

## What is a Chelsea garden?

My 2010 garden at Chelsea Flower Show was a garden destined for a home. After 3 weeks of building and a week of display, this garden would be taken to pieces and carefully rebuilt at its sponsors' headquarters.

### SLIDE 1

This is what I was told when invited to design an urban garden for Thrive, a horticultural therapy charity. So, whatever design I came up with, it was going to have to work in real life too.

This created the starting point: what was my 'theme' for the garden?

Themes in show gardens are all very well. If done correctly they help with sponsorship, they draw attention to the human stories behind the gardens, they allow charities to promote themselves and they help the public to read the designs.

However, it is a little like a finely balanced see-saw. The garden element must always be stronger than the theme: as soon as the designer/sponsor allows the theme to dominate then all is lost. From there it is a slippery slope at the bottom of which lie the shredded remains of what might have been.

Never let your theme devour your garden.

If used in the right way a theme can help to provide focus for the garden. It can be tempting to add lots of features and plants in a design because the designer really wants to show their worth. Having a theme can help to simplify things down to the key elements which really work well together. The Thrive garden needed to deliver a key message

I needed to have a clear understanding of my client (i.e. the charity sponsor), but also have a very clear image in my mind of a second client, i.e. the person or family who would in theory, for showgoers, be using the end result. And I had to have a clear idea of how this garden was going to work afterwards, in real life, as a communal, public space. A clarity of thinking and lack of gimmickry, I believe, can give a show garden heart

### SLIDE 2

My starting point, therefore, was actually to focus on the end aim: a real communal garden that people can use.

So these real people are the staff and clients at Thrive

Thrive is a small national charity, founded in 1978, that uses gardening to change the lives of disabled people.

Their activities are varied but focus on championing the benefits of gardening to individuals and organizations, as well as teaching techniques and practical applications so that anyone with a disability can take part and enjoy gardening. A research programme underpins Thrive's work to provide evidence and improve understanding.

Gardening can help individuals accomplish many things. It can help rebuild a person's strength after an accident or illness, and can provide a purposeful activity for someone coping with a difficult period in their life.

Their vision is

To enable those touched by a disability to transform their lives using gardening.

My brief from Thrive

My brief was to create a garden that did not look as if it were specifically for a disabled person: and Thrive did not want the garden to look as if it had associations with disability or illness. It needed to be 'practical and enabling'

My client brief

So my job then was to devise an imaginary client, who fitted in with Thrive's brief, and then I had to create this client's brief.

And this is who I came up with: we called him "The Unexpected Gardener"

These are my words to the Royal Horticultural Society's application panel:

This is a garden for a stylish more mature client, who, although finding gardening slightly more challenging physically than in the past, does not want to compromise his design choices.

He has always been a keen gardener, using it as a source of relaxation from his work in the design field.

A supporter of young artists and a collector of new work, he displays some of this in the garden.

The garden is practical and enabling, a place for active use as well as relaxation. There is somewhere to sit, somewhere to work and somewhere to socialise.

That's my brief. There's the client. I now needed to design the garden

SLIDE 3

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I had a few starting points: this was the first. I saw this image and decided that I'd quite enjoy that space even if 90 years old and unable to move, as long as somebody placed me there, I could quite happily enjoy the view.

### SLIDE 4

I also had seen this table by the furniture maker Gareth Neal. It's a contemporary table on first sight, but on closer examination it reveals a traditional twist: the shape of the 'Queen Anne' style leg encased within the geometric exterior.

### SLIDE 5

These images gave me my garden. A lampshade in a client's house had a clean simple detail

### SLIDE 6

that eventually found its way into the posts in the Chelsea garden.

### SLIDE 7

### SLIDE 8

The eventual design was this, submitted in October 2009, was this. However, that's not to say that this was the final design: additions and alterations were made throughout the months running up to the show: a garden evolves and I don't find it easy to stick rigidly to a plan

### SLIDE 9

Three months before the show, I went to Marrakech: on arriving at the airport and seeing the fabulous light patterns of the terminal's canopy, I realized that I was missing a trick by just having a shade to keep the sun off: I needed to apply my use of one item having more than one function in a small garden.

Returning to London, I was looking at the work of graduates of ST Martin's College of Art, and saw the work of a young artist called Jo Angell

### SLIDE 10

who was working on a modular shade canopy. Most people enjoy sunlight, but the risks associated with over-exposure to harmful UV rays are well documented. Jo's work gives people protection from the sun, yet retains an aura of light.

### SLIDE 11

This is achieved by a double layered system which allows light to pass through patterned holes on the outer layer, which become diffused when hitting the inner layer.

### SLIDE 12

The canopies are modular and based on a geometric system, so they can be constructed and grown to any size required for the space. As each 'petal' is individual, colour variations

are multiple and allow customisation.

#### SLIDE 13

The inspiration for the structure came to the artist by observing nature at a microscopic scale, in particular, diatoms, single-celled structures encased in 2-sided silica which are highly ornate.

#### SLIDE 14

A series of meetings later, she had developed this model.

#### SLIDE 15

In the garden, the canopy took on a life of its own and revealed its mysteries, During the day it cast varying shadows as expected, but the strange thing happened at night.

#### SLIDE 16

This photo was taken at 7.30 in the evening in May: somehow the combination of the 2 materials caught and held the light and seemed to glow.

#### SLIDE 17

Back to the brief. The key feature of this Chelsea was accessibility, and this got me to thinking about accessible garden design in any space

When asked to design features for a specialised space, my first step is to find out what the space is now and who it's for. What it is to be comes later on in the design process. A lot of the issues in the design of public green spaces are issues we all face in our own private spaces: if it's easy to get to, we use it; if it's comfortable, we sit on it. And if that's a good experience, we'll use that area again.

We know that public spaces need to provide access, purpose, comfort and sociability. Looking at the elements I tend to incorporate in my design, both public and private, there are a number which crop up consistently:

#### SLIDE 18

somewhere comfortable and accessible to sit, large trees to provide the required atmosphere as well as giving structure and shade, and strong lines softened by abundant planting.

The spaces themselves develop further than their original brief and tend to have more than one function:

#### SLIDE 19

A play-space in the garden of a children's hospice is also a retreat for families as well as a dining area for medical staff

#### SLIDE 20

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a display garden in a plant nursery showcases new plants, provides visitors with a place to sit and also becomes a stage for summer music events.

### SLIDE 21

A terrace in the Docklands is accessed by workers who want to escape the office and relax in a garden setting: it is also a meeting place and provides the main view from the boardroom.

### SLIDE 22

The Thrive Urban garden at RHS Chelsea 2010 was developed to a brief, provided by the horticultural therapy charity, not to cater specifically for a disabled person.

### SLIDE 23

Only on closer inspection is it apparent that it does in fact address the needs of somebody who's finding it a little more difficult to get around: there are raised planters, posts for support when gardening, non-slip surfaces and plenty of spaces to sit.

### SLIDE 24

At the onset of the design stage I took what I need in my own garden – essentially large trees and places to sit– and then put them in a space I'd be happy in.

### SLIDE 25

Clean structural lines, neutral wall colours and fabulous multistemmed *Prunus serrula* were brought together to create a restful place where a few people can comfortably relax or garden, or both, as they wish.

### SLIDE 26

As soon as I saw this tree

### SLIDE 27

and this bark

I could see what potential they held, and what importance structurally they held for the garden

### SLIDE 28

### SLIDE 29

### SLIDE 30

### SLIDE 31

I thought I'd share with you some heart-stopping moments: not many words were uttered while this was happening:

### SLIDE 32

### SLIDE 33

#### SLIDE 34

Although some people did have much bigger trees than me: this was interesting watching this tree going into James Wong's garden

The 'Unexpected Gardener's' garden has been relocated since the show at Thrive's headquarters, and is in daily use as a workspace, lunchspot and outdoor classroom by both clients and employees of the charity.

Going against the 'less is more' banner often adopted, to me a garden is a living space, thus I need to incorporate within it those elements which I need to 'live' outside. So I often tend to look to the inside

#### SLIDE 35

I love this composition: ok it's inside and not completely outside – a corner of a Riad in Morocco. Clean lines, somewhere to sit, something to look at and it looks great

So we start with a list which usually goes something like this: seating (lots of it in different areas if possible), a source of heat, cooking facility, planting (vegetable and ornamental), play area, storage, lighting, screening, shelter, shade. I know this is a pretty long list to get certainly into any small space, let alone a larger area, so rather than compromise, I need any feature that I design to fulfill at least more than one purpose. So a piece of art could also be a sunshade. A planter can also be a seat. A structural element in the form of a post can also be a support to hold on to when heaving oneself out of a flowerbed.

#### SLIDE 36

An example of this can be seen on the terraces I've been working on at the new offices of the National Youth Theatre and Ideas Tap in London. A range of people use this overlooked exposed outside space, and the whole scheme needed to be approved by estate landlords who were not initially prepared to allow any form of hard or soft landscaping outside, so the proposed functions and positive elements of the scheme needed to be clear.

#### SLIDE 37

Oak benches at 450mm high designed by me and made by English Garden Joinery were designed to provide both ample seating area and adequate space for shrubs and perennials which now give privacy from neighbouring buildings, shelter from winds as well as an attractive view from the boardroom.

#### SLIDE 38

The sound-themed garden at Chelsea 2009 for the Demelza children's hospice also needed to provide screening, but more in the sense of providing something of a refuge and creating a feeling of safety in those who use the garden. Again, there is adequate seating in the form of a low stone-capped brick wall which curves round a small terrace big enough to hold a wheelchair, but small enough for parents to sit in and just 'be'. Multi-stemmed *Betula pendula* were selected for the movement of their branches and for their towering presence:

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these would have been all wrong in the Thrive garden, where the Prunus serrula provided a show of their own with their mahogany-coloured bark. I love including large trees as opposed to 'dolls house' specimens, in small gardens. I like boldly structured varieties with multiple stems and beautiful bark such as Prunus serrula

So we have trees, and we have function: we need interest. The areas of interest in the Demelza garden comes in the form of a piece of interactive artwork: outside tethered steel chimes easily be accessed from the seating.

### SLIDE 39

The Thrive garden again has a decorative element which is also essentially a bit of fun: a multi-layered sculpture and water feature which reveals different forms depending on where it's viewed from. This was directly inspired by Gareth Neal's table that we saw earlier, and has the same idea.

### SLIDE 40

It's made out of 160 alternating discs and squares of LGHi Macs, a composite similar to Corian. Upon first sight it looks like a cuboid: closer inspection reveals the traditional twist.

### SLIDE 41-7

These are images of it in the workshop and at the show. It's something to talk about, or just to sit and look at, but the important thing is that everyone can see it.

### SLIDE 48

Within a public space, as this garden was always destined to be, I need to provide zones, giving different areas different feels: raised beds, as well as being accessible and providing seating, also create different routes through a garden to different focal points. This might be a tree on a roof terrace which also provides shade, a fireplace which also provides warmth, or a temporary art exhibit in a nursery's garden.

### SLIDE 49

I keep the routes wide enough to provide universal access throughout, yet narrow enough to still be inviting.

Even in a small garden there should be 2 or 3 destinations, with items of interest to look at along the way. I was very much influenced by many weeks of each year spent every year in Italy, as the daughter of an Italian, and my instinct is to use strong geometric shapes, softened by loose planting. I do like seating: for those idle moments I incorporate lots of places to sit, with walls and planters that double as seats.

I'm going to now touch on a space that had a great impact on me when studying how this Chelsea garden, this show garden, could work effectively in its real life, and how to combine all these factors.

### SLIDE 50

MATERIAŁY KONFERENCYJNE: „CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW – WSPÓŁCZESNE PROJEKTOWANIE OGRODÓW”  
STOWARZYSZENIE ARCHITEKTURY KRAJOBRAZ: [WWW.SAK.ORG.PL](http://WWW.SAK.ORG.PL)

An admirable communal space which addresses these issues simply yet effectively is the Urban Soland design for the Chemin de la Cote-des-Neiges in Montreal. Large-scale street furniture in the form of benches and tables along terraces revises the idea of the street in the public mind. It becomes a place to stop for a while and be human and interact, rather than just to be rushed along.

#### SLIDE 51

Forty bronze apples anchored to the tables are inscribed with phrases commemorating the multi-ethnic community which uses this area. This busy street has been transformed into an unlikely oasis, and that, I guess, is my main aim when dealing with a public place, however big or small it is.

Many public spaces fail because of the lack of places to sit and lack of gathering points, poor, uninviting and uninteresting entrances, features that aren't functional, paths that don't go where people want to go, domination of vehicles and lack of things 'going on'.

#### SLIDE 52

Trafalgar Square in London is starting to get it right so has the Chemin de la Cote-des-Neiges,

#### SLIDE 53

and so has Siena's Piazza del Campo : three very different spaces in different areas. Accessibility, it seems, is not complicated, but we can over-complicate it. Make it a place where people want to go to, make sure they can get to it, and make sure it's a pleasant experience once they're there.

#### SLIDE 54

And so, I devised the garden.

To turn this

#### SLIDE 55

And this

#### SLIDE 56

Into this

This is its description:

This area is at the end of a larger garden, separated from the house by a terrace that is not seen here. A painted frame is used to display a temporary installation which can also provide some shade and light patterns at times over a work/relaxation area. This area is also used to display latest acquisitions.

#### SLIDE 57

A 'living picture' of vertical temporary planting is also in this area. This is the one element I grew myself and I was rather please with it here it is in February, March April and May

SLIDE 58 59 60 61

SLIDE 62

Raised beds provide easier access to some plants, and posts of varying heights can provide a form of support when gardening. These are mainly of painted accoya, as is the frame for the seating area to the right of the fireplace.

SLIDE 63

There is seating here and by the fireplace itself, providing somewhere to rest before and after approaching a variety of tasks. The outdoor fireplace has a plaster finish, as do sections of the tall boundaries. These boundaries also comprise timber panels. The flooring is of a gravel which packs but does not set, recommended by Thrive. It also remains largely non-slip if splashed by the sculpture when it is being operated as a water feature. A contemporary material, LG Hi-Macs, which is a stone/acrylic mix, is used in the sculpture/water feature and the console table, and appears as a detail in the raised beds and posts. The console table is under the accoya frame, and is designed for occasional use as well as display. Although this table seems contemporary from certain angles, further inspection reveals a traditional twist.

SLIDE 64

The manageable amount of planting is selected mainly for ornamental purposes. Structure and colour is provided by 2 multi-stemmed Prunus serrula, while planting is selected mainly from a palette of purple, blue, brown and green.

SLIDE 65

Perennial salvias and irises are amongst the young foliage of grasses

SLIDE 66

The irises were interesting: here they are one week before the show.

SLIDE 67

We'd had a cold winter, and this was the scene facing all the designers. However the sun came out

SLIDE 68

And so did these

All the time I was working on this garden I was also developing ideas of how to make communal space work

#### SLIDE 69

Going back to the Piazza del Campo, I asked Why do spaces such as this one work, and what can we take from them to apply to the development of my own public or communal spaces, green or otherwise?

The client brief is changing from a request for a place defined by plants to a request for an outdoor, multi-functioning space. I am being asked to design landscapes for use rather than gardens to look at.

What we are now starting to demand of communal spaces is following the same pattern: they are gradually beginning to fulfil the same function: provision of a communal space. Green communal spaces are rightly heavily defended, but we now need to start thinking about getting each square metre to work for its keep.

Alternatives to the standard public space are appearing: Nigel Dunnett's Rain Garden at the London Wetland Centre, as well as being an 'aspirational' space, offers very real solutions for people looking for ideas that can be implemented in their own outdoor areas.

#### SLIDE 70

The Vauxhall Sky Gardens will provide 2500 square metres of communal space which can be shared by surrounding apartments. They'll provide somewhere to meet and avoid the anonymity inherent in large residential blocks. There are seating areas, larger areas for 'social passing trade', and for nine months of the year there is enough area to grow a weekly salad box for each household.

#### SLIDE 71

The Sky Gardens are an urban model of an integrated environmental-social sustainability, a concept now key to gaining any residential approval in densely-populated urban areas. Amin Taha Architects have provided here a series of significant garden spaces: similar to the Georgian and Victorian garden squares, the residents will, as a community, use these as their shared amenity.

#### SLIDE 72

The mixed use (office, retail and residential) tower was initially limited to 10 floors as there wasn't enough ground and roof level garden space for any further apartments as prescribed by the Greater London and Local Authorities. The architects asked the question whether would it be acceptable to them if we provided one whole floor plate of amenity, the mathematical product of which would provide a further 50 or so residential units? They answered yes which then left the hypothetical result of an infinitely high tower with a proportion of garden space against residential units. Both the GLA and Lambeth agreed and suggested English Heritage would be the first to decide where to limit the height which was eventually decided at the equivalent of 40 floors achieving the highest habitable room density per hectare within the UK.

This precedent has now allowed the GLA and other authorities to request a proportion of sky

garden from all developers proposing such dense schemes.

#### SLIDE 73

Early on it was decided to plant all trees (8m high) and shrubs within separate pots to avoid cross infection. The pots and decking were then arranged to form an undulating landscape fully accessible for wheelchairs while adding some variety to the walk around the gardens.

#### SLIDE 74

The gardens themselves were then sub-divided into larger social break-out spaces where BBQ's and parties could be held and a series of small intimate spaces large enough for one or two people to read a book amongst the trees or simply take in the view.

I feel relieved when I see spaces such as the Sky Garden being designed and approved by local authorities: Richard Louv, in his "Last Child in the Woods", describes a world in which we are detached from the source of food, where there is an ambivalent relationship between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom, in which new suburbs constantly shrink open space. "A kid today can likely tell you about the Amazon rainforest – but not about the last time he or she explored the woods in solitude, or lay in a field listening to the wind and watching the clouds move ... For a whole generation, nature is more abstraction than reality."

But while painting this bleak picture, Louv is determinedly upbeat. He points to what he calls "green urbanism" in western Europe, the creation of urban areas which foster rather than destroy wildlife. London bristles with parks, bird sanctuaries, reservoirs, and wetlands, and there are still other public areas which can be developed to achieve the same. Derelict land, community gardens, urban parks, play areas and even business frontages: these are all communal spaces that can with a considered approach, become great spaces with an enormous uses and benefits that validate their existence in the face of looming financial cuts.

All of this was hugely relevant to me when designing the Chelsea garden.

Public and communal spaces are being rediscovered as a powerful means of transforming communities. The benefits go far beyond just making better spaces for people: they spark private investment, they nurture community identity and draw a diverse population, be it in terms of age, gender, ethnicity or culture. These spaces are by definition a common ground.

So, what makes a successful communal space? I needed to understand this and address this in this Chelsea garden. As far as I can see, there are four key qualities: accessibility, activity, comfort and sociability. And we achieve these how?

Good public spaces have good, strong management. They have strategies for attracting visitors through the seasons ranging from outdoor cafes, perhaps some temporary or permanent art, right through to the street vendor selling ice cream. They have diverse funding sources, they feature well-designed flexible layouts and, most importantly, they

demonstrate their own image and identity. Successful public and communal spaces must be a crossroads of peoples' lives.

#### SLIDE 75

To function successfully, great communal spaces have some obvious requirements. There needs to be seating, and this seating needs to be in the right place. Lighting should be used to create atmosphere as well as highlighting paths and entrances. We need to be able to get to these spaces easily, on foot. Surrounding streets should narrow to ensure that traffic moves slowly: a communal space surrounded by lanes of fast-moving traffic will be cut off from and deprived of its essential element: people.

The surroundings of a public space hugely affect its accessibility and use. The Project for Public Spaces asks us to 'imagine a space fronted on each side by 15-foot blank walls....then imagine the same square situated next to a public library: the library steps open out onto the square; people sit outside and read on the steps. An active, welcoming outdoor square is essential to the well-being of the inner square" .

These ideas could all be transferred into a show garden, but we need to remember that it's a show garden representing a private garden which ultimately was destined to be a communal garden! but always bearing in mind that this garden of mine was going to have to be relocated.

So I treat the garden as I treat the house. It's another living space that deserves as much investment as a room indoors, Accordingly, I don't cut costs on furniture and use pots in the same way I'd use cushions indoors, interchanging them to liven seasonal planting to use as a portable kitchen. I paint nondescript walls and fences to give them a visual lift.

Vistas are important

#### SLIDE 76

My favourite vista is a corner view looking along a 7m length of the garden. Naked stems and frothy flowers again provide a veil, so that it makes us look at that, then the fabulous bark of the *Prunus serrula* and the tiniest glimpse of a fern sculpture behind the wall which can only be seen when you're sitting right by it ,before glimpsing in the distance the chill-out area with table and cushions.

#### SLIDE 77

This was all done to show you can create interest and mystery in the smallest of gardens, keeping the attention in the garden and not distracted by what's going on around it in neighbouring gardens/show gardens/real gardens

My favourite all time view – gardens of Villa d'Este outside Rome. Whether looking down onto the pools, or looking from them up at the tremendous fountains, or looking across them, it's magical , amazing, awe-inspiring, exciting and relaxing. It all depends on where you're standing: and that's what I try to achieve in my small way

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In the UK I'd say the most important vista is from the house initially, as we don't really tend to venture get far out into the garden for at least half the year in this country! Having said that, the lines of the gardens I design are quite classical, and I like to intersect the main vista with a route to at least one other vista – the views and routes around my gardens are probably the uppermost thing in mind as I design.

### SLIDE 78

The fan-shaped structure of the Piazza del Campo in Siena does not feature much green, but the principles it employs to be a great communal space, whether it be a park or a square, remain the same.

The Campo demonstrates in its layout the importance of the inner and outer space. A strong, active outer edging of cafes and shops is broken up by narrow streets spilling out into the space. In front of these shops there is a clear area along which people can stroll: this then merges in to the inner ring of the piazza, where people sit on the paved ground. It's a huge outdoor living room, where people hang out, have a drink, eat an ice cream, play music, talk, watch children play. Why do spaces such as this one work, and what can we take from them to apply to the development of our own public or communal spaces, green or otherwise?

### SLIDE 79

Glass-half empty types say the space's success is due to the climate, and that areas like this would never work in the UK. This reminds me of clients who are adamant that they'll never use a bench I've specified in what starts off as a far-off inaccessible corner of the garden. Once it's there, once it's beautiful, and once they can get to it, they use it.

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