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ARTICLE

Connecting People and Place with the Women of the Welfare Landscape

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Abstract

This article details the efforts made to map a project that commemorates the network of women and their collaborators who played a major role in shaping the post-war designed landscapes of the British Welfare State. It argues that despite the value attached to some parks and green spaces created in the twentieth century, many more have been overlooked and remain "unseen," regardless of what we now know about their health and well-being benefits following the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, the role of an online open-access archive is explored as an innovative tool of public inquiry, in which the complexity of both archives and the passage of time are explored. The Women of the Welfare Landscape Historypin site was not solely focused on landscape architects and landscape architecture but also sought to communicate the perspectives of the communities that inhabit, work in, or recreate in landscapes that these pioneers developed. Through a contextualisation of the role of digital open-access mapping and archiving, along with local and social history, the project demonstrates the utility and opportunity of using an online and publicly accessible archive to show the humanities at work in public life.

Keywords: archives; landscape architecture; landscape history

The first COVID-19 lockdown in the United Kingdom feels like a distant memory. There seems to have been a collective forgetfulness. Education went virtual. Worlds shrank back to our homes, streets, and neighbourhoods: short daily walks, closed playgrounds, hazard tape on benches, and "clapping for carers."

This moment also highlighted the value of our historic gardens and public parks, as well as more quotidian street trees and green spaces.[1] "Parks and green spaces provided a lifeline for millions," stated the Landscape Institute in a paper that set out the need for a "green recovery" for Britain, recognising them as crucial assets in maintaining people's physical and mental health.[2] So, who can we thank for having the foresight to create these life-enhancing public parks and green spaces?

[1] See Dempsey and Dobson 2021; Russo 2024.
[2] Landscape Institute 2020.

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I. A woman with formidable energy

Brenda Colvin was born in Shimla in India, where her family had deep connections. Following her education in France and England, Colvin studied horticulture at the female-only Swanley Horticultural College in 1918, changing to landscape design within the first year. Colvin felt that it "promised to combine out-door life with Art in a form I could make a living in."[3] In 1922, at the age of 25, she started her own independent garden design business. Her practice grew quickly with commissions from her network of family and friends, and within a decade, Colvin was exhibiting at the Chelsea Flower Show.

Whilst her pre-WW2 work was mostly focused on private gardens, her vision for her profession was already much broader. In the 1930s, she sold her car and travelled to America. Her experience strengthened her understanding of the role of landscape architecture in engaging with the rapidly changing world and large-scale planning projects at a much larger scale. Her post-war work showed her belief that the landscape architect was integral to any projects that dealt with any questions of the landscape and countryside whether it was industrial, infrastructural, or corporate. She played a formative role in the professional and intellectual development of the discipline in the United Kingdom and internationally. When she was elected President of the Institute of Landscape Architects in 1951, she became the first woman to head a built environment profession, and her seminal book *Land and Landscape* (1947) was a crucial text in demonstrating the scientific and creative basis of landscape architecture.

During her career, she completed over 600 design commissions, in a variety of scales such as private gardens, public parks, housing landscapes, power stations, and reservoirs. As her business partner Hal Moggridge wrote in her obituary, "her creative energy was formidable" and that "her sparkling intellect led the creative thinking of all those committed to better landscape."[4]

II. Engaging with local landscapes

In 2022, when we started the *Women of the Welfare Landscape* research project, we set out to establish the contribution made to a "better landscape" by Colvin and other women who shared this commitment. Through a series of public-facing events and activities, we worked in partnership with organisations such as the Gardens Trust, the National Trust, the Modernist Society, Historic Environment Scotland, and the Museum of English Rural Life to understand the legacy of these contributions and to bring it to a wide audience.

A key part of the programme was a travelling exhibition that was installed in numerous venues across the country and that brought to life Colvin's practice and highlighted both the networks of women practitioners and the places they created: reservoirs for recreation, car-free footpaths, and allotments for the workers at power stations. We wanted to connect these everyday landscapes with the various archives that hold Colvin's and her peers' work: bringing together the paving, tarmac, grass, and trees with the paper plans where they were conceived.

In 2020, the Chief Executive of Historic England reflected on the post-war parks, gardens, and landscapes that had recently been added to the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens of

[3] Colvin n.d.
[4] Moggridge 1981.

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Special Historic Interest, and called for them to be celebrated as life-enhancing public spaces.[5] Although there is cause for celebration, the list also reflects a narrow reading of landscape architectural practice after WW2. There is so much missing from the register, not least the infrastructures of power, housing, water, and transport created in the period. These power stations, New Towns, reservoirs, and motorways are part of a distinct heritage to which that generation of landscape architects made a singular contribution. But why is this heritage so easy to overlook?

Women of the Welfare Landscape aligns with the ethos that underpins local history, namely that it helps create an attachment to a place that reaps rewards in terms of what can be called "social capital investment."[6] Research by the countryside charity CPRE has found that small, undeveloped areas of land in towns and cities are the most likely to have been designated Local Green Spaces, a recognition of the special value that they hold for the communities in which they are situated.[7] Furthermore, Historic England has found that learning about heritage at school makes children prouder of their local environment.[8] The idea that people have an attachment to place, that participation matters, and that everyday parks, landscapes, and green spaces are valuable would not have been a radical idea to a woman like Colvin.

III. Accessible archives

The role of landscape archives is something that John Dean Davis has argued "serves an instinctive impulse to understand our present location and material conditions in relationship to our immediate and distant histories."[9] Yet Davis sees another possibility in the historian's role, one in which synthesis takes primacy, and "she changes her relationship to both archive and landscape. By wading into these overlapping and cacophonous territories, the historian takes responsibility for the complex web that links them."[10]

This approach, which places a study of the web as a focus of historical research, resonates with a wider effort to find ways of sharing and co-producing archives. Reflecting upon Charles Angoff's suggestion that "History is a symphony of echoes heard and unheard," the digital education specialist David Schaller suggests that it is becoming increasingly difficult to hear those echoes due to the proliferation of digital devices.[11] Schaller does, however, see some hope, as those same devices "also offer a way to tune into that symphony so we can hear those echoes and see the world of the people who once walked the very ground we are standing on."[12]

The innovations that are taking place are changing the way we engage with history: from augmented reality to geotagged content, soundscapes melding speech and music, the creation of virtual worlds, and the gamification of history through role-play. This re-evaluation of the models and methods of scholarship is timely, as Harris Kornstein and Jacqueline Jean Barrios have asked: "What tools and technologies will you use? What values,

[5] Historic England 2020.
[6] Stefaniak, Bilewicz, and Lewicka 2017.
[7] CPRE 2022.
[8] Historic England 2022.
[9] Dean 2021.
[10] Dean 2021.
[11] Grove and Schaller 2013.
[12] Grove and Schaller 2013.

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ideologies, or politics are they enmeshed in?"[13] These questions, albeit much more analogue, were explored by the landscape writer Nan Fairbrother in *The Nature of Landscape Design* in which she stated that "A plan is an intellectual abstraction, not a description of the visual landscape … We are ground-level animals looking along the landscape surface; we see in elevation, not plan."[14]

A key part of the project was the creation and expansion of an online, open-access archive on the Historypin website. By bringing together material from Colvin and her peers' archives, as well as other documents, archival and contemporary photos, films, and other ephemera, we hope that by including material like Diana Armstrong Bell's photos of Mary Mitchell's Markfield play area from the 1970s alongside current images, we can document the legacy of these landscapes as they evolve. This method of creating a landscape architectural archive is novel, and we hope that through it a long-term interest in these landscapes will be assured. This is consistent with the aspirations of historians more broadly, who see opportunities in bringing flexibility and broadening knowledge and understanding in post-pandemic learning environments.[15]

Another opportunity presented by using Historypin was the ability to include material that sat outside of the bounds of traditional landscape archives. This mixed-media ephemera has a way of bringing to life the real-world, real-life experience and evolution of these places that cannot be done with a paper plan alone: the glimpse of a cooling tower that meant you were almost home, the games played in an innovative concrete playground, and local history videos placing a designer in the context of the place that they worked, all do something completely different to archive alone. We think that by doing so, we have shifted some of the bias that can be embodied in archives, adding breadth and depth to the voices that are represented, and presenting an alternative and open model for a twenty-first-century archive.

For us, this is the most important aspect of the project and represents its legacy. Landscape archives are often hard to reach, disconnected from the places that they represent, and require specialist knowledge to understand and interpret the documents and plans that make up their collections. The *Women of the Welfare Landscape* Historypin site challenges that inaccessibility, making the collection available to anyone who might wish to interact and add to it. Our hope is that this makes the history of the designed landscapes all around us more accessible and legible.

IV. Nuancing legacies

As researchers, we were not solely interested in the designers and their designed landscapes, but also in the stories and perspectives of the communities that inhabit, work in, or recreate in these places. Colvin's work speaks powerfully to current and pressing questions about the politics of climate adaptation, the role of citizen participation in nature recovery, and the necessity for workable and meaningful long-term management of our landscapes. Alongside a broad range of public engagement activities, we mapped the evolution of these sites across seventy years. It proved to be an exciting opportunity to demonstrate the potential of digital open-access mapping and archiving as a form of local and social history that shows the humanities at work in public life.

[13] Kornstein and Barrios 2025
[14] Fairbrother 1974, 34.
[15] Yuen and Amoroso 2023.

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