

Spirit of Place

Bob Brown

The neatest and best maintained gardens often don't feel comfortable to visitors. I suppose the same could be said of house interiors. But going into a slightly dishevelled, poorly planned garden that's developed like Topsy and which is loved by the owner can be not only a comfortable visit but can be like kicking off your tight new shoes and putting on an old pair of slippers at the end of the day. This spirit of place is difficult to aim for – it simply tends to happen and reflects the personality of the gardener.

Recently I visited a garden owned by a very rich, virtually absentee, owner with a group of eminent gardeners. The garden was immaculate. It has a variety of distinctive parts including formal gardens and even has a wildflower meadow. All of the visitors were very quiet after the visit until slowly they began to talk about it.

The consensus was that the garden lacked "soul", whatever that is, and this was the result of being owned by someone who didn't care and was no reflection on the designer (who was in our group) or the gardeners. Amazing! Call it what you will – soul, *genius loci* or spirit of place – it's fundamental and if you are a garden designer it's difficult to aim for.

Geoffrey Jellicoe was a famous garden designer who managed it at Sutton Place in Surrey in every part of the new garden he designed. One part he called the "Magic Garden" and another has a massive sculpture by Ben Nicholson which alone would confer little *genius loci* but, subtended by an irregular oblong pond with free-grown edges, achieved the loved, slightly worn-out and comfortable garden instantly that the rest of us might achieve after twenty years of gardening.

Sit back a bit more.