

Dynamic Planting For Public and Garden Spaces

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Widely acknowledged as one of the UK's leading garden design lecturers, **Andrew Wilson** is an award winning garden designer, former Chairman of the Society of Garden Designers, author and Chief Assessor for the RHS for show gardens. He has been at the forefront of garden design teaching, in the UK and overseas, for 25 years and now teaches exclusively at the London School of Garden Design.



Andrew was the founding editor of The Garden Design Journal, and now writes a regular column for Gardens Illustrated and has authored a series of books, the most recent of which include Influential Gardeners, The Book of Garden Plans and the Book of Plans for Small Gardens.

Andrew designs from his practice in Surrey alongside designer Gavin McWilliam.



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Q&A

What are you going to talk about at Palmstead?

"I'll be looking at the future of garden design; in terms of philosophical and cultural change. I'm not a trend predictor, so I won't be saying 'this is what we'll be doing in 20 years', I'm interested instead in attitudes and how they change and how this in turn changes our garden space".

How will changing attitudes to outdoor spaces alter the design brief in the future?

"There is a split down generational lines in terms of what people will be using their gardens for; the younger audience often uses the garden as an 'outdoor space' or an extra room, whereas the older generation uses it for 'gardening'. An older client will give a different brief to the younger client, whereas fifteen years ago the brief would have been the same – it would have been a request for a 'planty' garden or traditional space; somewhere where the client would garden or relax. Now though, people want a space that's much more individual and tailored to their needs and the idea of creating a formal garden with interesting planting and so on, for some younger garden owners is never going to happen. Age and how this affects the future of garden design is an interesting subject for me as a teacher; I'm getting older but my students remain around the same age every year; and so, they are effectively getting younger than me! This interaction with the younger generation means I have to be much more aware of their needs, and where they're coming from; it means that as a designer I have more success when I work with younger clients as I can identify with their needs and recognize them".

What's the news for garden design?

"Generally speaking the news is gardens will be getting smaller and more individual, especially in urban gardens where we've ended up with gardens that are literally the size of a room and people treat the space



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that way – as an ‘extra room’. Some will light the space and place furniture out there, slipping out into the space to relax, while some will use it as their workspace using their laptop or as a place to play on their Wii. This ‘trend’ introduces the whole idea of ‘gardens without plants’. Plant-aholics will throw their hands up in despair but they’re only looking at this development from one direction. The client who chooses to have a space with minimal planting might not want plants because they might not have the time for ‘gardening’”.

What does a garden without plants mean for the landscaping industry?

“From a nursery or horticulturalist point of view or from a trade point of view there is a developing trend towards the minimizing of the number and variety of plants. A client might not want plants at all because they might not have time for it. It comes back to utility and use. So, for a client who doesn’t want to ‘garden’, if you introduce a wide variety of planting into their space you’re committing them to ‘gardening’. The idea of simplifying the palette is a good compromise; for example, you might have a small urban garden and choose just five or six species – you select your plants in a different way and they have to work harder for you”.

The clients lifestyle needs are paramount then?

“As a garden designer I can’t govern what my client wants; I let them talk first and I ask; ‘who have I got here; what sort of person; what sort of garden?’ How do I fit use and utility into a space for this particular client? Garden Designers are problem solvers; a client might want; planting, a parking space and a compost heap and as a designer your job is to try and mould something so it fits together; the planting, pathways, soft and hard landscaping so that you end up with a happy client. It’s no good if the planting is glorious, but the client can’t get across the garden to the compost heap”.



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What do you see as the biggest shift in attitude in the garden?

"I've just written a book on colour; where I talked about conceptual design and use of colour just for itself. Twenty years ago this book on 'colour' would have almost exclusively been about planting".

What is your most recent public space project and how is designing a public space different from an individual's private garden?

"Public spaces are of great interest to me; 'meaningful' public spaces, they might be smaller urban spaces; courtyards or gallery spaces that the public use. I originally started working as a Landscape Architect and spent seven years designing public spaces before concentrating on garden design. In my practice working with Gavin McWilliam, we work on high end private gardens but we also work on public spaces. We've just completed the Rose Garden at the Savill Garden and it was a very interesting process because it's a public access space. It was a brief that enabled us to be very progressive. For me it was the perfect scheme as it combined garden and landscape and was very plant oriented. We've been rewarded with feedback from thousands of people utilizing the space, which you don't get with an individual client, and it was lovely to have that response from a wide range of people".

You started your working life as a Landscape Architect for British Rail, how do you think this has informed your work as a designer further down the line?

"When I graduated as a Landscape Architect I worked in a big architects department on the Southern division initially and then across the whole of the UK. We worked on the regeneration of existing stations and sometimes on a brand new station. The forecourt to a station is an important space; it's often the first part of the city a visitor sees and it's the impression you take away when you leave. In my time at British Rail I developed ecological woodland edge planting around the car park of Southampton Parkway, so as well as screening the cars, I was working on developing an



ecological habitat.

Winchester and Hampshire County Council were really keen to work in partnership with the railways and at that time if a local authority or a group of people came to a project with a budget, British Rail would often match it. Some Local Authorities and County Councils picked up on this in a big way and it worked in favour of developing the environment. It was sustainable.

It was an interesting start to my career, working for up to twelve architects I soon learned how to juggle and how to prioritize jobs, but as privatization came about, the job evaporated as the railway was split up”.

What do you think makes a good public space?

“It comes back to understanding the place and understanding the people who are using that space, and I think in this country, we’ve had a lot of design produced without those two things in mind. I set a lot of store by responding to the space you’re designing within. If I said; there’s an enclosed courtyard that needs developing for a school or museum, then I’d need to know what the ethos is of that school, or what the characteristic of that space would be, for example if it were an enclosed courtyard, it would by it’s very characteristic be a private space and I would work accordingly. It’s important to understand the individual space rather than rely on a formula; if the Landscape Architect relies on formula then all the personality from the designer and from the space goes”.

Do we really value our public space planting?

“No. I’ve spent some of my life being a Landscape Architect and some being a Garden Designer, people understand the term ‘Garden Designer’ but if I say ‘I’m a Landscape Architect’, they reply; ‘What do you do?’ and I say ‘I design public spaces’. I’ve often then had the response; ‘I didn’t know they were designed’. It’s almost an invisible world. People think it just happens somehow and the idea that someone designs it is quite an alien idea to some. Seventy years on from the Landscape Institute being formed it’s sad that this happens”.

And finally, what's your favourite public space and why?

"I love the space outside Tate Modern. I love the water in the landscape; the Thames is open at that point and the building is dramatic and the simple treatment responds to both. I really like the channels of light and space. It was previously a 'nothing' space but now it's really lively. I also like the green dock part of Thames Barrier Park and the way it moves along and has this sense of dynamic change".

Example of Andrew's work with Wilson McWilliam.

The Rose Garden, The Savill Garden

The new rose garden at the Savill Garden was opened by Her Majesty The Queen in June 2010. This progressive design mass plants roses selected primarily for their perfume, colour intensity and repeat flowering capabilities to produce a new focus for the summer gardens at Savill.

The concept is 'intense' with colour grading from the white and ivory cream of *Rosa Sally Holmes* and *R Glamis Castle* to the deep blackcurrant reds of *R Munstead Wood*, *R Shakespeare* and *R Burgundy Ice*. Perfume fills the air and pathways take a route around the edge of the vortex like design to create changing views of the garden as a whole.

One route takes the visitor down into the centre of the garden but a second route in the form of a ramped promontory allows the visitor to slowly rise above the garden. A 5m cantilevered grille floats out above the central, most intensely coloured and perfumed roses coming to a point at which only one individual at a time can experience the fragrance rising on the warm air.

Over 2500 roses have been planted within the garden but only 28 cultivars have been used. Ribbed mounds spin off towards the woodland, planted with the transparent wands of *Molinia 'Heidebraut'*.

www.wilsonmcwilliamassociates.com

Andrew Wilson will be speaking at Palmstead Nurseries' 2010 Soft Landscaping Workshop on 22 September at the Ashford International Hotel.

Registration is now underway for the workshop at www.palmstead.co.uk

