

Sustainability Means Protecting Designed Landscapes Too

By: [Yaniv Korman](#) in [Featured Articles](#) —

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View from the garden path towards the fields, Rousham, © Côme Savagnac

Britain is on the verge of compromising one of its most extraordinary designed landscapes.

Rousham in Oxfordshire is a revolutionary garden that borrows its surrounding countryside to take visitors on a philosophical journey. The distant agrarian meadows, eyecatcher structures, and medieval bridge have remained almost untouched for three centuries. But now developers propose to impale Rousham's designed sightlines with tall commercial buildings and three titanic wind turbines.

Throughout my landscape architecture career, Rousham has been my epitome of garden design. At university, I studied how in the late 1730s William Kent transformed Charles Bridgeman's formal geometry into a landscape that appeared natural yet expressed moral and aesthetic ideas through spatial experience. His design marked a turning point, when moral meaning was no longer declared only through symbols or geometry but emerged through the movement and perception of space.

The English landscape garden of the eighteenth century grew from this shift, breaking away from the rigid symmetry of French and Anglo-Dutch

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Korman studied human ecology at College of the Atlantic and landscape architecture at Cornell University, where he specialized in heritage and cultural research. He currently serves as Heritage Landscape Manager at Tom Stuart-Smith Studio and lead

formalism. Designers such as Kent, Bridgeman, and later Capability Brown developed increasingly naturalistic compositions of lawns, rivers, and groves that suggested nature's apparent irregularity while remaining artfully controlled.

These landscapes were not simply displays of wealth but embodied Enlightenment ideas of liberty, reason, and harmony with nature. Rousham represents the first mature phase of this new aesthetic. Unlike many other gardens altered by fashion, it has remained largely intact since Kent's time, preserving its spatial sequence, sculpture, and sightlines as one of the most complete surviving examples of early English landscape design.

Kent spent a decade in Italy studying great painting and architecture, an experience that transformed his vision. Back in England, he composed landscape as a painter composes a scene, laying the foundations for generations of landscape designers.

While working in a New York landscape architecture office on public projects amidst concrete deserts, my boss kept referring to Rousham's serpentine water rill. She wasn't just talking about its elegant curve, but about the sense of wonder it creates, a path that is as important and exciting as the destination. I kept dreaming of visiting Rousham until visa reforms forced me to bid farewell to Uncle Sam. On the way home, I

landscape architect for the Casa della Regina Carolina restoration at Pompeii.

He has created reconstruction drawings and illustrations published by Dumbarton Oaks and in academic journals including *Quaternary International*, *STRATA*, and *CARMEL*. His writing and illustrations have appeared in *Landezine*, *Art&Object*, *The Independent*, *Haaretz*, *GanVaNoF Magazine*, and *Papyrus*.

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stopped in England to make my long-overdue pilgrimage.



The Walled Orchard by St Leonard and St James's Church, Rousham, © Yaniv Korman

After seven years of American strip malls, England seemed like another world. The country lanes tunnelled through hedgerows, and crossing the medieval Heyford Bridge, I felt time folding back on itself. The garden had no busy coffee shop, no gift shop selling themed merchandise at its entrance. It felt immediately both timeless and peaceful, making me want to stop and capture every moment with brush and ink.



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Cold Bath and Water Rill, Rousham, Sketch by Yaniv Korman



The Walled Garden, Rousham, Sketch by Yaniv Korman



The Praeneste Arcade, Rousham, Sketch by Yaniv Korman



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Exploring the winding paths felt as if I were in an opera, with movements that shift between light and shadow, openness and enclosure, the cultivated and the wild. I passed through groves of oak and beech, their canopy filtering the spring light, making the carpet of laurel and ivy glow. I stood transfixed by the scene at Venus’s Vale: she was sheepishly standing in full sunlight, while Pan lurked in shadow among the hedge. The entire tableau felt alive, suspended between sculpture and theatre.

As I followed the Long Walk, I encountered a statue of a male figure. The garden plan labels it as Apollo, but it is a copy of the celebrated Vatican statue once known as the Antinous Belvedere. In the eighteenth century, scholars believed this sculpture depicted Antinous, Hadrian’s young lover who drowned in the Nile. Later scholars reidentified it as Hermes. Yet when William Kent and General James Dormer placed it in the garden, they understood it as Antinous. For Dormer, a lifelong bachelor, and Kent, who never



Venus Vale (detail), Rousham, Sketch by Yaniv Korman

married, the statue held particular resonance. Positioned across the Cherwell, it whispers a private mythology of beauty, loss, and unspoken desire, subtly revealed in the garden's composition.

I continued my journey and entered the Temple of Echo, where rows of trees along the River Cherwell seemed an extension of the temple's Tuscan columns, their trunks creating a rhythm that drew the eye outward. Here again, Kent had choreographed a way of evoking reflection on the relationship between the intimate and the infinite.

That visit changed everything. I fell in love with the English landscape, and within months I moved to the UK. I left understanding why Rousham



Statue of Apollo / Copy of the Antinous
Belvedere, Rousham, © Côme Savagnac

represents the impossible ideal, unaware that soon after, the very thing that makes it extraordinary would be under threat.

This summer, developers submitted plans for the former RAF Upper Heyford base, three miles from



Temple of Echo, Rousham, Sketch by Yaniv Korman

Rousham. The proposal includes 9,000 homes, five schools, three wind turbines, and extensive commercial infrastructure. Britain urgently needs housing, and brownfield sites like this are precisely where it should go. The question is not whether to build but how. A project of this magnitude in such a sensitive location should demonstrate how modern towns can coexist with and enrich their historical settings.

The developers describe Heyford Park as “a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable settlement.” But sustainability rhetoric means little without substance. Natural England has warned that the proposed 10% biodiversity gain is barely adequate for a project of this scale, noting risks to protected

wetlands, meadows, and nearby wildlife habitats. Installing wind turbines does not automatically render a project sustainable when those same turbines would dominate the sightlines of an irreplaceable landscape. True sustainability demands protecting both natural and cultural heritage. The historic context that makes a place meaningful is itself a finite resource.

Kent's design philosophy could provide the template. His work teaches how built form can echo the land's natural rhythm rather than oppose it. Sensitive massing, controlled heights, and intelligent placement of renewable infrastructure could preserve key sightlines while accommodating growth.

Unfortunately, the submitted documents suggest a different approach. The Heritage Impact Assessment describes Rousham's landscape as having "some ability to accommodate limited change," as if an eighteenth-century masterpiece were a motorway service station. It promises that vegetation will provide "screening," adding that "harm would be reduced during summer months." In other words, when autumn strips the leaves and Kent's designed views reopen, the damage will be impossible to ignore. Unlike many historic gardens that close for winter, Rousham remains open year-round, precisely so visitors can admire the views seen through the sculpted trunks and frost-kissed meadows.



The Dying Gladiator by Scheemaker,
Rousham, © Côme Savagnac

The accompanying visual impact report is equally problematic. Only one verified view is included, taken from the Dying Gladiator, and it is greyed out. Critical perspectives from Bowling Green and Venus's Vale, where new buildings might be visible, are omitted. Nor does the analysis address the likely surge in traffic over the Grade II* listed medieval Heyford Bridge or the strain on Heyford Station. Expanding the station or its car park could scar Rousham's horizon, yet alternatives remain unexplored.

Without night-time or noise impact assessments, the threat to Rousham's atmosphere cannot be fully appreciated. The contemplative quiet that allowed me to hear nymphs laughing by the cascades and the faint whisper of leaves tumbling

in the wind would be shattered by engines and light pollution.

Kent didn't design a walled garden. He pioneered the English landscape movement, extending the frame of the garden into the surrounding countryside, erasing the binary of inside and outside. His architectural eyecatchers do not simply decorate the view; they activate it. At Rousham, the fields beyond the formal layout are not idle backgrounds; they are protagonists in the scene. They make the Oxfordshire countryside take on a quasi-mythical air and compel the visitor to reflect on how we perceive landscape, what we call wild and what we call designed.



Clipped Hedge,
Rousham, © Côme
Savagnac



Ha-ha Wall,
Rousham, © Côme
Savagnac



View of Rousham
House, © Côme
Savagnac



The Water Rill,
Rousham, © Côme
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Urn (detail),
Rousham, © Côme
Savagnac

View of the River
Cherwell from the
Praeneste Arcade,
Rousham, © Yaniv
Korman

This is why heritage and modern needs do not have to conflict. The Roman engineers whom Kent admired built aqueducts that were both practical and elegant. With careful layout, planting, and controlled density, new settlements can protect historic landscapes while meeting contemporary needs. Development can honour Kent's vision by continuing his dialogue between art and environment, creating places that speak of both past and future.

The public can still send comments to Cherwell District Council's planning department (Planning@cherwell-dc.gov.uk, application [25/02190/HYBRID](#)) before December 26. This is not a call to halt development but to insist that what is built must recognise the depth of what already exists. Britain can meet its housing needs without erasing its masterpieces, but only if developers understand the difference between filling space and making place.

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