

Sylvia Crowe's *The Landscape of Power* is strangely prescient more than 50 years after its publication, finds **Kate Pinnock**

Power play

“Our ancestors were convinced that all they did was justified by economic results.” This statement sounds every bit like a futuristic appraisal of our current economic recovery plan. Only it’s not. It was made in 1958 by eminent landscape architect Sylvia Crowe in her seminal work *The Landscape of Power*.

Rereading Crowe’s book, I’m struck by just how far ahead of her time she was. Apart from the slightly dated, yet still beautiful, style of her prose and particular differences in the jargon of the era, you could be forgiven for mistaking it for a commentary on today’s appetite for infrastructure or any number of contemporary design discussions. And this, I suppose, is where the interest lies. Fifty years on, what does our ‘landscape of power’ look like and how has our approach to it changed, if at all?

Looking at the impact of the requirements of the late 1950s, Crowe describes the coming of age of huge infrastructure projects in Britain. Elements that are now a common feature of our landscape were then exceptional, alien and unprecedented – a ‘third element’ comprising power stations, motorways, airports, electricity pylons and radar: the basic necessities of what we might describe as modern Britain.

So what has changed since 1958. We might argue that we no longer see infrastructure /...

as an alien form that we have to accommodate, nor a necessary evil, but as part of our everyday lives. In fact, we now consider infrastructure as so intrinsic that we actually use the word to help to justify investment in landscape in the guise of 'green infrastructure'. In that sense, we have come full circle, not only accepting it but also using it as a positive justification for change.

WHAT IS MOST interesting in rereading Crowe's book is the relevance that it has to the current political and economic trajectory, and modern design thinking. The current government's strategy for economic recovery focuses on cautious spending and economic growth through investment in infrastructure. In this respect, today's policies share many of the characteristics of the post-war Keynesian economic landscape that Crowe was writing in, a time when significant provision for an increasing population was required, alongside the need to rebuild Britain.

Crowe's work looks carefully at the way in which the design of infrastructure responds to the landscape – or, indeed, doesn't at all. What concerned her was how infrastructure may not respond to its locality; that it would lose all sense of place in the drive for economic growth at the expense of a nation's health and of the wellbeing of the natural environment. She focuses heavily on the long-term implications of design decisions on the landscape, talking of the "havoc" that will be left to future generations if the design of infrastructure is not carefully considered in a long-term context, which sounds a lot like proto-sustainable development to me.

This influence on 'modern' design thinking is quite astounding. Given that Crowe was writing in 1958, the notion that current debate is somehow contemporary is quite worrying. Who hasn't discussed the need for landscape design to be considered as important as that for housing, for example? Or that professions should be integrated to ensure coordination and effective outcomes? That infrastructure should work with the landscape rather than against it, and that the Netherlands should be seen as an exemplar? All these ideas are an intrinsic part of the rallying call for the landscape profession, today. In which case, why are we still discussing the same shortfalls and why are we not now the exemplar?

It would, of course, be wrong to suggest that we have not learnt, that we have not progressed. The majority of work is now carried out in multidisciplinary teams; we have developed a holistic approach to design and, fundamentally, we have established ways of minimising the impact on the environment through careful design and evaluation. Technology has facilitated solutions that lighten design and the visual burden of infrastructure projects. Indeed, infrastructure is now seen as a piece of art in its own right, often working with the landscape to great effect.

THE MILLAU VIADUCT in France, which explodes into the Tarn Valley, unapologetic for its interruption, is one example. The careful integration of Canary Wharf Tube station and park, or the awe-inspiring engineering of the Falkirk Wheel, are others. And what about those infrastructures that are becoming part of the everyday, such as SUDS? We now have some exceptional examples of where infrastructure and the landscape can work together, and we will have a renewed opportunity to showcase our skills as designers with a new generation of power stations and infrastructure projects on the government's books.

I wonder what Crowe would make of contemporary debate and our resulting landscape of power. When, in the late 1950s, political leaders and landscape professionals faced many of the same challenges, she suggested that "the time has come when the nation should be prepared to overcome these difficulties wherever possible, and in the case of the costs to realise that a good landscape is part of the nation's standard of living".

This is a sentiment that I believe most would feel is as relevant today as it was then. But I can't help but feel that the alarming similarity between Crowe's thoughts and our own 'contemporary' debate would frustrate her. She set landscape design a challenge – to rethink the relationship between the landscape and infrastructure – but can we honestly say that our response has been as exciting or revolutionary as the ideas she set out in her book?

Perhaps it is time for a successor to Crowe to come forward and articulate the landscape of power for the 21st century. •

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