

DESIGNER PROFILE: Brita von Schoenaich



ALL IMAGES: BRITA VON SCHOENAICH

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Working to improve public spaces and constantly challenging the accepted are key to Brita von Schoenaich's design vision. **Anne Hardy** met her to find out more

Before I met German-born Brita von Schoenaich I came across a brief reference to a Baroness von Schoenaich designing an edible garden for Lloyd Christie Garden Architecture at RHS Chelsea Flower Show 1998. She laughs when I mention it: "Yes, it is true — I am a baroness. But it does not mean so much in Europe and I have no desire to belong to that kind of hierarchy. It pleases me that we now belong to a more egalitarian society. I guess I am just an old hippy!"

We are sitting in the garden at her home in Petersham, southwest London (close to the German School). She continues: "We don't have the same sort of class system in Germany. Everyone goes to state school and that is why it is important

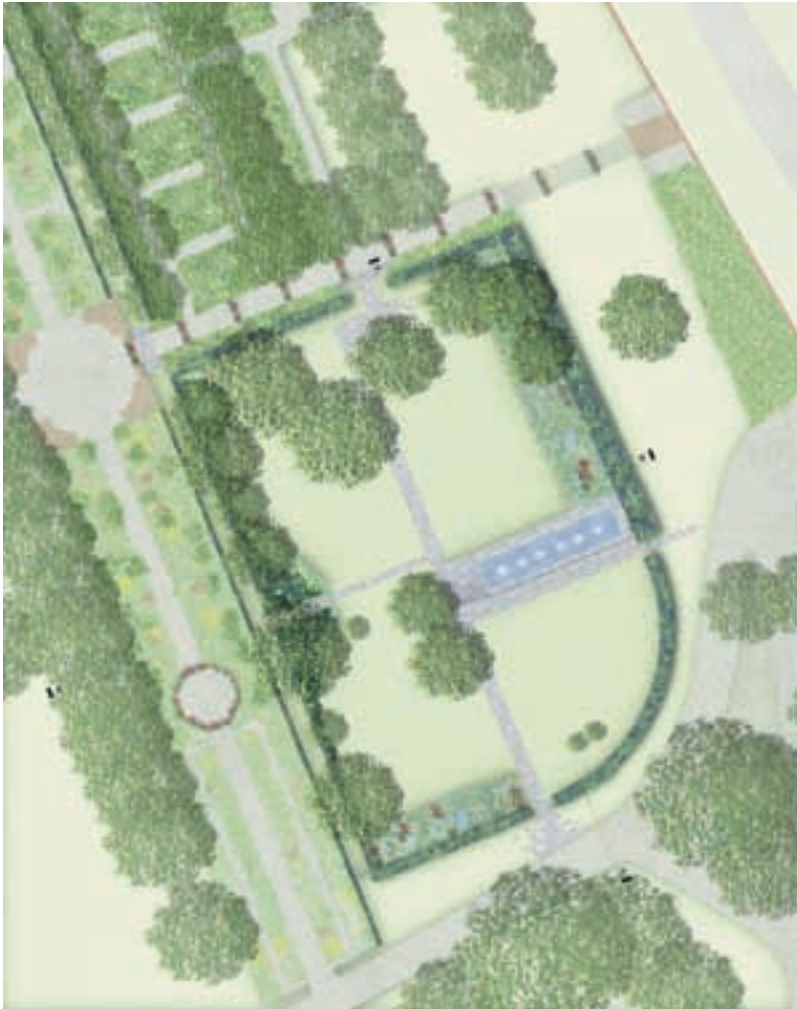
for me to be here near the German School. Not just for my children to learn German but so they also grow up with that sensibility."

Public face

This sensibility is significant to her work, which mainly focuses on public spaces and, most importantly, the way in which people use and inhabit these spaces. Her site-specific works often contain a strong art installation bias and include such diverse schemes as Marks Hall in Essex (a series of garden rooms within a 19th-century walled garden) to a high-rise development in Deptford, southeast London where she is installing giant sculptures of cobweb catchers designed with the artist Chris Marshall who has a studio nearby.

Above: Seasonal planting of tulips, barley and cornflowers at Tate Britain in London. Schoenaich has redesigned the borders twice a year for the last five years. Their experimental nature has been well received by the public and serves to continue the Victorian tradition of bedding in a modern context.

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This page: Plan and photographs of Princess Margareta's Garden at the Royal Park in Sophiero, near Helsingborg, Sweden. Wide paving joints are filled with grass, which anchors the path within the lawn.

"Yes, there is a sense of mission and that is to create public spaces with imagination and come up with ideas that are a not only a joy to people but also affordable," explains Schoenaich. "There is a common misconception that there is not much scope for creative design within these projects but there is — you just have to work harder to achieve it."

Team work

Her cosmopolitan team (from France, Italy, Britain and South Africa) are all trained in landscape architecture or architecture and contribute in specific disciplines. They include: Guillaume Baltz, "a talented designer who always keeps calm"; Hilary Beecroft (project management), "never lost a fight with a contractor"; Matteo la Civita, "a great plantsman"; and Ivon Oates, "an artist with a passion for integrated design processes".

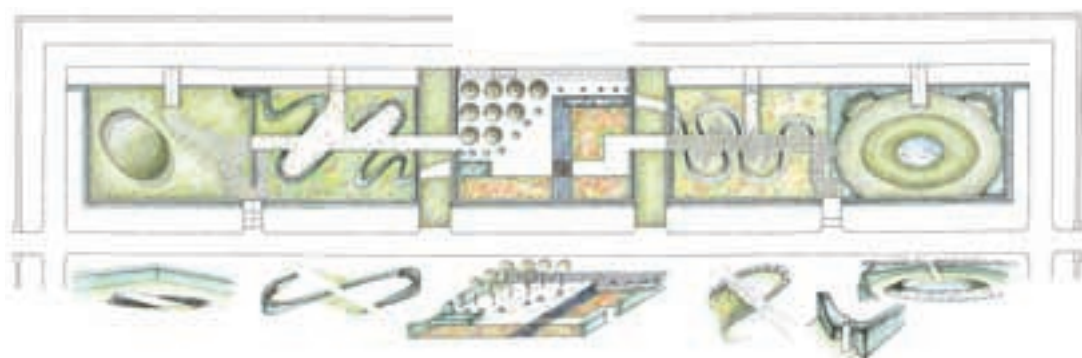
"My team are incredibly important to me and to the success of my business," she says. "It's not all me, me, me and together we are more than the sum of our parts. I like to work collaboratively, for me sparks fly out of that work."

Schoenaich also values her collaborative work with architects, such as Tony Fretton and Allies and Morrison. The strong relationship she has built up over the years means she is involved at the beginning of projects, ensuring the landscape design becomes integral to the finished project and not just an afterthought.



A residential development at nearby Kew Riverside typifies the playfulness of her work. It contains a labyrinth of sound created by using chimes and tubes set in the ground and parabolic dishes. Clever planting and pruning of cornus forms a warren of foliage that satisfies the opposing demands of children who like to stay hidden, with the adults' desire for them always to be visible.

Projects range from those with a £5m budget (a project expected to take five years) to small gardens, such as commissions to design gardens for sculptor Anish Kapoor and the British Embassy in Warsaw. Not all projects are such high profile. With colleague Hilary Beecroft she deals with many housing association projects with little or no budget and admits that sometimes the damage limitation aspect of the work is soul destroying. "Some of these schemes are not the best," she admits, "but they are better for our involvement."



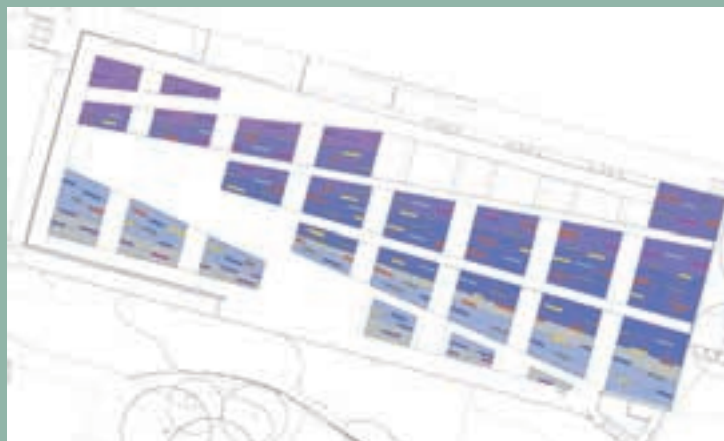
Left and above: Plan and photograph of Schoenaich's design for the walled garden at Marks Hall, Essex. The garden consists of a series of rooms. Through careful use of sculptural elements such as landforms and curved concrete walls, the scheme successfully fuses traditional and contemporary.

Refreshingly, she also took direct action to attempt to improve that most disheartening of public spaces – a roundabout. Frustrated with municipal apathy she worked closely with team member Guillaume Baltz to radically change the appearance of Hogarth roundabout, London, by turning a desert of bare soil into a riot of colourful wild meadow. "I did it as a protest against the banality and dreariness of these spaces. I also wanted to go to Ken Livingstone and say this is what 250 quid and three people can do in one afternoon." Sadly, in what some would describe as vandalism, the council cleared the site, returning it to bare soil just after the first wave of flowers were beginning to flourish.

Pushing the boundaries

Working, initially, with Allies and Morrison Architects on new gardens for Tate Britain, Schoenaich re-interpreted seasonal planting (unchanged since Victorian times) as an installation artwork. One season's concept involved deciding on a limited plant palette of six compatible plants and then throwing dice to determine the planting pattern. Of this very public experiment Schoenaich says: "It is hard to take risks when it is so high profile, not least because when it goes wrong it goes wrong for four months. It can be scary but also very rewarding. I am not interested in doing the same thing over and over or in repeating a safe formula." The borders have been very successful, attracting much interest from the public. They have now re-designed the borders twice a year for over five years.

Similarly, an ambitious roof garden for a conference centre in Hamburg, a space approximately 170x60m, is planned for 2007. From a palette of 12-15 plants, groups of massed planting will create colour bands of about 30cm high. Emerging from this base are tall accent plants that will appear to float like container ships in water. "For me this is fabulous. Pushing boundaries is what interests me," Schoenaich states. "I want to do something different. It is important to make mistakes and do something new. It is always refreshing to start from scratch."



Concept planting plan by Schoenaich for a roof garden at the International Conference Centre in Hamburg, Germany. Bands of massed planting will be selected from a limited palette of 12-15 plants from which accent plants will emerge. The ambitious character of this project is what she most relishes.

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Right and far right: A slope is negotiated by a series of steps, terraces and raised beds in this private garden in Hampstead, London by Schoenaich. Evergreen stalwarts such as *Hebe rakaienses* and phormium feature, while groundcovers such as alchemilla, aquilegia, crocosmia and aconites knit together on the steep bank to form a tapestry of textures.



Personal history

Brita von Schoenaich lives in Petersham, southwest London with her husband and two children. Originally from Germany, she came to Britain to study for a diploma in horticulture at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and went on to gain a diploma in landscape architecture at the University of Central England, Birmingham.



Of her time at Kew she says: "The unique course, with a demanding three months of intellectual work and nine months of practical outdoor work, helped form the cornerstone of the way in which I work with plants." She has been teaching landscape design at Kew for the past decade.

For a few years she worked for the London Borough of Brent before teaming up with Tim Rees to form the successful Schoenaich Rees Partnership. Recently they have dissolved their long association. Schoenaich explains: "It was a very amicable split which came about partly because I moved away (so geographically it was more difficult to work together), but also because our work had divided naturally into two very distinct branches."

Rees' projects tend to be gardens in the UK and abroad for high profile private clients, while Schoenaich is concentrating on large scale and often urban, residential developments and projects which are open to the public. "Originally we saw the strength of fusing garden design with more public projects but eventually we ended up with different client groups and little cross-over."

She has a team of three people working for her full time and works closely with artist Ivon Oates on a number of commissions.

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Schoenaich is well known, with former business partner Tim Rees, for the pioneering work she achieved with the New Perennial movement. Beginning in 1987, they organised a series of seminars with lecturers from Germany. Their concept is to use plants that need the same requirements or come from a similar habitat. Used together they have a lot of integrity — ecologically and aesthetically. It is not wildlife planting but it is naturalistic. The resulting buzz created among such designers as Beth Chatto, Rosemary Verey, Christopher Lloyd, Penelope Hobhouse, Robert Lane Fox and Christopher Bradley-Hole is ongoing. Of the type of work that he and Schoenaich are involved in, Bradley-Hole says: "Where art, landscape and architecture meet is where we are working, and it is a very inspiring place to be."

Deeply committed to making a difference to public spaces and how we think about them, Schoenaich conveys her enthusiasm and passion for landscape, ecology and art in an elegant and often witty way. While Frank Gehry, the renowned architect, was not speaking of landscape architects specifically, the sentiment of his words could have been written for Schoenaich: 'We are finding ways of working together, artists and architects, architects and architects, clients and architects. The dream is that each brick, each window, each wall, each road, each tree will be placed lovingly by craftsmen, client, architect, and people to create beautiful cities'.

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