



## opinion

**STEPHEN FEBER**

Stephen Feber is a creative and technical consultant to the cultural, leisure and heritage sector with 25 years industry experience

# A visitor gadget

I am out in the Yorkshire hills, walking with my wife. We are without map or compass, yet I am leading the way with confidence. She is worried but I am not because if I don't exactly know where we are I am quite certain that the National Trust car park where our car rests is just over the next brow. We crest the rise and see before us another valley, more stone walls but no car.

The reason we have a row at this point is not just because I can't admit I've made a mistake and got us lost, but because I suggest that what I really need is a piece of technology, my web

enabled Apple iPhone to be precise. It's a gadget I have been imagining, an electronic version in fact of Superman's X-Ray specs, a Personal Landscape Assistant.

Of course I know the geology and geography I am looking at, around Malham and I know it's a man and sheep made landscape. I know the roads and paths (mostly) but what do I really know? If landscape is where geology, geography and culture meet then I'd like to know more, I'd like to have a mufti media, Wikipedia connected, Wainwright enabled, OS supported Landscape-O-Scope in my pocket.

"I'd like to have a multi media, Wikipedia connected, Wainwright enabled, OS supported Landscape-O-Scope in my pocket"

I'd use this to help me decode what I am seeing and walking on. I'd have used it on a recent visit to Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, where the National Trust, as far as teaching me about the history of the Park was concerned, were unhelpful. It would have been useful when we were working recently at Kensington Palace to find out more about the surrounding Park. And it would have been a great boon when we visited Alnwick last year, though I doubt it would have given a very good answer to my persistent question – why?

For those who object that such a device would interfere with the tranquillity of the experience, or lessen my

appreciation of the purity of their design, I say the same as to those who complain about television – you can always switch it off.

But the serious point is that a little machine to add richness, depth and complexity to my experience would not only make me have a better experience it might also get me to stay longer, extend my experience, book a local hotel, sample a pub.

Who knows, we might then create landscape and open spaces with this form of mediation in mind from the start, re-cycling the enormous amount of research and thought that often goes into the design process ... now where did I leave my car?



## column

**NOEL KINGSBURY**

Noel Kingsbury is a writer on plants and gardens. He is currently undertaking research at the University of Sheffield as part of his work to promote quality planting in public spaces

# Green roof challenges

Having co-written the first book to be published in English on green roofs, and having just had to update it for a second edition after three years, it feels like a good time to take stock of developments in Britain.

Given our summer of flooding, the topic of controlling run-off should be near the top of the agenda. In Germany, Japan and some US cities, there have been a range of policy initiatives aimed at encouraging, or even mandating green roofs. British policy makers have been slow to follow – but then the British Government and political culture has always been slow to recognise the value of environmental public goods. Green roofs will only spread when incentives, or the law, ensure developers use them.

But what can green roofs offer in terms of amenity interest to the

users of public green space? The current generation of sedum roofs actually offer very little; they soak up little water, are often visually dull, and have little biodiversity value – and you can't walk on them. Serious roof greening has to involve deeper substrates and more diverse vegetation.

As population density in urban areas rises, public amenity space is more likely to be on completely artificial substrates. Where mown grass is needed, the technologies promoted by roofing companies give a very good result. However, these technologies are arguably over-complex and unnecessarily expensive for situations where no public access is required.

The greatest problems in developing green roofs in Britain are in the creation of ornamental non-grass matrix plantings – the



Moorgate Crofts Business Centre, Rotherham with a 'semi-intensive' green roof designed by Nigel Dunnett. It has a substrate depth of 8cm, supplied by Alumasc, and a wide range of species is used, many of which are normally associated with domestic rock gardens

equivalent of the borders, rose beds and shrub banks down in the local park. Here, the hi-tech approach to build-up and substrate formulation is probably at its most valuable, with irrigation a probable must for southeast England at least.

Working out planting formulas is the difficult part. Researchers at the University of Sheffield have made a good start with their concept of the 'semi-extensive' roof, where a shallow substrate has supports a wide range of dry-habitat plants. The results can be extremely decorative.

There is a huge range of plants which can be successfully used, although their appearance is very far from what the public and

landscape designers are used to seeing or using in public spaces – lower and tighter, more like heathland or rough grassland.

Two horticultural management issues stand out: the ability of species to withstand drought in different parts of the country and weed control or management of the more aggressively spreading members of the planting mix. Fortunately, at least one of the companies involved in green roof construction is actively involved in promoting the research that is sorely needed.

■ *Planting Green Roofs and Living Walls*, by Nigel Dunnett and Noel Kingsbury (Timber Press, 2004) New edition out spring 2008

