

Silent Space

Liz Ware



Liz Ware in Akaroa

What is [Silent Space](#)? In a world where non-stop communication is the norm, how often do we allow ourselves time to be silent in a beautiful green place – to really connect with nature? It can be difficult, particularly for those of us who live in urban areas. Silent Space, a simple not-for-profit project based in the United Kingdom, encourages parks and gardens open to the public to reserve an area for silent visiting – rather like the quiet carriage on a train. The project is in its fifth year and takes place in just under fifty venues around the UK, including in New Zealand.

How did Silent Space begin?

As a garden writer, I often spend time alone in beautiful gardens, either taking photographs or collecting material for articles. The peace and sense of connection I enjoy during these visits is something that many of us who work in gardens take for granted, and yet the public is rarely granted this opportunity. For years, I wondered how such a rewarding experience could be shared more widely.

Encouraged by research supporting the benefits of taking time to connect with nature, I conjured up a simple format that would make silent visiting in public gardens a possibility. Until 2015, it had remained no more than an idea, until my mother was diagnosed with dementia. To be able to help with her care, I had to change the way I worked. I knew that, for the next few years, it would be easier to explore a project of my own than to write to other people's deadlines. As I would be working without funding, I had to keep things simple.

I took my idea for Silent Space to a few head gardeners known to me in gardens that included Waterperry and Greys Court, both in Oxfordshire. Before I could develop my project any further, I needed to know how visitors would respond if we asked them to switch off their devices and to be silent in a specific area of the garden they were visiting. I also had to be sure that the concept would be easy for garden teams to set up and run. I was lucky. All the head gardeners I approached agreed to take part in a trial.



Silent Space runs permanently at Waterperry Gardens, Oxfordshire © Waterperry Gardens

The pilot

The pilot ran for four weekends in June 2016. The month dragged as I nervously awaited the results, but I needn't have worried. The response couldn't have been better. The visitors, staff and volunteers who had participated in the trial enjoyed being in a Silent Space, while garden staff said it had been easy to organise. It was such a success that the five largest gardens involved in the pilot decided to continue their spaces for the remainder of the summer. They are still part of the project today.



Silent Space runs during the summer months in the Tower Garden at National Trust Greys Court in Oxfordshire. ©Liz Ware

Collecting feedback took some imagination. The last thing I wanted was for visitors to be followed around a Silent Space by someone waving a feedback form. Initially, I asked staff to mention the project to visitors as they entered the gardens and to note any reaction. The response was always positive and usually led to a discussion about our hectic pace of life and the difficulty of finding a way to escape. This was encouraging, but I needed to understand more. How did people feel during their time in a silent space?

On one particularly sunny June weekend, I tied empty notebooks to benches with garden twine and waited for the results. Not only were all the notebooks still tied to their benches at the end of the weekend, but I was amazed by how people had used them – they had drawn pictures, written poems and quotes, and the overwhelming response was one of gratitude for the opportunity to be silent in a beautiful place. It seemed extraordinary that such an outpouring of creativity and appreciation could be triggered by a simple blackboard asking visitors to switch off their devices and to stop speaking. Silent Space had a future. I had its name registered and a website built.

Initially, the progress of my mother's dementia enabled fairly normal conversations between us, and she was delighted when she heard the results of my Silent Space project. As her dementia progressed, our usual topics of conversation – children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren – became impossible. Yet, perhaps because her love of gardens predated any of us, she remembered Silent Space. It became our main topic of conversation long after she'd forgotten I was her daughter. In an unexpected moment of clarity, she came

up with the slogan, 'peaceful time in green places'. She would have been amazed, and undoubtedly delighted, to know that her words, placed neatly beneath the Silent Space logo, would one day appear on the other side of the world.

The future

There are now just under fifty gardens and green places running a Silent Space across the UK, and the number continues to grow, sometimes in ways I could never have imagined. The University of East Anglia, for example, became the first university to set up a Silent Space. It supports their work in ensuring the wellbeing of postgraduates and staff on campus. The Whitworth Museum in Manchester has established a Silent Space in its Alex Bernstein Garden and the space is one of several projects that contribute to its Natural and Cultural Health Service, a range of weekly outdoor activities promoting good physical and mental wellbeing. The Garden Museum, situated in a busy part of London, not far from Westminster, organises a valuable Silent Space every Friday afternoon in its Sackler Garden.

Last year, I had the chance to speak about the project at the Botanic Gardens of Australia and New Zealand (BGANZ) Congress in Wellington. Soon afterwards, Dunedin Botanic Gardens became the first garden in the Southern Hemisphere to become involved. The gardens set up a Silent Space trail – a loop walk around seven special spots, inviting visitors to travel silently between them. As a brilliant 'variation on a theme', I hope it – or yet another variation – will be replicated elsewhere.



Silent Space Dunedin

With the core of the project now strong and well established, I've recruited supportive trustees, three of whom are head gardeners with experience of running a Silent Space. We've applied to the Charity Commission to become a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) later in the year. After five years of developing the concept alone, I'm looking forward to being part of a team.

Wherever you are in the world, if you know a garden where Silent Space could be enjoyed by visitors, staff and volunteers, do get in touch at <editor@silentspace.org.uk>.

We're particularly keen to encourage gardens in urban areas, where the need for people to slow down and reconnect with nature is greatest, but all gardens open to the public are welcome. I'm convinced that every person who takes time to reconnect with the natural beauty around us makes the world a better place for us all.

Liz Ware is a UK-based garden historian, writer and photographer. She founded and runs Silent Space, a not-for-profit project that encourages parks and gardens open to the public to reserve an area where visitors can reflect silently in nature.

Liz has experienced a different, far less welcome, silent space recently – she has been in isolation suffering from Covid 19. All of us at AGHS wish her well and a speedy recovery – to experience spring from outside her window rather than from the confines of her sick bed.

The email address for Silent Space is editor@silentspace.org.uk