

Fuse together a passion for drawing, sculpture and nature and the result is the successful design practice of Cleve West. **Anne Hardy** met him to find out more

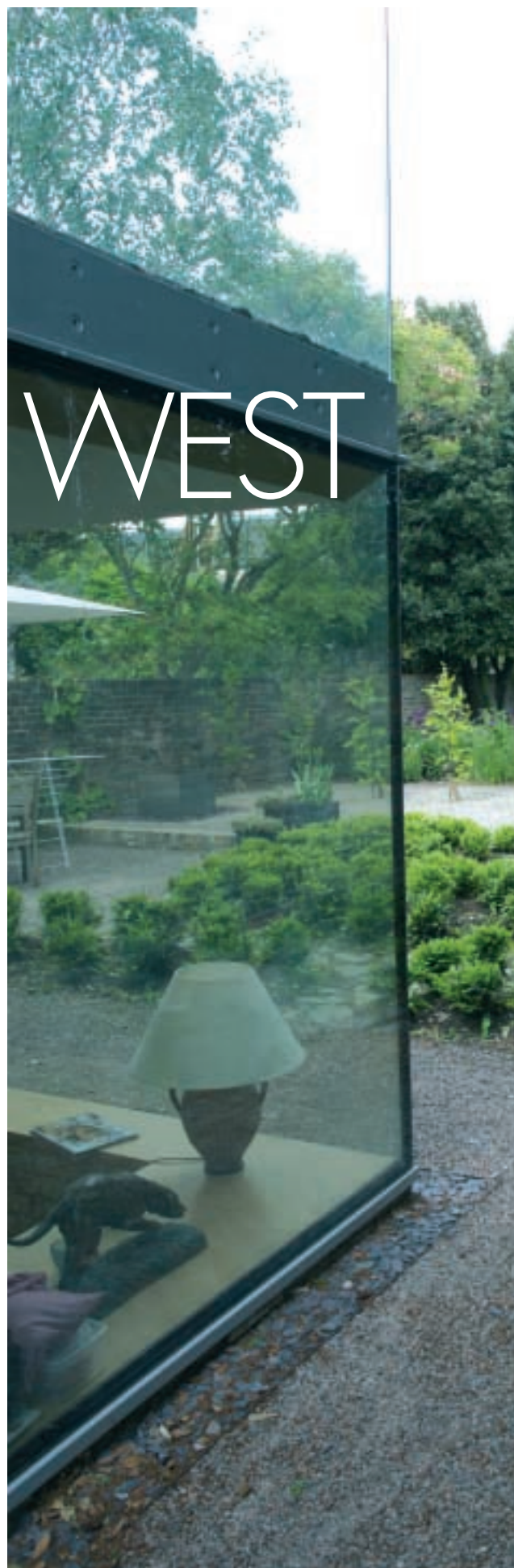
CLEVE WEST

Cleve West works from his basement studio by the River Thames at Hampton Wick, Surrey. Evidently at home in this part of the world he has a house in the next street and an allotment in nearby Bushey Park. In addition to designing contemporary gardens, he is also an artist, lecturer, three-times Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) gold medal-winner, full member of the Society of Garden Designers (SGD), RHS judge, photographer and, more recently, a short film-maker.

It is difficult, then, to imagine that he began his design career as a reluctant participant (he studied art and sports science at Brunel University). Forced to make a career change due to a sporting injury (see Personal history box on page 38) he knew he wanted to work outside and garden maintenance seemed a good way to support himself. "I mowed a lot of lawns before going on to work with a landscaper," says West, "and although I may not be the fastest bricklayer around, I am accurate!"

Show judging

For some years now, West has been involved in judging at the RHS shows. There has been much controversy on how the gardens are marked but West is certain that the judging is fair. "There are three different layers to awarding the marks. The main judges, the assessors and the independent mediators all have to agree and if there is any controversy they will all meet and vote again. There have been some lovely gardens that have lost vital marks because they simply did not adhere to their brief." He continues: "I was keen to fly the flag for contemporary design. I went into it thinking that the judges might be stuck in their ways, but happily most are not. Contemporary gardens might, I suppose, cloud the judgement of the traditionalist but the same design rules apply in most cases."





In retrospect, he sees this practical approach as a great basis for his design practice. "New designers should be more hands on with plants and landscaping," he states. "It's by far the best way to learn and get a feeling for space, materials and plants." But he is far from just a landscape designer — an interest in the esoteric and surreal is



Plan and photographs of a Cleve West garden in London. This newly built contemporary family garden was designed to complement the modern glass extension built onto the house. The space is free from clutter and incorporates a herb garden, lawn area for the children and a garden shed with sedum roof.



DESIGNER PROFILE: Cleve West



On show

Well-known for his early sculptural show gardens, West will be at RHS Chelsea Flower Show again in 2006. The garden will be a contemporary space celebrating the migration of plants around the world, in particular herbs supplied by Jekka McVicar. "Jekka and I have talked about working together for years so I'm looking forward to using her subtle but exciting palette of plants." See plan for the garden above.



Opposite right: Granite setts laid flush with the water level in a West-designed Oxford garden. The setts' bases are set in mortar but a lack of jointing gives the illusion of floating stone. The cracks between the setts provide a safe haven for resident tadpoles.

a common thread that has run through his work since his first garden and continues to inform his current work. A fine draughtsman, his pencil drawings depicting surreal roots and vegetables are exquisite and his sketchbook is never far from hand.

Under the influence

The feeling of space and a connection with the sky are notable aspects in his gardens, so it is not surprising to learn that Derek Jarman and the Mexican architect Luis Barragán are a source of inspiration. "I'm not a minimalist but like simplicity. The space left between things is as important as the objects and plants themselves."

West's work is also informed from the period in his life between the ages of 13 and 18 when he was

living in the heart of Exmoor. "I spent a lot of time out in the landscape, running and walking, and it had a strong influence on me," he explains, "not only in terms of spatial awareness but also in the way I use plants." They say that solitude is good company and during this time West observed how plants relate to each other in the wild. "Giving plants freedom to breathe also means that their form can be appreciated. I don't like to see plants crowded together or totally homogenised in a design."

To grow things slowly and see plants respond to their environment is something he advocates: "I want to move away from this fashion for instant gardening. Plants respond in such a different way when grown in situ. For me these plants are preferable to the perfect specimens that come from the nursery."



Main picture and plan left: West designed and planted this new garden for a client in Kent. The newly built house had come with a pre-installed garden, but the design was poor and required a complete overhaul. This new well-proportioned garden includes a pool, retaining walls, a path and a terrace using bush-hammered basalt and mint limestone. Pleached lime trees provide screening and a suitable backdrop for perennials. The plan is drawn up with CAD — something West has started using in the last year, alongside hand drawing, to execute his plans.



The Green Man

West first saw an image of the Green Man in a small church in Culbone, Exmoor as a boy. This mysterious image, found in many churches and dating back hundreds of years, symbolises the triumph of green life over winter and death. It has remained an interest of his since his first show garden 'Homage to the Green Man' at Hampton Court in 1994 and is the source of inspiration for the short film that he has recently finished.

For West, the Green Man symbolises the deep desire we have to connect with the earth. He explores this in his work on his allotment and has written an account of creating a contemporary allotment for *The Garden*.

He is enthusiastic about the meditation found in digging, raking and sweeping, and feels passionate about growing and buying local food. He adds: "The allotment is my sanctuary and growing food really is as satisfying as it sounds. Unearthing root vegetables is almost like an archaeological dig. I love the small details that are part of being here, such as the long creak from the gate as you enter or leave. These things carry their own ghostly signature and create a unique sense of place. This is something that I do my best to include in all my gardens."



Work in progress

The surreal element to West's gardens is now more subtle and understated than in his early work. A hands-on attitude, combined with a playful inventiveness, result in some innovative landscapes. Granite setts just below the waterline mischievously suggest a path that you cannot walk on (pictured left), or alternatively — if you don't mind damp shoes — you could walk on water to the other side of the pool.

A garden in Normandy contains a wide, meandering box hedge which is juxtaposed by a group of large metal triangles that appear to be moving through the landscape. This project changed as it progressed from the drawing board to completion on site. It illustrates West's interest in interacting with the process of

DESIGNER PROFILE: Cleve West

London Wetland Centre

In 1999, West designed a garden with then business partner Johnny Woodford for one of three sustainable gardens at the London Wetland Centre in Barnes (below). The water-saving garden uses such drought-tolerant plants as *Phlomis russeliana*, while bold sculpture doubles as water collecting devices. The garden is divided into wedges, one of which incorporates a reed bed planted with *Phragmites australis* to filter waste water.



making a garden. "On site sometimes things do not quite work how you imagine," he says. "I enjoy experimentation and responding to the site as it develops, it is where you can grow as a designer."

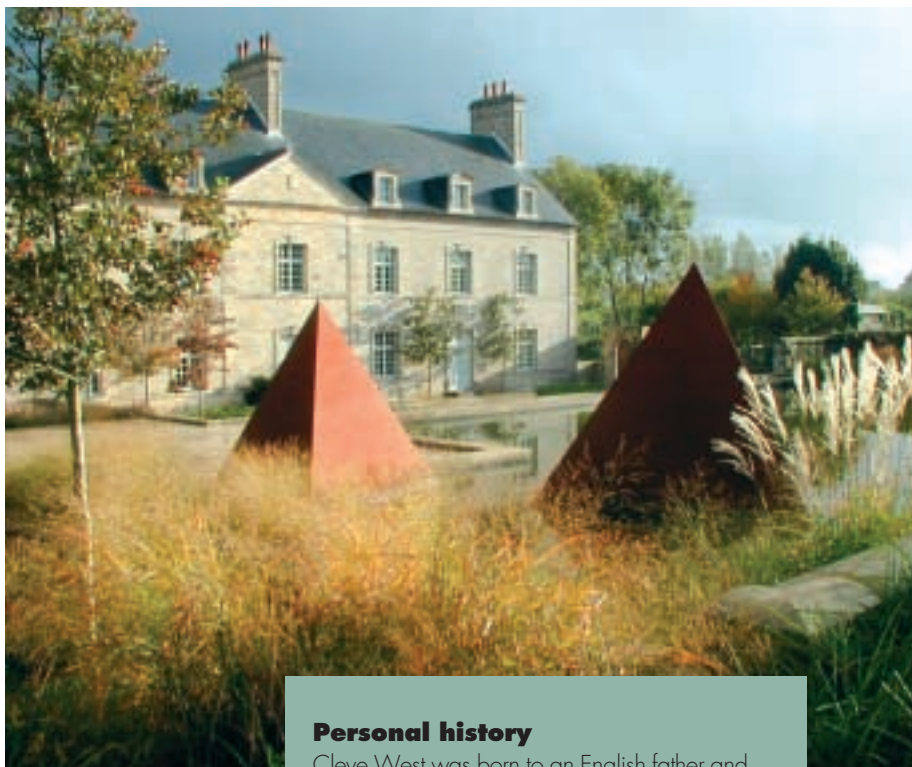
Sense of place

West is easy company with a relaxed and laid-back manner but takes a serious and well-considered approach to his work. I ask him what he looks for in a great garden. "To create a good garden is to create its own character, one that will work any time of the year. This is not the same as year-round interest, which doesn't interest me. A feeling that is difficult to describe, but is almost like being home — it's a recognition that comes from inside your chest cavity. I am looking for the soul of the thing that everyone is searching for in their garden."

I was reminded of the speech Luis Barragán gave on receiving the Pritzker Award in 1980. He felt some words had been banished from publications on architecture: "Beauty, inspiration, magic, enchantment, as well as the concepts of serenity, silence, intimacy and amazement." Barragán added: "They have never ceased to be my guiding lights."

Along with his art and planting skills, it is these intangibles, which are so difficult to capture, that form the cornerstone of West's philosophy and design practice.

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Above: This strikingly contemporary garden for a traditional Normandy house demonstrates West's ability to accurately gauge design volumes. Originally, more pyramids were planned for this space, but once on site West decided three was all that was needed to counterbalance the austerity of the traditional architecture. The pyramids sit in a formal pool and are made of sheet steel, which has been allowed to rust. Grasses such as *Panicum virgatum* 'Rehbraun' and *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Undine' surround the pool.

Personal history

Cleve West was born to an English father and Anglo-Indian mother. His interest in gardens began after injury ended his promising sporting career. Helping out his aunt in her large garden he soon set up his own business in garden maintenance. When his aunt died leaving him a small legacy he invested some of the money on a garden design course with John Brookes in 1990. "That was a turning point for me," says West. "John Brookes is a great teacher and he has had a big influence on me."



In 1994, with the remnant of his aunt's money he self-funded a show garden at Hampton Court. "It was a good time to do a show garden and it was serendipity that at this time I met up with Johnny Woodford." The successful artistic partnership with Woodford came to an end in 2001. "It was wonderful collaborating with Johnny, but the whole look was too scary for most people and we just didn't get as much work as we needed. It has been a difficult transition at times but I am pleased now with my own design practice." Today, West's commissions range in budget from around £30,000-100,000.

As well as writing a weekly gardening column for *The Independent Magazine* (and other publications) he appears, periodically, on television programmes such as *Small Town Gardens*, *The Joy of Gardening* and *Take Three Gardeners*.