

Chris Young, Deputy Editor of *The Garden* and a member of the thinkinggardens group, offers his personal answer to the question

IS GARDEN DESIGN A FRIVOLOUS LUXURY IN STRAITENED TIMES?

When this question was put to a thinkinggardens symposium, held in association with the London College of Garden Design back in June this year, the resounding answer was 'No'. The debate verged from the specific (what clients want from their garden; what designers should be providing; how they should be providing it) to the general (the role of a garden; business cases for creative industries; working with other design disciplines for collaborative effort). The outcome was probably not surprising because the majority of people at the event were already connected to the garden world – as designers, garden curators, journalists and head gardeners. But, perhaps, what is more interesting and variable is where we find ourselves on the scale of the 'no'.

Clearly, it all centres on one's appreciation of gardens – if you have a personal, emotional, deeply connected relationship with outside space then you are going to be more passionately against the concept that garden design is a frivolous luxury because you know the benefit... and joy... and creativity that gardens can bring. So too, you are probably going to be less likely to need the services of a garden designer because you may be making/creating/designing/growing your own outside space.

However, and for me this is the main challenge, those consumers purchasing garden design are the ones who may feel the frivolity of garden design is one step too far in leaner times. People can often justify a new kitchen, bathroom or car, but gardens may be lower on the list. (Anecdotally, it currently seems that some garden designers are finding that clients are still willing to pay for new gardens, but that budgets are being reduced by a nought here or there, or a few tens of thousands.) If a client can't see, appreciate or engage with the benefit of a better designed space, then the likely outcome will be that they won't pay for it – unless bonuses allow. Mix with this the potential that some garden designers may not sell their services/benefits/outcomes

well enough, and the current downturn in projects could continue for a while.

But, as ever, when you get a passionate group of people together, the range of feelings represent the sheer diversity and joy that garden designing/making/visiting/writing can bring. Not only the deep-seated relationship a human can have with his or her garden, but so too the role of creativity, expression, learning and personal development. If such virtues are to be extolled, can design be democratised – is it an issue of cost? Is it an issue of engaging children younger and earlier? Is it about the national curriculum helping to articulate people's language and learning of design, art, creativity? Of course, it is about all of these things, but getting the

message across to 'non-believers' is the real challenge.

For garden design to be better recognised for future generations – and clients – then it needs to be better understood. Collaboration, business acumen and

media-awareness are necessary. At the symposium, an explanation by Colin Hicks, Director of Cultural Services for Quebec, of the role the Quebecois government gives in supporting and developing artists – of all types – was fascinating. The result is that the government wants its artists to make money; to be businesses; to not need ongoing financial support. Business and creativity are bedfellows, not opposites. Such refreshing thinking costs – but can a price be put on creativity?

In the end, the arguments support the notion of democratisation of design and the necessity of partnerships. Whether it be a group like thinkinggardens or the SGD, we need alliances to make people hear and ensure new events/thoughts/ideas take place. We also need the media to stimulate the potential audience.

And that takes us back to where we started – what is your personal take on design? If you understand it, appreciate it and value it (emotionally and monetarily) you will pay for it. If not, then you won't. And it is the latter group of people where most attention should be directed. ◻

www.thinkinggardens.com