

PARK STRIFE

This summer will see the official opening of *Northala Fields* in Ealing. *George Sell* looks at how one of the most important new parks of recent times has sparked a political debate over the future of funding public *green spaces*.

Let's get one thing straight from the start –

Northala Fields isn't your average park. It is as much a feat of architecture and master planning as it is a place of leisure and relaxation, and it has also been the unwitting battleground for a war of words between local politicians, and a wider debate over the funding of new parks in the UK.

Ealing Council describes Northala Fields as "the most exciting and significant park development in west London for many years". Located within the Northolt and Greenford Greenbelt Park, it has sprung to life on the site of a disused playing field, alongside the A40, the busy arterial road which runs from London to Oxford.

Since August 2004, more than 600,000 cubic metres of excavated subsoil from local redevelopment sites, including Wembley Stadium and White City, has been used to build Northala Fields' signature structural element – four overlapping central mounds, the tallest measuring more than 25 metres high, which shield the park from "noise and visual pollution" from the A40.

The new park will include a large range of features and facilities including separate lakes for model boating, fishing and wildlife, including a network of streams to collect surface overflow and improve the adjacent golf course, a system of pedestrian and cycle paths, a central building containing public toilets, a fishing baitfish office, a shop and a café, covered seating and parking. A wide variety of ecosystems will be developed within the 18.5 hectare (45-acre) park, including different types of woodland, meadow and wetland habitats.

The masterplan for Northala Fields was designed by London practice Form Associates (formerly known as AritzArchitecture), in conjunction with Peter Neill (now of CABE Space), Olympic planning consultant EDAA, structural engineers Techniker, the Wetland Trust and engineering consultancy Peter Brett Associates.

Form Associates describes its bold vision as "a symbiosis of land art, ecology, sustainability, landscape design and engineering. The design process of the park involves extensive and proactive community participation".

This last point is an important one. Both Ealing Council and those involved in creating the park embarked on a comprehensive range of measures to make sure that the eventual end users – the people of the Borough of Ealing – had an important role in deciding how the park would look and what it would contain.

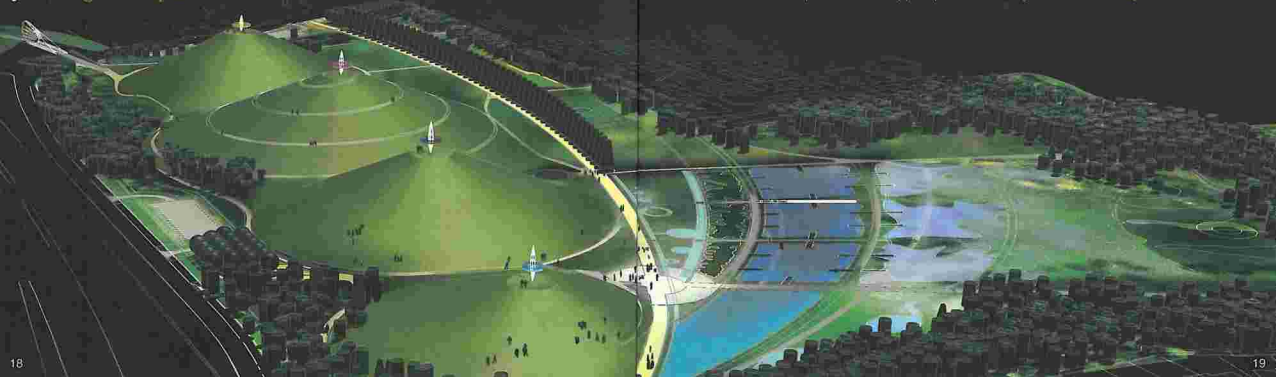
Development proposals for the park emerged from public consultation and a design competition in 2000, and public meetings and workshops were held to develop ideas for the park. The Northolt and Greenford Countryside Park Society – which is made up of members of the local community – got heavily involved in the process. Additionally the council circulates regular newsletters to local residents, schools, libraries and resident associations. It also holds an annual public meeting on site, during the summer, to invite local residents to inspect site progress.

The locals were largely supportive of Form Associates's proposals. But such ambitious plans don't come cheap. And this is where the political wrangling comes in. Just as government-funded architectural body CABE Space published its report *Paying for Parks*, which warned that the renaissance seen in parks across the country in recent years is under threat, Conservative Ealing Council voted to shelve the proposed £6 million second phase of Northala Fields.

The park's first phase was self-funding, as the project organisers were paid for using other people's waste, but Ealing council dismissed *Art 2 Architecture*, saying it wouldn't support phase two, which was set to include a visitors' centre, road bridge and a maintenance fund.

The council's Conservative leader Jason Stacey said that local taxpayers could face a bill of up to £4.8 million if phase two went ahead, adding: "We are not prepared to open this council up to a financial risk that we can't meet."

The decision caused uproar. Labour MP for Ealing North Steve Pound said the decision could lead to the park becoming a "haven for undesirables", while local campaigners claimed that withholding the finance could leave the park neglected and without sufficient management in the future. →





Northala Fields' landmark features are the four conical hills which are made from landfill shifted from the new Wembley Stadium

The decision seemed to give immediate credence to CABE's report. A CABE Space spokesman said: "New methods of paying for parks' long-term management and maintenance are urgently required. Without this funding, parks run the risk of being improved now only to endure a gradual decline later, requiring further large injections of capital if they are to be restored again."

In October 2007, Peter Fink of Form Associates sent a blistering letter to architects' trade journal *Building Design* saying the recent, highly public, Northala fields controversy was triggered by Ealing's newly elected Conservative council's plans to divert £750,000 of the spoil-generated income to other projects.

"Because of the media exposure and considerable public opposition, the council has now reconfirmed the position of the previous Labour-led administration that all of the £5.8 million income will be used to complete the park. However, the aspirational version of the park designed as phase 2 and due to be funded solely by externally generated funds from statutory, trust and commercial funding sources has now been abandoned by the council. Under a totally misleading pretext of implying a £4.6 million cost to the council tax payer, this decision was taken in circumstances where none of the consultants associated with the project for over six years were consulted. Consequently, the decision does not reflect their considerable understanding of the project or their professional assessment of the underlying issues," said Fink.

However, away from the arguments, work progressed on delivering a new amenity for the people of west London. On November 22, 2007, the children's play area – which benefited from design input from pupils at the nearby Petts Hill primary school – was opened, and immediately became popular. Councillor Nigel Sumner said: "A lot of hard work has gone into the park and it's wonderful to see the local community enjoying it so much. Improving facilities to enable children to have fun and be more active is very important."

Northala Fields is still on course for its grand opening in summer 2008. But its creation has opened a can of worms over how we fund and maintain new parks.

Edward Hobson, head of policy and research at CABE Space, has warned that the creation and refurbishment of parks could founder if ambitious new parks are designed and built but lack sufficient funding to be adequately managed. "Local authorities are putting real commitment behind parks and green spaces, but there is a problem over how you maintain them to that standard," said Hobson, who added that innovative funding methods such as long-term endowments and section 106 agreements could be used.

Peter Fink said that events at Northala Fields "clearly demonstrate that however well thought out the CABE Space policy reports are, it is the proactive engagement with the political realities of local government that will need to take place as a matter of urgency in the near future."

If you happen to find yourself driving along the Western Avenue, marvelling at the imposing mounds at the side of the road, take a minute to think that their creation may have inadvertently led to a sea change in the commissioning, funding and maintenance of green spaces across the country. ■ ■

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