

GARDEN DESIGN JOURNAL

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AGRICULTURAL EXPRESSION:
MAKING LINES IN THE LAND-
SCAPE

DESIGNER MIND: THE GARDEN AS
A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

EDUCATION AND TRAINING



Mathew Bell (left) originally trained as an illustrator. Studying art foundation at Falmouth College of Art, Cornwall, he undertook graphic design at Kingston Polytechnic, Surrey, before completing his art training with a post graduate course at St Martins, London.

After 15 years as a freelance illustrator he realised he needed a change of direction. "I wanted something that would combine my skills in art and design with my love of being outside and physically active," he explains. Fortuitously, a friend told him of a place made unexpectedly available on the design and planting course at Capel Manor College, Middlesex, and on the strength of his design portfolio he was accepted on the course in 1994. He cites Hilary Thomas, senior lecturer at Capel Manor, as "an inspirational teacher" and says that he learned a great deal from her. Initially using his illustration work to supplement his income, it was not long before he had made the transition to become a full-time practising garden designer. Bell lives in Muswell Hill, London, with his wife and son.

FUTURE OF GARDEN DESIGN

As a full member of the Society of Garden Designers, Bell is passionate about professionalism in garden design. "I respect the SGD's selection procedure and I enjoy the benefits of being a member — I often get work from the website," he explains. However, he is concerned about the sudden popularity of the subject. "Garden design is a popular profession for people who want to change their career and it appeals on many levels to the more mature person." This, Bell believes, creates its own problem: his concern is that although garden design has become very popular, there is a chance that the market is becoming saturated and that new designers may find it hard to make a living. "While I am sympathetic to the catch-22 situation of needing work in order to get experience, I am concerned with the poor standard of some work."

Bell would like to see all garden design courses using the same accreditation system which would help set an overall standard within the service. "The SGD does a wonderful job with its awareness and pursuit of good practice, but needs the help of the rest of the profession if it is to present and uphold the standards required to be a good garden designer."

HELPING THE COMMUNITY

A more altruistic project that is still ongoing, is Bell's involvement with a community initiative at Woodside Park, Wood Green, London (where he once lived). Local people, dismayed at the poor upkeep of the park, got together and (with the help of the local council) decided to form a group to regenerate the park. They installed benches, planted borders (left) and established an adventure playground. The council also accepted Bell's proposal to change the borders at the front of the park from annual bedding plants to a long border of trees, shrubs, herbaceous perennials and grasses.



MAKING THE LINK

Talking to garden designer Mathew Bell, it is evident his enthusiasm is not only for art and design, but also for people. He clearly enjoys the challenge of making gardens and working with a range of associated professionals, for many different clients.

Client satisfaction is a cornerstone of Bell's philosophy and, as a result, he has no set style. Rather he enjoys the challenge of fulfilling the client's brief: "I respond wholly to the brief, whether it is traditional or modern. Space, flow and proportion are all intrinsic to good design whatever the style". His finished drawings are produced freehand and without colour. "I like my finished plans to be clear and easily understood," he states. "I always produce them in black and white, and usually include a cross section of the site for further clarity."

Bell believes that the designer should be able to produce a drawing which is professional without resorting to colour — "colour rendering only adds more cost to the client!" he says. It is the creative process, rather than the technical challenge, which truly stimulates Bell: "The technical construction of a design is an easy methodical process, but I much prefer the initial creative process". He uses some computer software, such as Macromedia Freehand for planting plans and planning small gardens. "It was a programme I knew well when I was illustrator and it still serves me well."

WAYS OF WORKING

But it is not all about design. Bell acknowledges the importance of knowing your plants. "You need skill and time with plants to understand what they do and how you can use them," he says. As someone who designs mostly for London town houses, his planting style leans more towards foliage than flowers. He uses clipped evergreens for structure (and winter interest), and contrasts them with looser herbaceous perennials for the summer.

Bell has two different ways of conducting his business. On larger projects he uses contractor Danny

Mathew Bell's strong artistic background, together with his hands-on approach has led to a successful career in garden design. Anne Hardy met him to find out more

McNamara, who he has worked with for over seven years. "Danny and I have worked together for so long now that I know I can trust him to deliver a project to a consistently high standard." However, more unusually, Bell personally works on the build of smaller projects by using specialists and skilled crafts people.

"It's good to work with people you know," he believes. "Not only because it is helpful to share work as we are all self-employed, but because it makes for an enjoyable working environment. The client appreciates a good atmosphere around their home too." By this method, Bell also develops as a designer: "It is good to interact with others and hear different ideas and opinions. I get a lot of satisfaction bringing people with different talents together". Most of his business is generated by word of mouth. "I am in a lucky position where I can pick and choose, to a certain extent, the projects I get involved with," he explains.

BALANCING ACT

As a result of Bell's hands-on approach, he believes his design work is better informed. "There are different responses when you are working on site and often other solutions present themselves," he reflects. "I find that this is an important process that feeds back into all aspects of garden design."

Generating enough work to earn a living is a constant juggling act — as a result, there are ten projects, in various stages of development, on the go at any one time. "Less than ten, and gaps appear," he says. "A client only has to delay a commission for a few weeks or we have some bad weather and then everything is set back."

Out of preference he steers away from commercial work as he does not want to become the manager/problem solver which he feels corporate work demands. Rather, he is attracted to the flexibility of private commissions. "Every artist wants fulfilment from their work. I want people to be pleased"



Above and left: A penthouse roof garden, in Camden, north London. Bell used a contemporary mix of materials to provide an escape from the busy street below. Planting is simple and includes hostas, phormiums and agapanthus.

LEFT AND BELOW: DOM@DOMINICWHITING.COM

ALL IMAGES (UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED): MATHEW BELL

BELL'S

FAVOURITE . . .

. . . historical landscape . . .

The derelict engine houses and slag heaps of the Cornish cliffs. "Now overgrown with masses of gorse and heather, they are beautiful and very atmospheric."

. . . public garden . . .

Morab Gardens, Penzance, Cornwall. "This is a lush sub-tropical corner of England. I enjoy the variety and abundance of semi-hardy exotics that are there."

. . . private garden . . .

The Lost Gardens of Heligan, Cornwall — before they were found! "I would often visit the garden before work really started. It felt like it was your's alone to discover the tree growing through the greenhouse or parts of paths appearing and disappearing into the brambles."

. . . artist . . .

"I believe anyone involved with design is an artist. To me the simple, effective designs of Edward Lutyens are hard to beat."

. . . built structure . . .

Machu Picchu, Peru. "It is an incredible piece of engineering built to an amazing standard, with fairly primitive tools."

. . . plant . . .

Libertia grandiflora. "A hardy, tough evergreen that is great all year round and can survive in dry conditions."

. . . hard material . . .

York stone. "It is incredibly versatile — whether reclaimed, new riven or sawn. It looks good in any style of garden."

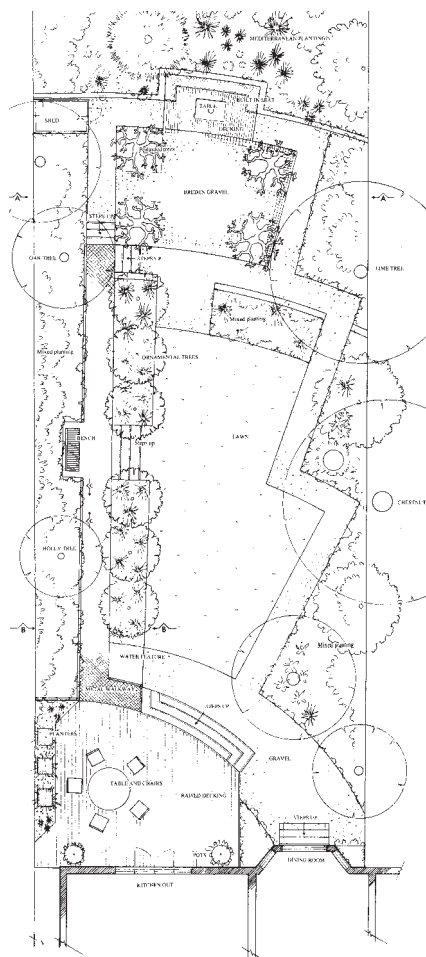
. . . book . . .

The grammar of ornament, by Owen Jones. "This is a classic reference of decorative arts that I first discovered when starting out in illustration. I still use it today."



Above left and right: Bell created this roof garden for a law firm in east London. His brief was to create a calm, modern area in which both employees and visitors could relax in.

Below: Design for a garden, built in 2001, which featured a metal walkway, Bredden gravel paths, an irregular shaped lawn and mixed Mediterranean planting.



with what I have designed. I enjoy getting positive feedback — it makes the job satisfying."

KEEPING IT REAL

Featured in a new book, *British landscape designers and their creations* (along with such luminaries as John Brookes and Anthony Paul), and with one of his gardens featured in a new television makeover programme, *My Eden* (Channel 4), I ask him if a more public arena awaits him? "Although I am pleased with this recognition I am not interested in the cult of personality. I have turned down offers of media work in the past," he replies.

His many interests include a love of Cornwall, to which he returns as often as he can. His family moved there in 1974, when he was 11, and he loves the contrasting landscapes of sea and valleys. "I would consider living there, but my wife and son like London to much," he jokes.

Bell combines a fairly laid back manner with a strong work ethic and a commitment to maintaining high standards. He appears to be someone who makes the most of opportunities that come his way and is lucky in his associations with people and with the projects he undertakes. But then maybe he is more an example of the old adage: 'The harder I work, the luckier I become'.

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