

Origins, Benefits, and Values of Four Cultural Projects in Wales

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This is a talk about the ideas that lay behind the creation of four major cultural projects which have helped to define a contemporary vision of Wales and its heritage. The four projects in which I was involved are the establishment of the National Botanic Garden of Wales, the restoration of Aberglasney, the creation of Artes Mundi, and the restoration of Llanelly House.

The National Botanic Garden

The origins of the Botanic Garden were wrapped up with the origin of the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust. My late aunt was a keen naturalist and went on a walk organized by the West Wales Naturalists to the site of Middleton Hall where the county council owned woodlands which were being opened up for walkers under a job creation scheme. She came back and reported to me that there were some structures lurking in the undergrowth which she thought might interest me. Shortly afterwards I took her advice and went to explore. What I saw astonished me. Within the mess and dereliction were the remains of what, in my judgment, looked like a highly sophisticated late eighteenth-century intervention of neo-classical geometry which made outstandingly beautiful use of the existing landform. In due course the whole astonishing scale of the park would emerge as one became aware of the network of drained and silted-up lakes, all filled with alder carr.

It should be borne in mind that at this point the Chairman of the Historic Buildings Council for Wales, when asked by his English counterpart if Wales had any historic gardens, was moved to reply, 'Of course we have, I can think of at least six.' (By the end of the first year of the Welsh Historic Gardens Trust's existence, initial research had produced an indicative list of around three hundred and six; I imagine that this number has now doubled, if not trebled.) At the same time, unsurprisingly, the word 'garden' did not exist in the Wales Tourist Board's strategy.

Therefore there were two great challenges: to try and save what survived of the great landscape at Middleton and to try and raise awareness in Wales of the depth, glory and parlous neglect of this aspect of our heritage. 'Heritage' in the late 1980s was generally seen as something in aspic, to which one turned to get away from the present, but to me, as an artist, the past is the compost out of which the future grows and, like any good ecologist, one recognises the huge importance of variety.

The first specific challenge of Middleton Hall's park was to find a role for it, a vision, that might catch people's imagination and give it a chance to be self-sustaining. To offer straightforward restoration was far too esoteric, with little chance of sufficient visitors. And so the vision emerged of a new botanic garden, with all the discussion of humanity's relationship with nature which that implies,

married to the similar vision which we inherited from the late eighteenth century. The original masterplan, developed with Norman Foster and Partners and Colvin and Moggridge, was a real beauty and reflected those ideas. Unfortunately, the execution has not always lived up to those ideals, though now there are very exciting plans which will lead to the fulfilment of an outstanding part of the original plan, namely, the restoration, as far as possible, of the great eighteenth-century landscape with its tree grouping and string of lakes and cascades.

Selling the idea of a new national institution of this nature was long and laborious, but the benefits which we envisaged transcended the straightforward ones to heritage and to science. Nowadays, in the era of lottery funding, which only came into existence part-way through the development of the project, the calculation of direct and indirect economic benefits of such schemes is commonplace, but at a time when gardens were not regarded as part of Wales's heritage it was a novelty to be promoting the economic, as well as the aesthetic and educational, benefits of such a project. Perhaps one of the most unusual elements was to propose that contemporary design of the sort that we were commissioning was capable of serving not only the Garden but as an icon for Wales and its ambition to move into the twenty-first century in a really exciting way. After some years of sadly losing its way, it is really marvellous to be able to report on how ably the Garden is now being run, and that the origin of the project, the historic landscape, should be largely restored by 2020.

The gardens at Aberglasney

Aberglasney's origins as a project are somewhat different. What constitutes the present holding of the trust was owned by a large number of different people, though the historic core of house, gardens, and walled enclosures remained in one ownership. The whole ensemble had fallen into a terrible state of disrepair and an attempt had been made to sell off the portico. In 1989, the nature of the garden was a real mystery and subject to wild conjecture about its origins and significance. However, in that year, as part of my plan to increase awareness of the Towy valley garden heritage, I brought Professor John Dixon Hunt down to show him Dinefwr, Middleton, and Aberglasney, and as I cut our path through the brambles and knotweed into the cloister garden I heard his voice behind me exclaim, 'Good God, a cryptoporticus.'

In due course he explained what this was and what the significance of the garden was, ending by saying, 'This is the one you have to restore.' It seemed to be completely beyond the realms of possibility, but the knowledge that at Aberglasney we had what was the only surviving early seventeenth-century 'cloister' or 'parapet' garden in the UK certainly reinforced the desire to save a garden which still retained a real magic, despite its appalling state.

Its saviour eventually came from the USA. I had decided at a very early stage that one of the best ways to interest the Welsh Office and its agencies in our garden heritage would be to demonstrate its appeal to people overseas, specifically north America, and therefore, for a number of years, I made an annual lecture tour. While



*Fig. 1: Thomas Horner's view of the site, 1815
(courtesy of the National Botanic Garden)*



*Fig. 2: The Great Glass House
(courtesy of the National Botanic Garden)*

I had always felt that there was an outside chance of attracting modest support for some aspect of our garden heritage, I had no idea that I would encounter such a generous and sophisticated donor as Frank Cabot, founder of the Garden Conservancy of the USA.

Frank had a particular interest in formal gardens and the slides that I had of Aberglasney piqued his interest. He and his wife came over to look at it in the January following my October lecture. It was one of those years when it rained continuously from November to April, with the improbable exception of the three days of their first visit, when the sun shone, clouds scudded, colours were brilliant and the Towy and its oxbows glittered. Frank thought that the setting was paradise and offered the seed corn for acquisition if I would set up a trust to take it on. As is now well known, in due course he went much further than that. So that, while the route to success for the Botanic Garden had been the creation, during the course of the project development, of the Millennium Commission, the reason that Aberglasney survives is entirely down to private-sector philanthropy. Not that the public sector didn't contribute, but it was a relatively minor player following a philanthropic vision.

As with the Botanic Garden, though less dramatically, Aberglasney offered scope for a fusion of the contemporary with the historic. An important part of the philosophy of the restoration was that structures were sacrosanct but the planting would be modern, responding to the inspiration that the structures provided. The result has been for the most part very exciting, not only in the formal spaces but in the informal, particularly the woodland areas which have benefited hugely from the expertise of successive head gardeners and of Frank Cabot himself. Ironically, the only area which I think is disappointing is the cloister garden itself.

One of the many benefits which this unique project has brought to the area is the growth of a magical cluster of landscape gardens. The Towy valley now contains, within a radius of some six miles, a wealth of examples of landscapes designed for pleasure, from the early medieval hunting grounds of the Princes of Deheubarth at Dinefwr to the entirely contemporary at the Botanic Garden. Between these two extremes come the early seventeenth-century landscapes at Aberglasney, the mid-eighteenth century and 'Capability' Brown designs at Dinefwr, late eighteenth century and Samuel Lapidge at the Botanic Garden, and the mid and late nineteenth-century landscapes at Golden Grove. This is an extraordinarily rich survey of attitudes to landscape to find in one small, and very beautiful, setting, and the direct and indirect economic benefits from developing this cluster have been considerable. Capital investment at the Botanic Garden now amounts to something in the region of £51 million which will rise to £57.5 million when the next stage, the restoration of the historical landscape, is completed. Aberglasney does not have up-to-date figures, but my assumption is that it must be in the region of £8 million.



Fig. 3: Aberglasney before restoration.



*Fig. 5: Aberglasney gardens after restoration
(courtesy of Jason Ingram Photography).*



Fig. 4: The walled kitchen garden at Aberglasney (courtesy of Jason Ingram Photography).

Artes Mundi

Artes Mundi is a very different kettle of fish. Its origins lie in a conversation with the then chair of the Wales Tourist Board, Tony Lewis, who asked me why we couldn't have a visual arts equivalent of the Cardiff Singer of the World event. I replied with the stock answers on the differences in the arts and the problems of creating any equivalent. However, thinking about it later, I wondered whether there was not a way around it, something that would help Cardiff be recognised for the first time as the capital of a country with a thriving visual culture as well as literary and musical ones. But this was a worrying period in the visual life of Wales despite the wonderful flowering of contemporary talent. The demise of the Zaha Hadid opera house proposals and, a little later, the closure of the short-lived Cardiff Centre for the Visual Arts damaged Wales's reputation and it was clear that if something was to be done it had to be low risk and involve no capital expenditure. The idea for Artes Mundi was based on something that would create a bridge between excellent contemporary practice and a wider audience to whom the idea of contemporary art *per se* might not normally appeal. It also had to be different from anything else in Britain, and, given Wales's lack of profile in the visual arts, it would have to have a really strong and clear appeal to ambitious artists.

Our solution was to create what was then the biggest art prize in the world, to give it a theme of the human form or condition, and to make it international



Fig. 6: The Rt Hon Carwyn Jones, First Minister for Wales. Artes Mundi 6, 2015, National Museum Cardiff (Wales News Service)

in scope, open to artists of any age who, in the opinion of the selectors, were not as well-known as they deserved to be. It proved to be a remarkably successful competition, attracting marvellous artists, excellent attendance figures, and good media coverage everywhere, except in London. (The *New York Times* gave a whole page to the first exhibition, something unprecedented in Welsh history!) Though it has taken many years to achieve an equivalent notice in the British national media, I am glad to say that the exhibition of 2014 has finally made the breakthrough and Wales's status as an important centre of contemporary visual art in the UK has been consolidated through many favourable comparisons with the Turner Prize and fine reports on BBC TV's *10.00pm News* and Radio 4 *Today* programme.

Each two-year cycle of the Prize requires fundraising of around £1million, in cash or in kind, which is hard work. But the Welsh Government has recognised from the beginning the value of raising the profile of this sector of the creative industries, and for the National Museum the raising of its profile, the influx of a new audience, and the educational outreach work have been invaluable. Recently we worked out that almost 60% of our funding came from the private sector, a very, very rare figure in the art world.



Fig. 7: Ragnar Kjartansson, winner of the Derek Williams Trust Purchase Award Artes Mundi 6, 2015, National Museum Cardiff (Wales News Service)



Fig. 8: Artes Mundi 6 shortlisted artists, National Museum Cardiff, 2015 (Wales News Service)



Fig. 9: Carlos Bunga, Exodus, 2014, installation view. Artes Mundi 6, National Museum Cardiff, 2014 (image courtesy of Warren Orchard)

Llanelly House

Llanelly House differs from the three other projects that I have described in two obvious ways. First, it is simply a building, not even an inch of its garden survives, and, second, it is a relatively straightforward project of restoration. Built in 1714, the house was a dilapidated eyesore in 2000, with Llanelli's inner gyratory road running six feet in front of its main facade. Yet despite the mess of interventions dating from the late nineteenth century to the brutal 1960s, what was immediately apparent was the fact that it is a real piece of architecture, not just a period piece.

It was designed with panache and a great feeling for space and light, and an astonishing amount of the original detail and decoration survived. The stairwell is a dramatic masterpiece, light flooding in to a three-storey space after an approach through a dark and narrow entrance hall. As far as detail was concerned, even more survived than was apparent at first glance, as from the beginning of the project we were uncovering hidden plasterwork, panels and paintings, and archaeological evidence of the origins of the house. If the quality of the building represented one compelling reason for committing to it, the other reason was the extreme bravery of the small town council in purchasing the house in order to save it. It seemed to me that the house had to be saved in order to prove that they had done the right thing and to give confidence to other authorities, small and big, that such things can, and should, be done.

It very soon became clear to me that there was a third good reason for the undertaking: Llanelli's town centre was in sharp decline. Poor planning decisions in the 1970s had recently been exacerbated by the development of out-of-town shopping and the centre itself was in desperate need of help in returning it to a 'go to' area rather than a 'stay out' area. Llanelly House had the potential to help lift the town centre, particularly if combined with a range of environmental improvements and a re-establishment of the historic cluster of house, church, and library that had once been at the heart of the town.

The brief that I was given – to organize the restoration at no capital cost to the council and set it up with an end use that would have no revenue implications for them – was nigh on impossible, but I promised to do my best. In the event we got close, but did not quite achieve it. The first task that I set myself was to get the gyratory road in front of the house closed, because without that environmental improvement I could see no viable future for the house; the setting was too unpleasant and the potential for further damage too great. End use was another major problem, partly because the house offered very little flexibility. It was Grade 1 listed and almost every part of it was of architectural interest. I tried to acquire neighbouring properties, but without success. This meant that the house would have to work as a multi-functional space relying on its exceptional quality to draw people in. Aware that the County Council was extremely worried about high costs and poor attendance figures at the Parc Howard Museum, I also tried to reconfigure the heritage offering in the town, arguing for the advantages of a critical mass at the town centre but, again, I had no luck.

However, we did have one major triumph. The County and the Welsh Government came in to support the redesign of the road system and the pedestrianization of the road in front of the house, and while I think it is sad that the scale of the cultural offering at the heart of the town is not what it might have been, maybe in years to come another opportunity may arise. The sustainability of the project currently rests on a complex package, a key element of which is the decision to turn the original dining room of the house into a restaurant, providing a uniquely beautiful dining/coffee shop. Other rooms play a multiplicity of roles, apart from the great hall which is one of the star attractions of the building. Not only was it possible to restore it, through wonderful archaeological work, to its original handsomely panelled form, but it now houses a large part of the outstanding mid-eighteenth-century Chinese export dinner service commissioned by Sir Thomas Stepney, seventh Baronet, for the house.

Planning the viability and appeal of a Grade 1 house with none of its original furnishings poses a number of problems, but early on we decided not to take the route of period furnishing drawn from random sources. Far better to create contemporary displays and interaction and to count on the quality of the building. But in the course of restoration we had two pieces of good fortune: locating the dinner service in Washington, DC, where it was in the hands of a willing seller, and then finding a portrait of Sir John Stepney by Sir Joshua Reynolds. This has given us two outstanding elements of the heritage of the house and family to consolidate the appeal of the house itself.

The old town centre of Llanelli is still in urgent need of investment and



Fig. 10: Llanelly House before restoration, taken from the church tower.

upgrading, and much more could be done with the nexus of church, library, and house, but at least a start has been made. The restoration of the house cost in the region of £7 million and was made possible by a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, but the role of the Town Council, in particular, should not be forgotten, with their initial decision to purchase the house and subsequent bankrolling being absolutely vital to the success of the project. And if the centre does claw its way back into being a desirable destination I have no doubt that the restoration of the house will have played a critical part in it.

In conclusion, I believe that these four case studies can be summarized as projects which provide substantial direct economic benefit through tourism and indirect benefit through raising the profile of Wales and improving the quality of life for local residents. They also directly promote intellectual and creative activity while providing what I think can most accurately be described as ‘cultural compost’!