

**Ed Bennis**

**EGHN Laudation 2022 “Design or Concept of a Contemporary Park or Garden”**

**RHS Bridgewater**

There were 24 nominations in this category, and it is always a challenge to determine a winner particularly with such diverse nominations. Our congratulations to RHS Bridgewater and to the joint second prize winners, Podzamecky (Czech Republic) and La Pista 500 (Italy).

Located in the northwest of England, RHS Bridgewater is one of the largest garden projects in Europe and the fifth garden in the RHS portfolio; the gardens opened in May 2021-two years after its planned opening. Delayed by technical site issues and then COVID, RHS Bridgewater has attracted more than 400,000 visitors in its first year. As soon as you arrive, you know there is something special about RHS Bridgewater. Its welcome building is vast, modern, daring in scale and when entering you see straight through to the new Moon Bridge Water Lake and gardens. It recently won the RIBA northwest building of the year. A judge commented the building was ‘modern and inviting to a special place, exciting and a different park to the other RHS gardens’. There is a connection between the building and the landscape, in a master plan covering 62H and conceived by the landscape architect and garden designer Tom Stuart-Smith. Again, a judge said ‘I recognised the design made by Tom Stuart-Smith immediately and his modern use of plants fits perfectly into this garden...a garden within a garden’. This is a modern landscape set within remnants of the earlier landscape of a Victorian estate; Worsley New Hall had been damaged by fire in 1943 and demolished by 1949. Seventy plus years of neglect resulted in a site that was overrun with brambles, invasive ash and sycamore trees, this was a forgotten landscape. What did remain were extensive walls from the 4.5H kitchen gardens and some associated derelict structures.

These restored walls provide shelter, enclosure and form the heart of the first phase of work. A series of gardens include a Paradise Garden with a rill, ponds and fountains. These are clearly modern in terms of form and materials, there is no sense of copying the past. The Paradise Garden has 89 planting beds and over 27,000 plants while other areas show traditional vegetables and trained fruit trees. There are large areas of woodland with over three kilometres of paths. This includes the site of the original terraces for the Worsley New

Hall, yet to be restored, and the original lake which has been restored. Just below the lake is one of the newest gardens, the Chinese Streamside Garden. A judge said that 'it gives an impression of modern aspects of Asian gardens'. Nearby is the adventure play area of just over 1H which keeps not only the children amused, but parents and grandparents as well. My grandchildren would love to see this doubled in size! It could be described as a play garden as planting is an integral part of the play area. Further attention is paid to modern issues and planting approaches with 8.5H being developed as a wildflower meadow; and, as you approach the exit, there is a meandering series of paths along the new lake with mixed planting beds; these look as visually appealing in the winter as in the summer.

The commitment to education and community makes RHS Bridgewater stand out as a first-class garden and EGHN winner. The Peel Learning Garden and the Community Grow gardens demonstrate the RHS's educational support for local communities by encouraging people to become involved in gardening and horticulture at various levels. This connection to the local area has been reinforced by promoting the benefits of gardening for better health. There are links to Social Services, hospitals and local doctors can refer their patients for therapeutic gardening. Since opening, residents have had free access on one day a week.

RHS Bridgewater proves the values of gardens in modern society, there is a clear social and educational commitment, but it also has a major economic role by providing 140 jobs in the garden and more than 180 jobs in the local community. The judges were particularly impressed with the design, quality and social commitment, but also the sense of maturity in such a large-scale venture and within a short time frame. In terms of the design, one judge felt that Tom Stuart-Smith is deserving of a knighthood for his work here and his work as a garden designer and landscape architect. There are more areas to develop and a planned school of horticulture. This is the start of a heroic scale adventure into the world of gardens and an important resource in terms of social inclusion, education, job creation, inward investment and the promotion of horticulture and all aspects of gardens.

Finally, a judge commented: 'It is the combination of modern design in an historic landscape and its special design for the location that makes Bridgewater an outstanding garden of the highest quality.'