Does heroism have a part to play in modern landscape design, or is it incompatible with the more concrete challenges of sustainability and ecological correctness? Tim Richardson reports on the outcome of a debate held at the ‘Breaking Boundaries’ conference in London.
series of spaces around the visitor centre, having arrived in air-conditioned cars. Porter modestly suggested that perhaps this scheme was not landscape design at all, but for me it was the most 'of-the-moment' project shown. There was a real sense that the architecture profession was at last ‘buying in’ to landscape architecture, thanks in part to the growing tendency to include environmental issues in initial project specifications. This means that the landscape surrounding the building is discussed seriously at an early stage of the project. (I did hear one landscape architect suggest, however, that architects are only interested in landscape at the moment because they have not got enough work.)

Kim Wilkie did not reflect on this specifically while presenting his plans for the Chelsea Barracks residential development, and would not be drawn into revealing anything about the hierarchy within the project team. However, it was clear that the revised plan for Chelsea Barracks takes open space as its defining theme, with the buildings left as grey shapes on the plan – the reverse of the situation landscape architects might expect. Wilkie envisages a long, straight formal stream bounded by a hedge running down one side of the development, against the road, and within it a variety of smaller spaces, each with their own naturalistic character. Consultation revealed that residents emphatically did not want a large central square. There are formal vegetable plots in one area (images of the kitchen garden at Villandry have been used to reassure nervous developers about the prospect of vegetables on Millionaire’s Row), an orchard effect in a gated area and rows of trees elsewhere. The old barracks church has been retained and may become a concert hall or gallery; the plans and impressions of this zone were somewhat reminiscent of Central Square at Hampstead Garden Suburb.

While I found this a thought-provoking day, several delegates were left confused by the theme and the disparate choice of speakers, who sometimes seemed to be going in different directions. Perhaps gratifyingly, given the conference’s ‘inspirational’ title, it did not descend into a mutual pat-on-the-back session. In fact, the notion of heroism in landscape design turned out to be a somewhat chimerical and double-edged concept, with heroism in contemporary landscape architecture apparently bound up solely with concerns about sustainability or ecological correctness.

I left the museum not so much inspired as apprehensive about the direction landscape design may be taking in the coming decade. It seems possible that a burgeoning eco-bureaucracy might impel designers to adopt the language and formal vocabulary of sustainability, potentially at the expense of other elements within the scope of landscape architecture. Or is this happening already?