



An Interview with

## Jeff Logsdon

Head of Writtle School of  
Design Writtle College, Essex

**Jeff Logsdon** came to Writtle College in 2003 as he wanted to stay in the academic world as well as practise, and was attracted by the chance to develop Masters degrees in landscape architecture and garden design.

**Q:** What was your background?

**A:** I studied garden design, architecture, anthropology in an unlikely combination with microbiology. My interest is in the interface between buildings and spaces and how people live in and relate to those spaces culturally, historically and ecologically. My first position as a research microbiologist also explored science and its relationship with art and design. I made gardens in Iowa and we, my family, moved to a farm, where I developed my knowledge of the rural domestic and working landscape alongside constant sketching and writing. I won a scholarship to Harvard, studying landscape architecture in the realm of public space, park design, urban design and greenbelts. I lectured in Versailles and then returned to Boston to develop my research further on protected landscapes.

**Q:** How in the US are landscapes protected?

**A:** Through public programmes – It is the public conservation programme that designates land to be protected, and then must raise funds to purchase it. Government provides a portion of the funding, and State lottery funds add money for further support. My work in this area was some 10-15 years ago. In the US, land is protected for historical and cultural reasons and as a natural resource for education, interpretation and recreation.

**Q:** Are the sites like most of the funded historical sites in the UK – stately homes and gardens?

**A:** Some sites are similar – but also US historical sites include native prairies, often with rare species of plants. Most prairies in the midwest need restoration through

planting of native grasses and wildflowers. Some species are only known in certain places so sources of seeds for restoration need to be local of a local genotype, within 50 miles. In Iowa, there is one-tenth of one per cent of the original seed sources left. Seed sources could be thought of as rare prairie reliquaries

**Q:** We in the UK think of prairies as being vast. When you came to England, did you find our spaces and landscapes small?

**A:** When I first came to England I had the illusion that people were tall based upon the scale of the houses in residential neighbourhoods. They were out of scale with the comparatively small houses behind them. This was a pedestrian scale that I was not used to! I had to adapt to a change of scale and new mode of living in a smaller space. Now, when I visit Iowa, even the fridge seems massive! Dimensions can change; as I know from working in a range from micro-scales to the vast expanse of prairies. Another important difference was the weather dynamics – the wind and the rain and the ever changing patterns. In Iowa, there are much more predictable and stable weather patterns. I'm now used to the weather influenced for example, by the North Sea and the Atlantic breezes.

**Q:** So is a sense of scale something you need to bring out in the students here?

**A:** Yes – I want our students to expand their senses in all directions, be able to envision the landscape and imagine changes in four dimensions, the dynamic of engaging at a particular scale, transcending scales, and linking scales all at the same time.

**Q:** What is your design philosophy in yourself and in your teaching?

**A:** In both instances it is about 'finding the life' – designing to become better citizens, and to improve qualities in society and in our own life through conceptual thinking in design that we can all access. To become agitators for a better quality of life, to resist banal conventions – to be informed through combinations of art, architecture, and landscape, to encompass many scales at the same time. To make connections with particular materials linked to meaning and identity of the site and global connections all wrapped together. Always re-visit places, understand the past, and progress to the new condition driven by knowledge, emotion, and drama, and not nostalgia.

In consideration to humans and to human settlement we learn and we have the ability to make conscious decisions of the soul. There is a memory in the earth, the ecology and in the collective consciousness of a place. The difference can be decided in our reference to history and the relationships that are possible through our work in design.

**Q:** Do you think that designers should have a knowledge of garden history?

**A:** Not just garden history but all of history – to go into philosophy and literature. There are many layers to a place, in its history, we need to know how the layers are constructed, its social, ecological, and economic structure. The idea of dwelling, and developing a relationship between dwelling and elements or features of the site, including the past and more recent inhabitants – finding a good place for humans to live; to develop a relationship with the boundaries, both physical and psychological. In garden design, people often chose a place they like and then inadvertently destroy the very thing or relationship and place they love. Design should be about place making, meaning, context, form, function, and affect.

**Q:** The ‘sense of place’?

**A:** In Lucy Lipard’s words, ... “Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person’s life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds it, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there.” The ‘sense of place’ prevails as a sign marking our significant attachment and relationship to an identity in space. Art and design may take a significant role defining and interpreting ‘sense of place’ For example, the artist’s role in a project is to understand the phenomenal relationship, the dynamic, between dwelling or position in landscape and express this relationship through art. In combination with a garden designer who designs-creates a garden as the link in the relationship between dwelling and territory. The architect may build a structure to preserve and enhance this relationship and become part of the artist’s canvas. Designers need to be educated in art, architecture, landscape and the philosophy and science behind these disciplines. I see landscape and garden design as parallel disciplines encouraging and thinking with each other in the organisation and interpretation of places through layers and relationships in space. Gardens from my perspective are the world and I see the scale of gardens moving from boundary to boundless where limits of perception begin to embrace the idea of landscape. I see the earth being more a garden than landscape and the Landscape as a thick horizontal plane of all things.

**Q:** You talked earlier about plant species in prairies. What is your own planting design philosophy?

**A:** I move toward native species as the primary ingredient in my plant pallet. My personal planting design comes from understanding each situation and knowing that each place and the dynamic of place are different. I am concerned about sustainable solutions, the essence of the sensual realities and detail of plants, and the fragility and the organic architectural forms of plants. I wish to learn from a planting design, see it as conceptual, meaningful, functional, and contextual project that must be beautiful. Applying beauty is relative and sometimes a situational challenge as well as a very personal endeavour. Of course I have favourites and continue to use them in my work. Planting design has a theoretical basis underpinned by history and related contemporary form in design solutions and is intended to be designed for

social well being in public and private circumstances. I am always interested in earthworks, reclamation, water, ecology, and support for an improved human condition in quality of life issues at all scales.

**Q:** What about the use of plants within the climate change we are experiencing? For example all the advice on dry garden plants with us all planting tree ferns, palms and exotics in the gardens has run a bit adrift in the wet and cold winters we are having.

**A:** One direction is to think about overlapping patterns of plants with a sensitivity to native plants and plant ranges. For example various species of grasses and forbs and upland species can be very different in requirements for wet or dry conditions. We could overlap and extend mesic, xeric, and associated edge species as an evolving installation that establishes over time through adaptation to climate change and to the site whether warmer or cooler or wetter or dryer. These plantings begin to develop the capacity of resiliency in long term more permanent planting schemes. This approach also needs to partake in more sustainable thinking when it comes to drainage, cultivation, desired affect, and patience, In time plant evolution will succeed but perhaps not always in the span of a human time frame.



Courtesy Writtle College

Jeff Logsdon pictured in front of the  
Design Degree Show