

The logo features a stylized graphic of two overlapping, curved shapes in shades of blue and green, resembling a ribbon or a swoosh, positioned above the text.

RTPI SOUTH WEST
AWARDS FOR
PLANNING
EXCELLENCE 2020

Awards for Planning Excellence Case Study

The Story of Gardening & The Viper at The Newt in Somerset

Entered by AZ Urban Studio and South Somerset
District Council

Sponsored by

STRIDE TREGLOWN



1. Background

Please outline the background to the project:

- context
- timeline (including phase in project, eg. in recognition that some planning work may have been done earlier)

(insert your answer here – MAX 500 words)

The Newt in Somerset is a large country estate, with the core area of nearly 1,000 acres now open to the public as a visitor attraction showcasing built heritage, historic landscape, horticulture, and local produce. It comprises restored historic buildings and landscape, numerous new buildings, new gardens, and extensive new service infrastructure, all functioning together as an 'estate ecosystem' of productive land management. We believe it is the largest rural diversification project in the UK, and the national press has compared it to a scale of transformation in the rural environment not seen since Victorian times.

Having secured planning permission and listed building consent for the core visitor attraction buildings and landscape areas in 2015, and with construction of buildings and detailed garden design well underway, the owners felt that there was an important story to tell for visitors that would place the gardens at The Newt within a global historic context of gardening. At the same time, the question also arose as to how to make the more remote parts of the estate landscape of interest and excitement to visitors.

These multiple opportunities and challenges were explored through a creative and open process between the project consultant team and officers of the Local Planning Authority (see section 3 below).

A great deal of synergy was found within these challenges – the brief for the museum was to enable reflection upon and contextualisation of the gardens seen at the estate, and therefore a degree of physical and visual separation was required, taking visitors to another place to then enable reflection upon what they had seen shortly before. This extended to the very *form* of the museum building required – it needed to be contained and 'other-worldly' – a brief moment of transportation away from the gardens and landscape of Somerset to tell a broader story.

The tree canopy walk project – now known as The Viper as a result of its snake-like form – was being explored as a concept slightly earlier than the museum, and sought to engage visitors with the ancient woodland of Poorground Copse from a canopy level perspective, making use of the natural topography to achieve dramatic height and views without the need for any steps at the access or exit point.

Pre-application planning engagement on each project began in summer 2016. Planning permission was granted for The Story of Gardening museum in June 2017 and for The Viper in November 2017. Construction of both was completed during 2019 and, and they were opened to the public in early 2020.

As explored below it was through positive engagement and collaborative working with the Local Planning Authority that these two projects – originally envisaged in separate locations – came together to form a harmonious, purposeful and sensitive addition to the visitor experience and landscape.

2. Outcomes

Please outline what positive impacts the project has provided for:

- the local community
- the economy
- the environment

(insert your answer here – MAX 500 words)

At the very heart of The Newt in Somerset project is the principle of public access to what has been a private environment for the last 350 years. The target of 100,000 visitors per annum has been met, with many of these being repeat visits from local residents making use of the 'pay once, visit all year' arrangements. With extensive gardens, parkland and woodland to explore, together with cafes, food and beverage, and other shops, The Newt has quickly become a favoured leisure and culture destination for the local community as well as those visiting from further afield. The Story of Gardening museum and The Viper are major components of that visitor draw, and each provide a unique visual and learning experience that cannot be found elsewhere.

The Viper is hugely popular and enjoyed across a range of age groups, although children are particularly intrigued by the unusual experience of being able to walk off into the tree canopy, without having to climb any steps. This step-free access and the gentle gradient of the walkway ensures that it is also accessible to all. The Story of Gardening provides a highly interactive and accessible range of exhibits that explore how different cultures through the ages have gardened, providing a valuable educational resource for the local community, and inspiring visitors of all ages to themselves engage with the art and culture of gardening. School visits to the museum (and other parts of the estate) will be facilitated through a local education partnership programme.

The positive economic impact of these two projects is difficult to separate out from the overall significant economic impact of The Newt in Somerset as a whole, where 250+ staff are employed, more than half of whom are from the local area. Beyond the direct employment already noted, the positive multiplier effects on the local economy are also proving significant, ranging from direct use of local suppliers for goods and services by The Newt, to indirect visitor spend in the local area. The significant investment in constructing the 1000m² museum and The Viper, using an established contractor in the region has also directly contributed to the local economy.

In terms of environmental outcomes, both of the projects demonstrate an acute sensitivity towards the receiving environment, being examples of carefully formed and sited interventions that successfully integrate with the landscape they are set within, whilst also encouraging new ways of seeing, understanding and appreciating that environment. Visitors are gently encouraged to consider their own impact upon and contribution to the environment through the exhibition content, and this continues into practical application with the plant-based café located at the museum, showcasing food and beverage prepared from plants and the environmental benefits embodied within food choices.

3. Planning contribution

Please outline how the project has benefitted from the involvement of a planner or planners:

- providing strong and effective leadership and vision
- working in partnership with others
- managing implementation and delivery

(insert your answer here – MAX 500 words)

The role of the planner – both client side and at the Local Planning Authority – has been central to shaping both of these projects from their earliest formative stages, working closely with a wider multi-disciplinary team of consultants and officers at South Somerset District Council (SSDC). Crucially, planners from both AZ Urban Studio (for the client) and from SSDC played a leading role in guiding the client and team through the process of assessing options, appraising impacts, arriving at shared preferred options, and then driving each element through the application and decision-making stages.

Each of these two projects was the subject of pre-application engagement with SSDC during 2016, and it was through that positive engagement process that each project took its form, and the two eventually came to be co-located and related.

The Viper was located and shaped through detailed engagement with SSDC ecology, tree and landscape officers, eventually arriving at a solution with minimal ground contact in terms of foundations and no requirement for tree removal along the route.

Locating a 1000sqm museum building in the open rural landscape proved rather more of a challenge, and a number of sites in the pastureland around the core visitor area were explored in discussion with officers, all being discounted due to the adverse impact of such a large building upon the landscape. It was towards the end of this process that the SSDC Landscape Officer queried whether a building form that was embedded within the landscape might be worth exploring. Further discussion led to consideration of the steep bank of the woodland edge, and the potential to link the museum with the tree canopy walk experience – giving the museum a single façade to the woodland, revealed upon approach along the walkway. That degree of creative and cooperative planning has been fundamental to delivering these projects, and is the reason why a *joint* submission has been made by the two planning organisations involved in the project.

Implementation and delivery of both projects has been greatly aided by the resolution of issues at pre-application stage, resulting in each planning application being determined under delegated powers.

Inevitably on projects of the size and complexity there were also a number of small adjustments required as a result on detailed design, and these were dealt with in a timely manner as amendment applications, enabling the project delivery phase to continue uninterrupted.

The commitment to positive, problem-solving planning from the consultant team and SSDC on these projects, together with appropriate resourcing from SSDC to allow that engagement, has shaped and delivered these two fantastic projects through the planning process and beyond.

4. Sustainable development

Please outline how the project has supported:

- positive short, medium and long term public benefit
- a balance of economic, social and environmental objectives
- the UN's Sustainable Development Goals
- aimed to prevent or mitigate climate change

(insert your answer here – MAX 500 words)

The client's vision for The Newt in Somerset was to conserve and celebrate the cultural heritage embedded in the place, re-invigorate and expand productivity and produce, and share a previously private environment with the public. It is therefore an inherently sustainable vision, working with the existing, celebrating the local, engaging communities and achieving diverse productivity from the landscape. The Story of Gardening museum provides the benefit of context to that cultural heritage, placing what can be seen at The Newt within a global historic context of people, cultural and shaping the landscape for production, show and enjoyment. The Viper undeniably adds drama and fun to the visitor experience, but also demonstrates the principle of making small footprints and treading lightly in sensitive areas, and allows users to see the ecology of the woodland canopy from a uniquely immediate perspective.

Both projects and the process of delivering them has, and will continue to, deliver upon a range of social objectives. Through direct engagement and via the three Parish Councils covering the estate, local communities have been engaged and inspired by the project pre-construction. Now open to the public, visitors explore and learn first-hand how landscape is shaped and managed, and has been through the ages, for the purposes of pleasure and produce, and how buildings have been formed to support that endeavour. We firmly believe that visitors will be continually informed and inspired, promoting healthy living and wellbeing, local produce, and responsible land management. Social and communal benefit is already evident in the value that local people attribute to the buildings, structures and landscape created. In restoring the traditional productive eco-system model of the country estate a number of UN Sustainable Development Goals are delivered upon ranging from clean energy to economic growth, innovation, and responsible production. It is truly a sustainable rural powerhouse.

A number of direct sustainability and climate change mitigation measures are embodied within the two projects. The Viper is just one component of an overarching management plan for the ancient woodland, whereby areas of overgrowth and undermanagement are now subject to appropriate management, enabling greater biodiversity and the return of ancient woodland indicator species. All timber from woodland management is re-used within the estate for construction or fuel for the biomass boiler. The Story of Gardening building uses local Hadspen stone aggregate as a primary material within its heavy rammed concrete construction – giving the earthy and settled appearance in the landscape – together with an extensive ground source heat supply network laid in the adjacent pasture land to provide a renewable energy source for background space and water heating.

5. Community benefit

Please outline how the project has provided:

- positive and constructive engagement and dialogue with local people and businesses
- a better quality of life for people, especially for disadvantaged communities
- tangible benefits for communities such as facilities, infrastructure, jobs, training etc

(insert your answer here – MAX 500 words)

Being part of the second phase of major development at The Newt, good channels of communication and engagement with the local community and other stakeholders had already been well established. To engage such a broad group of stakeholders across a wide mainly rural area at the formative stages of the project, we made use of Parish Councils and Ward Councillors to disseminate information and where appropriate receive feedback, and also held on-site briefing events for tenants of the estate and the immediate neighbouring owners. Whilst both the museum and tree canopy walk were large scale projects, their location tucked away in the landscape near the core of the estate, and use of existing access and parking arrangements meant that there was little cause for any local concern. Indeed, both projects serve to reinforce the offer for *existing* visitors to The Newt, rather than being individual new stand-alone attractions in their own right. As noted above, both planning applications attracted no objections and were able to be determined promptly under delegated powers.

Providing employment opportunities and associated training for local residents has been a core objective of the client, and to facilitate this a 'jobs fair' was held by The Newt at the nearby Haynes Motor Museum in early 2019. It proved enormously successful, to the extent that 75% of the 250+ current employees live locally. All staff benefit not only from a fantastic physical working environment, but also from a range of in-house training and events, and all are provided daily with a free hot meal in the staff restaurant, made where possible from estate produce.

In 2019 The Newt began an outreach works programme, taking the skills and equipment of the estate team to adjacent local communities to assist with project and maintenance work of public areas (traditional 'finger-post' sign restoration has been delivered in the surrounding area this year). More recently during the Covid-19 pandemic, The Newt has also re-focused their food and beverage offer to provide home deliveries to local postcodes.

We strongly believe that the care and attention to detail that has gone into The Story of Gardening, The Viper, and their immediate environment will inspire visitors of all ages and give them the energy, excitement, and inspiration to positively shape their home environments and others around them.

6. Leading practice

Please outline how the project:

- is creative and innovative
- is an exemplar that is transferable across the UK
- promotes equality and diversity

(insert your answer here – MAX 500 words)

The process of accommodating buildings, structures, and uses of this nature within sensitive open countryside and ancient woodland has been highly creative and innovative, and has resulted in built forms of exceptional design quality. Together, these two linked projects demonstrate creativity, innovation, and going beyond best practice to demonstrate exemplary planning practice in a number of key areas.

The planning *process* has continued along the exemplary path of commitment and continuity of input by the officers of South Somerset District Council (planning, ecology, arboriculture, landscape, highways) that was established in the earlier applications at The Newt. Having key officers that were familiar with the previous applications across the estate, who had seen the quality of work recently delivered on other estate projects, was of great benefit to the process. Those early-wins in terms of design quality and craftsmanship were important to build confidence and trust in the client's intentions and ability to deliver. Both The Story of Gardening and The Viper are projects that truly represent the value of positive and detailed pre-application engagement, and without that commitment from all parties to engage and come with a problem-solving attitude it is highly unlikely that these two great projects would exist today.

These two linked projects also demonstrate creativity and innovation as *products* of the planning process, and exemplify what high quality design, sensitive to local character and environmental qualities can achieve. It was the planning process that shaped the location and form, and ultimately the co-location of these projects, and led the architecture towards an exploration of a 'landscape building'. As the image provided shows, and hopefully judges will also have the opportunity to visit the site, the whole 1,000sqm museum is carefully located below the grassland pasture, and it is only the very slender balustrade that offers a clue that to the approaching visitor that the edge of the field to the woodland may reveal more than expected.

We believe that both The Story of Gardening and The Viper are exemplary in their ability to deliver so much space, outlook and enjoyment of the rural and woodland landscape, whilst having such a minimal impact upon it. Even the reflection of the woodland upon the long, glazed elevation genuinely settles the building into the woodland environment, whilst the earthy stratigraphy of the short side elevation emerging from the bank equally settles it into the land.

This is a truly unique achievement and could not have been delivered without planners – public and private sector – working in partnership to deliver positive change in the rural environment. Those involved in this unique project have already begun disseminating knowledge and best practice from the process through study tours of the estate for a range of professional bodies.