

Can garden designers meet the need for popular, low budget garden design

Many garden owners would benefit from the input of a qualified garden designer to bring an ordered perspective to their plots, but few can afford such professional advice. Can and should garden designers open up their client base to incorporate the mass market?



YES

Designer: David Stevens is a garden designer, author and lecturer in garden design

Comment: I cannot abide a design snob. Design should be the most honest of trades and those who do not practise honestly, substituting it with insincerity or the froth of fashion are simply not worth the paper they draw on. Good design is simple and to the point; if you understand the skills there is no need to load the profit.

Of course I undertake work from well-heeled clients who want the best in terms of concept, materials and construction. However, there is a far broader section of society that has been exposed to such influences as Habitat and Ikea, not to mention the plethora of television output. Such people genuinely aspire to what is broadly perceived as good or at least accessible and realistically priced design.

Many years ago I ran a bargain basement postal planning service for, among others, *Homes and Gardens* magazine. It was enormously successful and no two schemes were ever alike. I am a fast draftsman with a good brain and not only did I make money but the product was welcome. I still

get letters from those clients who benefited and continue to benefit from such gardens. The designs were simple and to the point — they worked.

Over the years I have always offered realistically priced postal planning which sits very comfortably alongside my other work, which is naturally charged out at a higher (but never exorbitant) rate. My philosophy is this: provided the product is good enough then stack it high and sell at a realistic price. Don't get snooty — design is a product like any other.

I get far more satisfaction out of creating a garden for someone who has saved their hard-earned pennies. As a practice I probably don't charge enough, I can't see the point. I'd rather offer the very best at prices that are affordable not just to the well off; as a consequence I sleep easy at night.

I fear there are too many designers today who are poorly trained and simply don't have the ability to work well and quickly. This almost inevitably leads to high fees but believe you me, there is a huge and profitable market available at a lower cost if you have the ability and desire to access it.



NO

Designer: Andrew Wilson is a garden designer and freelance tutor in garden design

Comment: There is a huge gap between prospective client expectation and the reality of delivering a successful garden design. This chasm relates to budget but also, sadly, to the process of design for which few are willing to pay.

There are two distinct clients. The 'concerned about money' client asks: "What will it cost?". Past experience tells me they have probably budgeted unrealistically. The 'concerned about design' client rarely mentions cost until they see their design solution developing. This client forms about 90 per cent of my work, with contracts averaging £150,000, offering a workable budget and fee.

For many, the word 'elitism' will already have come to mind. Certainly, this is not what media types want to consider for their essentially mass-market delivery. For them, garden design is a low cost, DIY, make over kind of scenario. I prefer the word 'realistic', with my design solutions solving problems and issues. I am running a business. I have targeted a client

base that will deliver that business and a viable income level.

Of course, there are other ways of running a business. At the Society of Garden Designers 2004 autumn conference, Andy Sturgeon and I were comparing notes. I need four to five clients per year (albeit on top of teaching and writing). Sturgeon needed 40 to 50 clients per year, although he has since reduced this number and increased typical budgets. Obviously, we are not dealing with the same client group. What we both agree on, however, is that there must be a bottom line, which, it appears, hovers around £20,000 to £25,000. Spending less does not support a workable design fee, and comes with client issues over the value of a design solution.

I have many examples of approaches made to me asking for a response to overall budgets of £5,000 or less. It is just not possible to design and build a garden for such pitiful sums. No amount of wishing can deliver acceptable levels of quality without someone losing out. Personally, I blame television and the media in general for pedalling a product which is not attainable, realistic or desirable. Designers should not play a part in this game.



YES

Designer: Guy Farthing is an internet-based garden designer

Comment: Landscape architects, architects and developers provide little or no help to the garden owner. Only the landscape contractor, through necessity, picks up the cudgel and interprets the client's needs. The garden design profession is in danger of going down the same cul-de-sac as the architectural profession, which has put itself on such a high pedestal that only one in ten buildings (my figure) are designed by registered architects. A train journey through suburbia demonstrates how much our services are needed.

There is a great need from the majority of garden owners for outline designs: designs that assimilate the various garden ingredients into a cohesive whole. Above all, they need help with the size and shape of paving and lawns, optimum size of plant beds, and how to integrate these. Forget themes and the 'inspiration of the place'. Forget even the finer detail and detailed planting plans; these can

be supplied by the contractor or garden centre and just blur the message of a simple, well-executed plan. Many people want a plan that has style; that they can implement, perhaps over a period of time; and that will be easy to maintain.

When the budget for the garden is only £3,000 to £5,000, a five per cent or £250 design fee is just acceptable. There are two ways of providing such a service: an on-site consultancy, which provides the client with a sketch design after a couple of hours of discussion, or an internet/postal service where the client provides the brief (a completed form provided by the designer), photos and the necessary measurements (not a scaled plan). A phone discussion ties up loose ends.

Admittedly, it requires a lot of experience of on-site garden design, but I have designed hundreds of such gardens, complete with paving details and costed specifications, thereby satisfying the needs of many, who would otherwise have muddled on without professional help.