

Sylvia Crowe: Innovator and Exemplar

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Sylvia Crowe, edited by Geoffrey Collins and Wendy Powell,
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THIS IS THE SECOND MONOGRAPH BY LANDSCAPE DESIGN TRUST (LDT). Its focus, Dame Sylvia Crowe, who died in June 1997, was one of a breed of outstanding British landscape architects of the twentieth century whose influence spread around the world before globalisation was part of our language. Indeed, Sylvia Crowe pioneered other ideas and aspects of the landscape architecture profession which we now take for granted as part of our vocabulary: sustainability and the importance of working with nature. In this respect her monograph *Landscape Planning: a policy for an overcrowded world* published in 1969 through the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) still holds the core of what good landscape planning may attain, and in particular Sylvia Crowe's idea of healthy landscapes. As a young landscape architect/planner in Britain I recall being quietly but determinedly enthused by Crowe's platform and the simple but convincing prose. What she wrote in this publication, theoretically and professionally, is for me the basis of her extensive and innovative work which is traced in the LDT monograph.

What can one say about the Landscape Architect for all seasons? This book says it nicely for Sylvia Crowe in an idiom that would have pleased her. It covers her work, ideas and personality with a degree of understatement, modesty and plain language underpinned by solidity and conviction. Every profession needs its heroes and this account of Sylvia Crowe and her legacy fills an important niche in our gallery.

In the Foreword the editors, Geoffrey Collins and Wendy Powell, point to Sylvia Crowe's deep love and understanding of the landscape. We see how such a commitment to the idea of landscape underpinned her remarkable achievements. We also see how she was able to communicate this to others in the profession and to other professionals, particularly in the 1960s. This was a time when to be a landscape architect readily raised questions of 'what did you do?'; Sylvia Crowe addressed the question through her achievements and pioneered the way for acceptance of the profession. She did this, as the editors remark, by her 'practical common sense approach in solving design problems that few could dispute (with) considerable charm (which) screened a steely determination to ensure a course of action always in the best interests of each particular landscape'. Equally important was her immense ability to write and

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speak with a clarity and directness that made her one of the most effective communicators for landscape.

I recall in the late 1960s/early 1970s going one evening from Manchester to Preston to listen to Sylvia at a Northwest Institute of Landscape Architects Chapter lecture. At the opening she announced with a wry smile she was not using slides, which everyone had come to regard as *de rigueur*. After waiting for the muffled groan she then held the audience captive for an hour as she laid out her ideas on landscape, planning in the countryside and the opportunities waiting for landscape architecture. She was thought-provoking and stimulating. She also stressed the need for the profession to be able to work as part of a team. In her own work she had no difficulty in collaborating successfully with others. For me, she confirmed why I had left planning to take up landscape architecture. One of her tenets that she elucidated in the lecture has stayed with me: the mark of a good landscape scheme is where you cannot readily see where the landscape architect has been at work. Years later in the mid-1980s I was reminded of this when going by taxi to do a radio talk, during Floriade, from Commonwealth Park in Canberra. Sylvia had done the master plan for the park in 1964. The taxi driver asked me what I was doing at the park and I happened to mention the designer, Sylvia Crowe, would be delighted with success of the park. He replied without hesitation, 'Oh I always thought of Commonwealth Park as being natural'. I wrote to Sylvia, referring to the Preston lecture and the taxi driver's comment; she sent a charming reply and was clearly pleased with the accolade. She had a parallel canon for this: things must 'look right in the landscape' (p 28 'Reservoirs'), which she applied expertly to her large-scale design and planning work.

In the opening piece of the book, 'The Early Years', Simon Crowe, Sylvia's nephew, gives an insight into the influences on his aunt, including her love of the countryside, and her early experiences in designing gardens after studying horticulture. We see here the foundations laid for her remarkable career. Specific chapters then follow on her work covering, reservoirs, new towns, forestry, landscape of power, work in Australia, reviews of international and professional connections, a charming pictorial section highlighting some of her smaller-scale design work that reflects her immense understanding of, and sympathy with, the landscape and which is apparent in the three editions of her book *Garden Design* (1958, 1981, 1994).

In the 'Reservoir' chapter Duncan Campbell and Wendy Powell point to Sylvia Crowe's gift as an eloquent, persuasive writer and speaker (p 21) and how this underpinned her evidence at public inquiries for various reservoirs. We also see how she recognised that each landscape is unique and dictated its own purpose. Throughout the book there is repeated reference to the way she refused to apply stock planning and design solutions to different locations and her tireless appraisal on site for any project. Her success at integrating reservoirs with associated planting into the scale of the surrounding landscape is again highlighted in the comment

friends are understood to have made when she asked them what they thought of the landscape treatment at Rutland Water: 'what landscape treatment, we thought it was all natural'. Her thesis is summarised in the conclusion to her 1969 paper *The Landscape of Reservoirs* (p 45):

The essential element of reservoirs, the water, is an asset to any landscape and the landscape architect's task is to see that it lies happily and unfussed within the landform with that look of inevitability which is the hallmark of good design.

There follows an account by David Scott of her achievements in new town work in Britain and how Sylvia Crowe was at the forefront of thinking and practice in incorporating open space planning into new town layouts. She began her new town input at Harlow where, as usual, she insisted on a thorough and meticulous landscape assessment including a detailed survey of every tree and woodland area. Wendy Powell, in Scott's chapter (p 55), reminisces on the long, often wet and uncomfortable, days of site appraisal with Crowe and how she learned the basic approach to good site planning. We see how Crowe was instrumental in having natural elements and patterns in the landscape incorporated into new town plans, and how she identified areas of local ecological significance of value for school and naturalist studies in her 1960s work at Warrington in the form of marsh zones, waterways and areas of special vegetation significance. These she incorporated into a continuous web of open space and landscape that formed the basis for her Warrington master plan. Things we now take for granted. But these were exciting days in landscape architecture in the mid-1960s, influenced partially by landscape planning work in the United States of America. I recall being fired again by Sylvia Crowe's example when working at the City of Manchester Planning Office on the Open Space System based on the city's network of derelict river valleys and canals. Sylvia Crowe's passion for the role of landscape in large-scale development, recalled by Hugh Canning who worked with her in 1966 at Warrington (p 66), was infectious.

The next chapter, by Hugh Campbell, on Crowe's seminal work in forestry highlights her superb mastery of understanding scale in the landscape. Campbell also outlines how Crowe was able to influence and win over foresters somewhat sceptical about landscape architecture in general and a woman in particular. Notably, Campbell shows how Sylvia Crowe's design principles, set out lucidly in *Garden Design*, were applied to her forestry work, particularly the key principle of scale, and elucidated in her classic work *Forestry in the Landscape* (1966). In the chapter on Power, by Ian Purdy, the same imperatives in Crowe's understanding of landscape and her grasp of the need for simplicity in design are apparent. Crowe herself (p 130) outlines how colleagues in the work on power stations with the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB), helped her understand the five major phases in the preparation and development of a master plan: landscape assessment, overall plan form in concept, which incorporated flexibility, a continuing watching brief, final plan and arrangements

for maintenance. It is typical of Sylvia Crowe's generous spirit and collaborative approach that she gave credit to colleagues.

Other chapters include one by Michael Downing on international and professional connections. Interestingly for me in Canberra, this chapter omits mention of recognition by the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) in 1979, when Crowe was made an Honorary Fellow, and 1990 when she was awarded an AILA Gold Medal. There is also a brief, but important, recognition of her work and influence in Australia with special mention of Commonwealth Park in Canberra. On her 1977 retrospective visit to Canberra she was clearly delighted with the success of the park. Her explanation of the ground contouring, aimed at creating a series of outdoor rooms where visitors would pass each other, was charming.

In the final chapter, by Peter Youngman, appropriately titled 'The Legacy' there is a fitting appreciation of Sylvia Crowe's extraordinary contribution to landscape architecture through her prolific writings, work and example. It includes tributes from various colleagues, friends and acquaintances. One is left with the unfailing definition of a remarkable woman whose influence on the profession and other professions will be timeless. Read the book, refer to it when you want to be enthused; teachers, refer your students to it.