

**Lionel Fanshawe** discusses the ambitious plans for Enviropark, a project that aims to convert a 37ha landfill site into a landmark park at the gateway to Portsmouth

# Green dreams

The 91-acre Paulsgrove landfill site has blighted the entrance to the city of Portsmouth for over 30 years. However, with tipping recently finished and capping to be complete by 2008, there is now an unrivalled opportunity to create a landmark park at the gateway to the city.

Under existing planning obligations, the landfill operator Viola (formerly the Onyx Group) is required to restore the area to grassland with some basic path routes and 30 per cent woodland cover, before handing the site back to Portsmouth city council as public open space. The bold new landform's 'greening' can only

be seen as an excellent improvement on the previous tip and will instantly provide a five per cent increase to this densely populated city's open space. This scheme, however, is felt to be unambitious and could waste a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create a project of far-reaching vision that would benefit generations to come.

In early 2001, having successfully completed the Sails of the South project in the median of the M275 running into the city, immediately adjacent to the tip site, the Portsmouth and South East Hampshire Partnership (an organisation set up specifically to link local businesses and local government in the pursuit of regenerating



turned its attention to the wider locality with a vision to really put the city on the map.

Initial thoughts originated from Portsmouth architect and Partnership member Hedley Greentree (designer of many of the city's recent renaissance projects) and these early ideas included the working name for the project, Enviropark, a title that still remains. Plans envisaged a mix of innovative new technology, energy-efficient buildings for education and commercial uses, set in parkland that could itself be a showcase for environmental sustainability and technology. Together with Terra Firma, the Partnership worked up a large list of elements that might be included in the project and this formed the early brief in preparing the initial site planning and feasibility study. Many layers have since been added, with the input of an Enviropark Steering Group Committee set up to run the project for the Partnership and lead it through subsequent public consultation exercises.

Early conversations were held with the city council, the landfill operator, Portsmouth University and the newly formed Solent Groundwork Trust to ascertain the feasibility for key aspects: programme, ownership, liabilities, technical constraints and the potential for educational and community involvement.

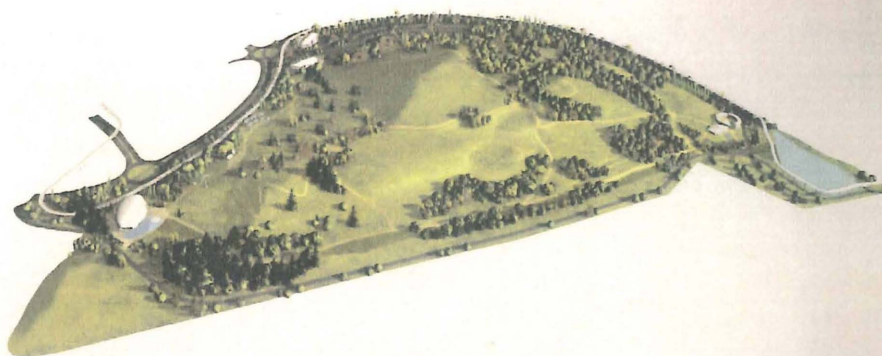
The initial idea was met by enthusiasm by all concerned, but further progress was delayed due to uncertainty about the eventual finish date for landfill operations. In early 2003, when it was fixed that landfill operations would be completed by 2005 with no further increase in height of mounds being allowed, a Partnership Steering Group was set up for the project and the nucleus of a design team was put together around HGP Architects and Terra Firma Landscape Architects, with the addition of Gifford as engineers and Davis Langdon as cost consultants. Some preliminary research was undertaken into similar projects elsewhere (visits to the Centre For Alternative Technology, Machynlleth; The Eden Project; The Earth Centre, Doncaster; Conkers, Leicestershire and Ecos Millennium Environmental Park, Ballymena among others).

In January 2004, the Onyx Trust granted a fund for a feasibility study resulting in the production of a comprehensive introductory document in October of that year. Among other aspects, this investigated the history, transport, planning, and landscape contexts of the site, opportunities and constraints of the site soils, hydrology, ecology, and neighbouring land uses, plus the potential for community involvement and education. These factors were then assessed in relation to the brief to formulate site planning and zoning. Additional input was given on interpretive vision and exhibition design (by Austin, Smith, Lord) and on market research and feasibility (by Planning Solutions).

## THE PROJECT'S CENTRAL AIMS

The core aims of the project were, first and foremost, the provision of a community park with regular sub-regional catchment within Portsmouth and South East Hampshire. Secondly, the creation of a regional, if not national, visitor attraction as a gateway to the city of Portsmouth, plus, an educational resource and an exhibition of environmental technology and sustainability.

The ability of this new park to both meet the various needs of the local community and also aspire to be something of wider importance is a key starting point to the Enviropark vision. The site is set out in the city local plan as public open space and, as such, is to fulfil objectives for a multi-functional park allowing a variety of amenity use, nature conservation and help in reducing the adverse effects of social exclusion and poverty. Taking it up a notch to becoming a wider attraction must not exclude these objectives. The theme of environment and sustainability in the 21st century is appropriate to underpin such multilayered proposals, applicable as it is to all society. The options that then open up for such a theme



become endless, but also interlinked, and provide a massive variety of ideas and uses while also avoiding the creation of a theme park. A diverse landscape of hills and valleys, waterbodies, woodland and open fields can provide a variety of habitat, openness and enclosure to provide free-form recreation, walks, trails, and meeting and performance space. There is also the opportunity for inspiration, education and research, woodland crafts, sculpture and art trails, wildlife trails, fitness trails, adventure play, integrated sustainable energy and drainage systems, variously managed grasslands and outdoor educational and exhibition areas. Ideas have even included grass skiing, trail-bike riding areas and a golf course, but care needs to be taken so the area doesn't have to absorb too many land-hungry or contradictory uses.

Built facilities with the park could offer points of arrival and major amenity hubs. Three distinct opportunities for built elements were identified (all of which have received potential operator interest from initial research undertaken) and offer the opportunities for exemplary state-of-the-art environmentally friendly technology buildings. These are: an entry building complex ►

The ambitious plan and visualisation for Enviropark. The core aims of the project are the provision of a community park and the creation of a regional, if not national, visitor attraction as a gateway to the city of Portsmouth





Below how the landfill site appears today and, right, how the area could look if the scheme gets the funding it needs

that could include a restaurant, welfare facilities, seating, and shelter, with the park maintenance base situated near or within. An urban farm (which has long been on the community 'wish list') and a main building situated in prime position with good views towards the city, offering the main educational and exhibition area while being flexible for use for events and conferences by both local community and wider public (regionally and nationally).

### PEACEFUL AND ACTIVE RECREATION

Although boundaries may need to be fenced and secured in the interests of safety and management, entry should be free for all for the purposes of both peaceful and active recreation. Revenue could come from a multitude of sources, should the park be able to make an 'enhanced offer' including parking charges (no harm charging for the car in an Enviropark), revenue from building uses, activities and special events. The park's position at the gateway to the city, at the water's edge and with the only rising topography between the coast and the Downs ensures a high profile, easy recognition and an aspect that is bound to attract visitors. Its immediate proximity to the successful local leisure hub of Port Solent, as well as local hotels, industry and transport network (both existing and proposed) would only enhance its location still further, giving the potential for a new focus to the northern part of the city, balancing all that has recently taken place at the southern harbour waterfront regeneration of Gunwharf, along with the Spinnaker Tower. Local communities of Paulsgrove, Cosham and Hilsea stand to benefit greatly from an inclusive vision for a new landmark park.

In a recent edition of TOPOS given over entirely to the theme of parks, Jusuck Koh and Anemone Beck in 'Parks, People and the City' set out an agenda which we believe fits entirely with our own thoughts for Enviropark. To quote from their article: "It needs to be multi-functional, ecologically performing and culturally enhancing and does not have to be one unified and coherent master image... The park itself, however, has to be living, healing the land, teaching us how to live, showing us the wonder of nature's ability to create and sustain, and the human ability to reciprocate with nature."

The methodology for creating Enviropark is intended to be one of inclusive community involvement. The Partnership and the design team are committed to this, and Groundwork Solent's involvement suggests active inclusion of all sectors of the community in designing, implementing and managing elements within. Opportunities for training and education can be offered at all levels of ability and to all age groups. This will not be an ego-massaging signature piece for any of the designers. The setting and the landform are already designed, meaning no single hand can lay claim to what is likely to evolve at the end of the process.

Since the production of the feasibility study, the Enviropark Project has been through a long period of consultation, with local authority officers, politicians, community groups, schools and environmental interest groups. This has been done with the assistance of the extensive network the Partnership already has in place. While constantly fine-tuning the overall 'offer' such an enhanced park could give, the team have found that nearly all who are consulted about the project are excited by the opportunity and eager to back the scheme. A momentum has built up behind the plan with good local press support. The neighbouring landowner, MoD, has indicated that it would be happy to offer access to much of its wooded land to the south of the park area, outside the main confines of the Navy's diving school, thereby enlarging the area of the park and giving increased access to the shoreline and a canal basin that could be offered for occasional aquatic events.

The main issue is, as ever, funding. While there are numerous avenues for small amounts, a project this size will require some substantial input. The City of Portsmouth indicated early on that there is no money available from council sources (even though some provision for maintaining the area once handed back under the existing arrangements would have to be found by necessity). The publication of the National Lottery Living Landmarks project, offering funding up to £25million and keen to reward community consultation and outcomes, was announced in 2005. This seemed to fit both the scale and aspirations of the Enviropark well. The project absolutely sailed through the first shortlist of 76 and representatives from Living Landmarks visited in late April for one of the first of their countrywide bid assessments. However, we have recently heard that the bid was unsuccessful in obtaining funds in spite of what was felt to be a very strong, robust presentation involving all the team and stakeholders.

This has obviously been disappointing and other major sources will now need to be pursued with renewed vigour. This is a scheme that could have a significant effect on the landscape of one of the south's leading cities and, having failed to win the necessary monies from the lottery, one must hope that sufficient financial backing can be generated elsewhere to ensure the vision is turned into a reality. ■

*Lionel Fanshawe FLI is Principal at The Terra Firma Consultancy founded in Portsmouth in 1985, now operating nationally and internationally from Petersfield, Hampshire.  
www.terrafirmaconsultancy.com*

