlands.

Finally, the potential uses and activities of the new neighbourhood park are supported through a series of clearly defined key routes and recreational facilities focusing on a central network of lakes. The six water

bodies provide both an environmental resource as well as opportunities for fishing and model boating.

Two development options

In 2002, it was recognised that the Northala Fields project could develop as either: a fiscally neutral project – solely funded by £6m spoil-generated income, delivering a park with a functioning urban fishery and a limited range of local sport, art and play facilities; or an aspirational project – a sustainable exemplar 21st-century park with a wide range of facilities supported by a long-term endowment fund for maintenance and a provision of free, inclusive

educational, art and sport programming. The latter option presumed raising up to £5m of additional funding from statutory, trust and commercial sources to deliver:

- A visitor centre, including high-quality educational facilities, café, park ranger office and toilets;
- Fully WIMAX-connected park, actively blurring the boundary between work and leisure;
- Environmental education programme based on open-air accessibility through mobile phones and so on, of virtual databases designed to explore the connections between people and their local, regional and global environment;
- Programme of vocational training to deliver skills required to maintain and manage this type of park;
- Innovative play facilities exploring water;
- A central core designed as a demonstration landscape environment exploring the value and meaning of water;
- A new pedestrian and cycle bridge.

The design and build contract for delivering the park was tendered in 2002 as a common baseline between the fiscally neutral and the anticipated aspirational option. A number of shared aspects, such as toilets or the central core, were purposefully kept out of this contract to ensure that the corresponding proportion of the spoil-generated income, amounting to £750,000, could be used either as potential seed funding or if necessary to complete the park as fiscally neutral.

In early 2006 a leading fundraising consultancy, Cascaid, was commissioned to produce a fundraising strategy



based on evolved and costed components such as the visitor centre. This strategy, while broadly confirming the viability of raising funds from external sources, has also identified lack of linked up government thinking and leadership at officer level in the council as a serious impediment to a successful, high-profile fundraising campaign. In response, Cascaid suggested a capacity building training programme for senior council officers and members.

Best-laid plans

This carefully laid out process was, however, dramatically influenced by the results of the 2006 local government election when Ealing Council changed from Labour to Conservative. As parks and open spaces did not feature in the Conservative election programme, the council saw the park no longer as a corporate priority but as a convenient source of ready cash. The bipartisan support for Northala Fields was expediently broken and plans to transfer £750,000 of the park's spoil-generated income to other projects were put into place.

Unsurprisingly, to justify this the project underwent an uninformed and highly misleading risk assessment in circumstances when:

- All the consultants associated with the project for six years were wilfully ignored and excluded from the ongoing assessment;
 - The steering/stakeholder committee in existence since 2000 was suspended and politically gagged;
 - A highly misleading risk assessment implied a fictitious liability to council taxpayers; and
 - The offer by CABE Space of enabling was rejected as unwanted interference.
- Given that both the Labour opposition and the local MP concluded that nothing can be done about this in view of the Conservative majority on the council we felt that, as consultants bound by a contract with the community, we had no option but to go public.

While this has resulted, predictably, in our instant dismissal in one curt email, it has also succeeded in triggering an unprecedented political and public backlash. Due to intense and prolonged headline media exposure and a barrage of letters and

THE COUNCIL VIEW

Phase I of the Northala Fields development will be completed and opened during 2007. The impressive new park, at completion of phase I, will consist of a range of gardens, a fishing lake, and various cycle and walking routes. This phase has been of no cost to the local taxpayer and in fact has generated a surplus of £690,000. This has been raised by charging contractors to dump their waste on the site and using it to create the mounds.

Consultants and architects produced what was known as the 'Phase 2' vision for Northala Fields, revolving around a concept of a celebration of nature. This phase was estimated to cost between £4.5m and £6m.

The business case for this phase stated £2.695m could

be raised through sponsorship or donations. This figure represented a best-case scenario based on a number of actions happening. The report also stated there was no significant statutory, Lottery or institutional funding streams for which Northala Fields is applicable – so a Lottery grant, for example, simply would not be successful.

Any financial shortfall for the delivery of this phase of the development would have needed to be met by Ealing Council and, therefore, ultimately our council taxpayers. Based on this, and that not a single pound had been raised for phase 2, we decided the business case for proceeding was not sound.

The surplus generated by the phase I development will be spent on:

- a fishing bailiff office
 - £60,000 – landscaping to paths
 - £30,000 – interpretation and direction signs
 - £80,000 – playground for children
 - £20,000 – fencing around fishing area
 - £10,000 – CCTV in car parks
 - £35,000 – fees for all of the above for design and supervision
 - £270,000 – payment for outstanding consultants' fees
- This comes to £630,000 – leaving a surplus of around £60,000, which can be used to pick up any snagging problem with the park plus some other issues that still need to be resolved, such as ensuring the fishing lakes are stocked with fish.**
- Cllr Jason Stacey, leader of Ealing Council**
Visit: www.ealing.gov.uk

emails, the council reluctantly retreated and reconfirmed the decision of the previous Labour-led administration to ringfence the spoil-generated income.

In the end, however, the progress towards the aspirational version of the park was abruptly halted. The decision not to proceed was taken through a three-line Conservative party whip at a full council meeting and opposed by all the Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors. Significantly, in times of general apathy, the public gallery was full with the supporters of the park cheering on a local pastor, David Wise, who spoke passionately on behalf of the community while presenting a petition with close to 1,000 signatures.



While the efficient completion of Northala Fields as a £6m self-funding project in spring 2007 will represent a considerable achievement for all involved, the broader picture also needs to be understood. This contains an important message that a genuinely sustainable park can only be developed through a bi-partisan commitment lasting beyond a single political cycle.

Equally importantly, it demonstrates that the aspirations of today's community cannot be delivered as a legacy for the children of tomorrow by politicians and local government officers afraid to engage with innovative approaches to funding and management of parks and green spaces.



Peter Fink has in the last 20 years realised a wide range of award-winning projects worldwide, combining art, urbanism, architecture, landscape and ecology. He was instrumental, with architect Igor Marko, in forming Art2Architecture London, a company dedicated to collaborative, and interdisciplinary ways of working.
 Visit: www.art2architecture.co.uk