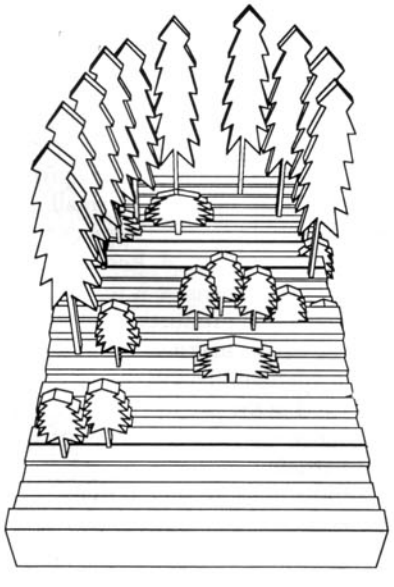
Not only computing – also art

JOHN LANSDOWN

More than awareness

In teaching graphic designers about computer graphics at St Martin's School of Art, my colleague, Gillian Crampton-Smith and I try to impart a firm understanding of the principles involved in making images by computer. At the end of the two year part-time, eight module course, our hope is that designers have gained a sufficient grasp of these principles that they can: handle computer image-making systems with some confidence; produce simple graphics programs; realise both the significance and detail of good human/computer interaction; deal effectively with computer salespersons; and, perhaps most importantly, properly specify their computer graphics needs to programmers and system designers.

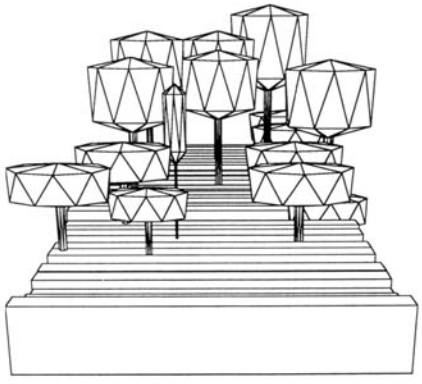
Our course, then, is more than one of computer awareness. Its aims are to bring about a level of computer graphics literacy that is often not even achieved by undergraduates taking computer science degree courses. But all within the context of good design. Indeed, the whole point of the course is to assist those already good designers who take it to become better by giving them new approaches to designing and new tools for visualisation and implementation.



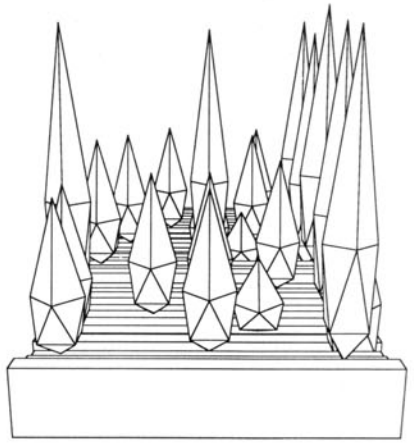
As some of the students come to the end of the taught part of the course and tackle the last two modules – devoted to a project – there is good evidence that this approach is paying off. We are being told by them that they *are* looking at designing in a new light and that computing (despite its many inadequacies and frustrations) *is* helping them work in new ways. We are also seeing evidence of imaginative use of computer imagery and systematic examination of graphics systems.

A garden is a lovesome thing

One of the almost completed projects (by Ted Mayes) is the requirements brief for a system for landscape gardeners. I have suggested before in these pages that landscape designers are not particularly well served by computer programs – although the May 1987 edition of the *CAD Journal* is devoted to describing six landscape design systems of considerable interest. Ted is setting down some of the characteristics that a system might have for dealing with small scale work – of the sort that domestic gardeners often undertake. The aim is not to produce a formal system specification: more a narrative description of what the program might do and, above all, what its output should look like. To this end, he has been experimenting with different possibilities for graphical output ranging from photo-realistic to diagrammatic. Some of the more unusual forms are illustrated in Figures 1, 2 and 3.



It is, I believe, in this matter of content and appearance of output that graphic designers (and other artists) have a great deal to offer the computing profession and, in order to test this idea, St Martin's has arranged for the landscape system to be implemented by students on Peter Burger's MSc computing course at Imperial College. The plan is that the students will use Ted's description as the basis for the system and cooperate with him as if he were an external client. We have already had some fruitful cooperation with Imperial College this year and look forward to developing the interaction further. The symbiotic effects of cooperation between art departments and computer science departments seem so promising that I recommend it as a general path to follow. The Computer Arts Society would be happy to act as a broker between such departments if it is able.



Leaning to Pisa

I am spending the next two weeks at the NATO Advanced Study Institute on Theoretical Foundations of Computer Graphics and CAD at a location near Pisa. If the last NATO ASI at Ilkley in 1985 is anything to go by, this will comprise 14 twelve hour days of solid work in monastic seclusion. There are a lot of interesting papers and presentations promised and I will report on some of these in the next *Computer Bulletin*.