



Arendt: believes that adoption of his step-by-step approach to neighbourhood design should never result in inferior plans

Green design expert

Randall Arendt is renowned throughout North America for his work on conservation design but his ideas remain firmly grounded in UK practice, **Cliff Hague** discovers

Randall Arendt's book *Rural by Design: Maintaining Small Town Character* is listed among 39 volumes recommended by the American Planning Association as part of the "essential planning library". This puts him in something like planning's hall of fame in his native country. Yet he trained and practised in the UK.

Arendt has been a powerful advocate of landscape conservation planning for three decades and is in demand throughout North America. He is regularly invited to address influential think-tanks and industry bodies, such as the Urban Land Institute and the National Association of Home Builders. His skills are sought by councils and developers because his designs are "twice green", delivering environmental quality in developments that sell well.

The secret of Arendt's success is his ability to creatively challenge the mechanical subdivision process that has rolled out much of American suburbia. Normally, homes and garages sit on standardised plots regardless of the nuances of the landscape and its ecology. He has managed to persuade planners and developers to depart from the uniformity of cookie-cutter layouts and to use the land saved to protect trees, views, pools and all the other features that offer visual stimulation and protection for wildlife.

As the American population ages, Arendt finds that empty-nesters worn out by years of mowing lawns the size of football pitches are providing a growing market for the trade-off between private and public green space. The quality of the conserved green areas adds a premium to prices, while more imaginative layouts

Career details

Age: 59.

Family: Married with two children.

Education: BA degree from Wesleyan University; MPhil in urban design and regional planning, University of Edinburgh.

Career: Planner, Norfolk County Council, 1974–76; director of planning and research, Center for Rural Massachusetts, 1986–91; senior conservation adviser, Natural Lands Trust, 1991–99; founder and president, Greener Prospects, 1999 to date.

Other roles: Fellow of the RTPI; honorary member, American Society of Landscape Architects; winner of American Institute of Architects' award for collaborative achievement; author of more than 20 publications, including *Crossroads, Hamlet, Village, Town: Design Characteristics of Traditional Neighborhoods Old and New*.

Interests: Walking, hiking, travel and photography.

reduce the cost of providing streets and utilities and help to recycle water.

"The predominant design standards that operate in much suburban planning on both sides of the Atlantic are engineering standards covering grey infrastructure," he says. "We also need to incorporate green infrastructure into bylaws and regulations and require the principles of good site analysis to be applied."

Arendt advocates a step-by-step approach to designing neighbourhoods. "I

believe that one should begin by first determining the open space. If this is done, and if the regulations also require a significant proportion of the unconstrained acreage to be designated as conservation land, it is nearly impossible to produce inferior or conventional plans," he maintains.

Once preservation areas have been identified, the second stage is to select house locations. Homes are positioned to take maximum advantage of the protected land to form neighbourhood squares, commons, greens, playing fields, farmland and forest preserves. The third step involves "connecting the dots" by aligning the streets and trails to serve the homes.

Arendt is passionate about site detail and the need to walk round a site before judging designs. "It is impossible to completely understand properties by examining two-dimensional paper documents," he insists. He takes members of planning boards — the US equivalent of planning committees — out on site to help them determine those features most worthy of "designing around".

So where did this enthusiasm begin? Arendt's undergraduate education had set him up to pursue a career in law. As a student in the late 1960s, he joined the

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Peace Corps rather than the Vietnam draft and was assigned to the Kingston Urban Development Corporation in Jamaica. He worked closely with English landscape architect David Wassell, who fired his passion for environmental design. Inspired by Wassell, he hung on to his grasp of case law and the interplay between the rights of property owners and the community, but sought a more creative career.

He headed to Edinburgh, the city his grandfather had left in 1923 as a disabled war veteran. A previous scholarship year at the University of Edinburgh had already whetted his appetite for the Athens of the north. "The topography, the vistas from Calton Hill and the castle, the man-made environment of bridges and classical architecture, the landscape coming right into the heart of the city in Princes Street Gardens," he enthuses. "What an inspiring, incredible city."

Newly qualified as a planner, Arendt went to Norfolk County Council, where he was assigned to the North Walsham area study. This examined the costs and benefits of alternative rural settlement strategies in the countryside, as well as informing the rural policies in Norfolk's structure plan. Looking at Arendt's work today, influences from those Norfolk years are still evident. His layouts are shaped by hedges, country lanes are retained and houses in narrow lots front onto greens.

Arendt regrets the extent to which design has been diluted in planning education on both sides of the Atlantic. "My hope is that the national professional bodies that represent planners, engineers, surveyors, architects and landscape architects will champion a multi-disciplinary educational approach to produce multi-disciplinary minds and not simply multi-disciplinary teams. Let's convene a symposium where people think across their professional boundaries to kick-start a fresh approach," he suggests.

As president of development design consultancy Greener Prospects, Arendt is concerned about the imbalance between abstract and applied research and has sought to redress the situation by always writing for practitioners in his 20-plus publications. For UK readers, the volume that is perhaps most relevant is *Crossroads, Hamlet, Village, Town*. "All my books and articles are written in a common sense language that any intelligent lay person can understand," he claims.

Arendt relishes his membership of the RTPI and has never felt the need to join its transatlantic equivalent, the American Institute of Certified Planners. He has a deep respect for UK planning traditions stretching back to well before the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 and reflected in the townscape and green spaces of Edinburgh. "The countryside has been well protected and efficient urban densities and public transport have been achieved in the towns," he believes.

Could rising petrol prices and global warming finally begin to sour Americans' love affair with large lots? Arendt can show them a greener path to a less sprawling suburbia. He calls his more compact layouts "conservation design".