**THE ELEMENTS**

It is often stated that Iceland lies on the border on the inhabitable world, because of its geographical location, harsh climate and frequent natural catastrophes. Iceland is the youngest and most volatile land in Europe – formation began about 70 million years ago - so the island is a geological infant compared with the oldest on the continent, whose age is measured in billions of years.

Because of the isolation of the country and absence of indigenous herbivores, great pressure was brought to bear on the natural vegetation with the first human settlement, which began in the late 9th century. The import of alien livestock resulted in sudden and great damage. Moreover, the native birchwoods, in addition to being grazed, were felled and burned, dramatically reducing their range over a short period of time. This wholesale disruption of native habitats marked the beginning of the soil erosion that has been a persistent problem to this day.

The climate became much cooler from about 1200 onwards, and there was no significant warming trend until well into last century. Huge areas of land became spoiled by natural catastrophes. On average the island has witnessed twenty volcanic eruptions each and every century since it became inhabited.

Satellite images show 30% of the current landmass as barren desert; only 25% is covered by vegetation; and just 1.33% supports woodland, (compared to 25% before settlement). Glaciers and water account for 15% of the island.

It is against this background that the Icelandic landscape architect must put his/her talents and professional expertise. On the face of it the picture looks bleak. The country is harsh, and the situation appears distinctly unpromising – but, as we shall see, it is far from hopeless!

**URBANISATION**

Urban centres in Iceland did not emerge until after the beginning of the last century. Reykjavík, the capital, supported a mere 300 inhabitants just 100 years ago. Today the city’s population stands at over 120,000, and the broader conurbation holds more than 200,000 - more than half the national figure of nearly 320,000. By comparison, Iceland’s second largest town, Akureyri, proudly boasts a population of just under 20,000. The smaller communities are by and large diminutive, mainly located along the coast and supporting tiny populations of 1000 - 2500. Iceland, then, has a strong claim to be the least and most recently urbanised nation in Europe.

With no tradition of urban development as such, many Icelandic communities have been built haphazardly, with little sense of controlling vision, the first city master plan for Reykjavík only being approved during the 1920s. One result has been the absence of a discernible urban texture, of the kind associated with more mature urban centres elsewhere in Europe.
DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROFESSION

Iceland’s early green pioneers were academics with a background in forestry and horticulture gained overseas. It is thanks to them that the precedent of achieving what, during the early C20th, seemed unachievable – a new generation of effective tree cover – was set. By the mid-1970s there were just three specialist landscape architects operating in the country. Before this the design of open green spaces in Iceland was virtually unknown – though in theory they existed on master-plans being produced by architects and engineers.

The nett result was that informed environmental design played a very small part in the huge redevelopment programmes which were implemented between 1950-60, especially in the south-west of the country.

The first Icelandic landscape architect, Jón H. Björnsson - graduating from USA - started practising in 1953. However, the profession was slow to take root, and the next environmental designer did not emerge until 1963. It was another ten years before the ranks were swelled to three! Today there are well over 60 within the profession, with an educational background that is distinctly international.

Initially the work of the pioneer landscape architects achieved little support. It was not just the elements they had to contend with; they had to carve out an entirely new professional niche, and convince the sceptical authorities of the value of their input. Unlike in other countries the very raw materials of landscape design had yet to prove themselves, for there were many who doubted that trees for recreation and amenity could survive, let alone make a positive and lasting contribution to the environment. Thus the first landscape architects, along with their horticultural and arboricultural colleagues, had to experiment extensively with all manner of imports and cultivars before work could begin in earnest, and the profession overcome the prejudice of the doubters in high office!

As the profession grew, both in numbers and strength, during the 1980s – so grew its confidence and stature. Highly successful innovations in forestry, horticulture and the production of “hard” landscape products equipped the landscape architect with a greatly expanded palette of proven materials. This, and an increasingly visible track record of successful schemes on the ground, led to their participation in all spheres of environmental design becoming more common.

The last twenty years have been particularly important in this respect. Landscape architects have become central to an increasingly ambitious range of activity within the field of environmental design. From modest beginnings centred on the area of garden design the profession now addresses a wide spectrum of environmental issues: development of large-scale regional and master plans; management of national parks; urban planning and design; park design and recreation management; historic preservation; avalanche protection; habitat creation; environmental impact assessment; and, increasingly, in the academic field.

Landscape architects today frequently work with highway engineers to lessen the impact of Iceland’s ever burgeoning road network, (until the 1980s Iceland’s one metalled road, beyond town limits, was between Reykjavik and the international airport !) and increasingly they work in collaboration with teachers and parents to develop stimulating and suitable environments for children.

If the period from 1950s to the 1970s was characterized by the search for correct materials, methodology and professional credibility, it can be said with some certainty that the 1980s formed the watershed. The
The subsequent phase of the profession’s development in Iceland has been critical and formative, and has seen its coming of age.

**THE ICELANDIC ASSOCIATION LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS (FÍLA)**

The Icelandic Association of Landscape Architects (FÍLA) was established in February 1978. The founding members numbered only 5 – just enough to fill the necessary positions. Such has been the rapid growth of the profession in recent years that today the association proudly claims 67 full members, and 14 student members.

As a country of just over 320,000 inhabitants, Iceland now has among the highest proportion of registered landscape architects per capita in Europe - encouraging for a nation that saw the growth of the first urban trees as little short of miraculous. That is approximately one landscape architect per 5000 inhabitants, compared to 1:12000 in Germany, and 1:20000 in the UK. Until recently there have been no unemployment problems within the profession, as the increase in the number of landscape architects has been commensurate with the growth of available projects, fed by the Iceland’s building boom of recent years.

From its inception FÍLA has stressed the importance of both Nordic and broader international liaisons. This has been significant not only in strengthening the association’s own network of communication, but also - as all would-be landscape architects have to be educated overseas - to establish educational links at an international level. FÍLA became a member of IFLA in 1978 and was admitted into EFLA in 2005.

Despite its limited numbers per se FÍLA has always been an active organisation. There are no paid staff, but its compact size ensures that members are involved and committed. The monthly meetings, which often present a guest speaker, are usually well attended and offer members an opportunity to connect with key issues and debates.

Landscape architects in Iceland work mostly in private practice. Some practices have as many as fifteen members of staff, though this is unusual. At the other end of the scale the “one-man-band” operation is not uncommon. Relatively few landscape designers work within local authorities or other public sector bodies, which is something of a contrast with many other parts of Europe.

**EDUCATION**

Most Icelandic landscape architects are educated in other Nordic countries, particularly Denmark and Norway, though a minority have graduated from the USA, Canada, Germany and the UK.

Until recently there has been no scope for specialist education within the field of landscape design in Iceland. There is however a new Department of Environmental Design at the Icelandic University of Agriculture, for the first time offering undergraduate studies in environmental design and planning. However students must conclude their studies overseas.
THE FUTURE

Over a relatively short period of time landscape architecture has become a well-established and respected profession. There are, however, troubled times ahead, as the world economic downturn continues to wreak havoc with the building industry - in Iceland more so than elsewhere. In response to the current difficulties many Icelandic landscape architects are looking to new horizons. Some have returned to education, to be ready with new specialisms once the recession lifts, (as it surely will); many are seeking new job opportunities abroad. Recognizing that necessity can be the mother of invention, designers from all backgrounds have begun cross-disciplinary collaborations. New research projects are being initiated and sponsors sought.

Recently FILA joined forces with other design institutes to form The Iceland Design Centre. The purpose of this collaborative project is to achieve a heightened appreciation of the importance of good design to society at all levels. Its role is to promote design in its many aspects as a vital and profitable component of the Icelandic economy, and thus to enhance competitiveness and economic gain.

FÍLA has from the very beginning stressed the importance of keeping in touch with the world outside – not simply to inform its members, but also to engender a spirit of mutual enthusiasm across the profession as a whole.

“Everything is possible if you put your mind to it” has been something of a mantra at FÍLA. Last year, at the association’s instigation, the internationally celebrated sculptor-turned-landscape-architect, Martha Schwartz, was enticed to build a large installation at the Reykjavík Art Museum, to great acclaim. This year, with generous support from the Nordic House in Reykjavik, the association is hosting a series of lectures and events from renowned landscape architects from round the globe – all pioneers in their own field. The TOPOS Symposium in June, will be the highlight of the year, culminating in the presentation of the first international landscape architecture award.