

Style and Substance

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Account by Francoise Elvin



Juan Grimm from Chile trained as an architect, with no formal education in landscaping of any description. His vivid passion for nature (which communicates to his audience as reverence) has him adopt a style echoing the shapes and patterns of the wild and dramatic landscapes of his native land. His sometimes understated work seems to be in deference to the splendour of his surroundings. I found this humility to be a very moving and powerful aspect of his work. It seemed as if his hand was always guided by what lay beyond the boundary of the garden, and that his willingness to submit to the authority of Nature actually enabled him to appropriate some of that authority himself. His work is that of an initiate, someone who has dared to dip his plume into a wild, unbridled, yet secretly perfect ink, the ink of the Earth herself... The location of his home bears testimony to someone who dares to live on this brink, the shifting edge where land and sea meet, perched as it is atop a rocky outcrop just metres from the sometimes churning, sometimes serene, yet always unpredictable, ocean. The composition Juan has expertly and sensitively wrought here exploits the contrast and mysterious accord between the clean lines (of the house and sea on calm days) and the rugged, unforgiving rocks surrounding his home with its floor to ceiling expanses of glass that leave you exposed night and day to the unending rhyme and rupture of the waves.

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The relationship between a garden and its surroundings is one of the cornerstones of successful design practice. What elevates Juan Grimm's designs is the depth of this resonance. The result amplifies the harmonics to be found in humanity's dialogue with Nature, and gives us hope that we may after all find a way to walk in right relationship with Her...



Picture: Los Vilos Garden designed by Juan Grimm



Main Picture: Bahia azul Garden designed by Juan Grimm



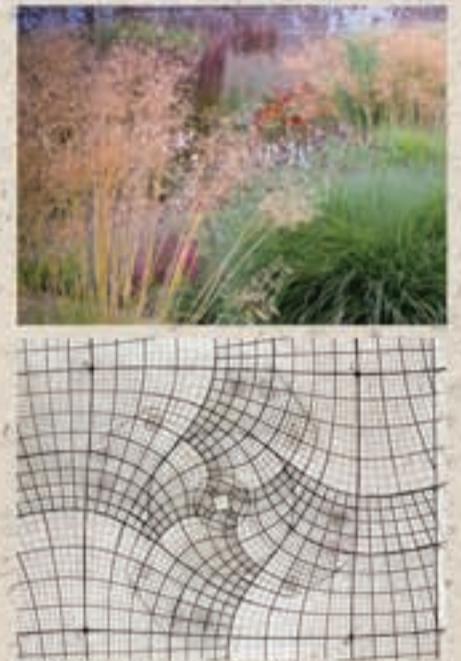
Before I drift off completely into frayed hippyish idioms, let me return to our second speaker: - Christopher Bradley-Hole. He does indeed possess a strong wake-me-up quality, producing work that is unashamedly modern in conception and execution. He loves to play with potentially repetitious grids of strongly geometric shapes. The 'reassuring' rhythm established is then ritualistically broken - but not too much - just enough to harness the attention of us lot as we were getting lulled into a somnambulant stupor with all that repetitious rectilinear stuff. It's as if Christopher submits to the hazardous over-designing and over-development of our age with a resilient and apparently effortless buoyancy that is impossible to resist. There's an almost boyish charm underpinning the hugely eloquent, highly refined and often abstracted outdoor spaces he invites us into.

The counterpoint to the very masculine geometry of his designs is an often effervescent and feminine approach to the planting, rising as it does with soft peals of laughter from the firm embrace of the unequivocal boundaries of the planting spaces... Even the nudity of the enclosed earth in winter is somehow revealed as the inevitable reality of the cyclical in nature, of fallowness that anticipates fecundity with longing. We can impose as many shapes as we want across the face of the living land, but even so, her laws prevail. Somehow, in this way, it seems to me that Christopher gives permission to the ancient earth to breathe and speak through his work despite his willing and thorough identification with, and influence on, contemporary design practice.

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Main Picture: Chelsea Flower Show Garden designed by Christopher Bradley-Hole



Top Picture: Perennial meadow designed by Christopher Bradley-Hole
Bottom Picture: Tom Moody impression of MC Escher concept



What a refreshing start to the afternoon was brought to us by Ossart & Maurieres. The creations of this French/Moroccan partnership seek to embody the notion of 'paradise gardens', taking as guiding principles the elegant quadrants and hills found in Islamic garden design and bounding the whole with rammed earth walls in keeping with biblical descriptions of Eden. This was the only presentation during the day where the designers were also responsible for the placement and architecture of the building on the site. The results were of houses and gardens locked in exquisite and inextricable embrace, breathing together in a subtle, timeless union; the fire of their creators alchemised into serenely accomplished compositions possessing a palpable unity which is rarely seen. It's as if the blank canvas of the site had been calling out for centuries for this duo to arrive and uncover its mute voice and give it song. In this way, walls arise, made from the very ground under their feet, and the resultant quarry is transformed into a sunken garden. Then they take seeds gathered in far-flung places and scatter them amongst a lattice of glaucous, passive-aggressive, perfectly formed agave americanas. Euphorbias from the Canaries and cacti propagated from cuttings on their travels are everywhere, smoothed and softened with pennisetums and other airy grasses that dry to bleached brittle shapes, surrounding the fleshy concrete forms of the cacti in a frothy dry mist. Set this against a backdrop of terracotta walls lit by the slanting sun, add a rill of water to quench the thirst of the building's strong simple lines, and you begin to get a feel for the work of this pair. An oeuvre that sources itself from an ancient vernacular architecture and yet combines it with planting combinations that are cutting-edge and experimental.

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The cue for Ian Kitson arriving should surely be a version of 'London calling' by the Clash, replaced with 'The Curves Are Calling'. But please make sure they are the right kind of curves... And if you are just a humble landscaper, best avoid the 'c' word altogether. The 'f' word though, well that's a different matter entirely! It's given me an idea in fact...

As Ian mentioned his collaboration with Tony Hayward, perhaps these 2 'enfants terribles' of the design establishment could emblazon that word as a garish Victorian bedding scheme, full of busy-lizzies and sempervivums in an unsubtle location such as Hyde Park. Could it be done in time for the Royal Wedding, even? Moving swiftly on, how is it that one often think of divorces after royal weddings? ...Which brings me to one of the schemes shown to us by Ian. It seemed to involve ripping up a perfectly good and expensive garden design (completed only a couple of years earlier) in true punk-rock - or uber-rich - fashion. Things were then drawn and re-drawn in a progression/succession of improbable loops, hoops, calligraphic 'S' bends and 'U' turns cavorting in naked and unbridled abandon towards the glass frontage of a monolithically modern and chic open-plan living space.... Except Ian chose the verb 'ooze' instead of 'cavort' and I fear I may be lurching/limping out of designer-speak and back into a version of landscaper-ese as I lap dance lewdly and lasciviously along Ian's serpentine lines in the general direction of the living quarters of the client in question in search of my 4th G&T.Woe betide the planners when they ask for a redraw of any of Ian's designs. If the pre-planning version looks slightly boozy, the post-planning version looks like ooze on acid! And yet, what truly takes my breath away is how these designs translate from paper to the ground. In particular, the creation that features on the cover of a recent SGD journal, with the deck disappearing into the pond. The lines open up and reveal themselves in mesmerising, fully epilated glory. They undulate and ululate with a pristine beauty born from a rebel world unafraid of turning itself inside out and upside down. Perhaps Ian has invented the truly superlative line. The irreverent and irrepressible line, that sticks up a finger at tradition and takes itself into unknown territory with a bravery and precise abandon that has to be admired.

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- Bottom Pictures (Left to Right, Top to Bottom):
 1. 'Passive Aggressive' Agave Design by Ossart & Maurieres
 2. Les Fournials by Ossart & Maurieres
 3. Drawing from 'Landscape Man' series on Channel 4 by Ian Kitson
 4. Sussex Garden by Ian Kitson
 5. Drawing for Sussex Garden by Ian Kitson

