

# TIM RICHARDSON



“Looking at this stuff, you can almost hear Ultravox’s *Vienna* and Spandau Ballet’s *Gold* emanating from every pore of the garden.”

Is it just me, or does a lot of professional garden design today look like it is stuck in a time warp? Even (especially?) those projects which are praised to the skies in end-of-year roundups and ‘landscaping’ awards. And where does this design look originate? The 1980s.

Looking at this stuff, you can almost hear Ultravox’s *Vienna* and Spandau Ballet’s *Gold* emanating from every pore of the garden. Leafing through the designs in John Brookes’ *The Small Garden*, first published in 1979, you have to conclude that it would be no surprise at all to see any of them illustrated in next month’s *GDJ*. What an indictment! \* I suppose one could argue that classic design ideas never date, but I am afraid I would not go along with that. Even the classics need tweaking and updating by designers who are eager to make their own mark.

What I mean, exactly, by 1980s style is garden design predicated on the idea of a neat plan, drawn on graph paper, in which the garden is seen as a series of subtly interlocked spaces. A preponderance of brickwork is a common motif, often laid herringbone fashion or at several levels as a decorative element in its own right. The circular brick platform is a classic design gambit in this mode. An area of dark decking is another telltale sign, often with shallow steps leading up or down to the rear part of the garden. The real cliché here is a small pond — usually rectangular and conceived as part of the geometric

plan — abutting the deck, with the vertical leaves of water plants peeping above. Mien Ruys was doing this sort of thing in the 1950s, John Brookes borrowed it in the 1960s and Anthony Paul and any number of more minor players used it in the 1970s, 1980s and beyond. Perhaps now we have had enough of it.

It is no coincidence that this is the look described and illustrated in the majority of books on design from the 1970s on, and it also seems to be the basis, still, of garden design tuition in this country. From the evidence, it appears that many people leave college with a sort of ‘one-design-fits-all’ mentality, which superficially makes commercial sense as the style is modular (in that it fits many different shapes and sizes of site), flexible and allows for a varying degree of horticultural sophistication. Planting can make a superficial difference and can sometimes even transcend a bog-standard structural approach, but we are still seeing tree ferns and other exotica introduced as if they are new and exciting, and ‘architectural’ plants placed in self-consciously architectural ways can also look fatally dated. I am not saying that all contemporary garden design is like this — it is only the mediocre stuff. But there is a lot of it about. Surely it is time to move on?

\*This is not a criticism of Brookes’ design — he has moved on decisively from this look — but a reflection on the paucity of new ideas out there.

*Tim Richardson is an independent garden and landscape critic. Email: tim@space19.demon.co.uk*