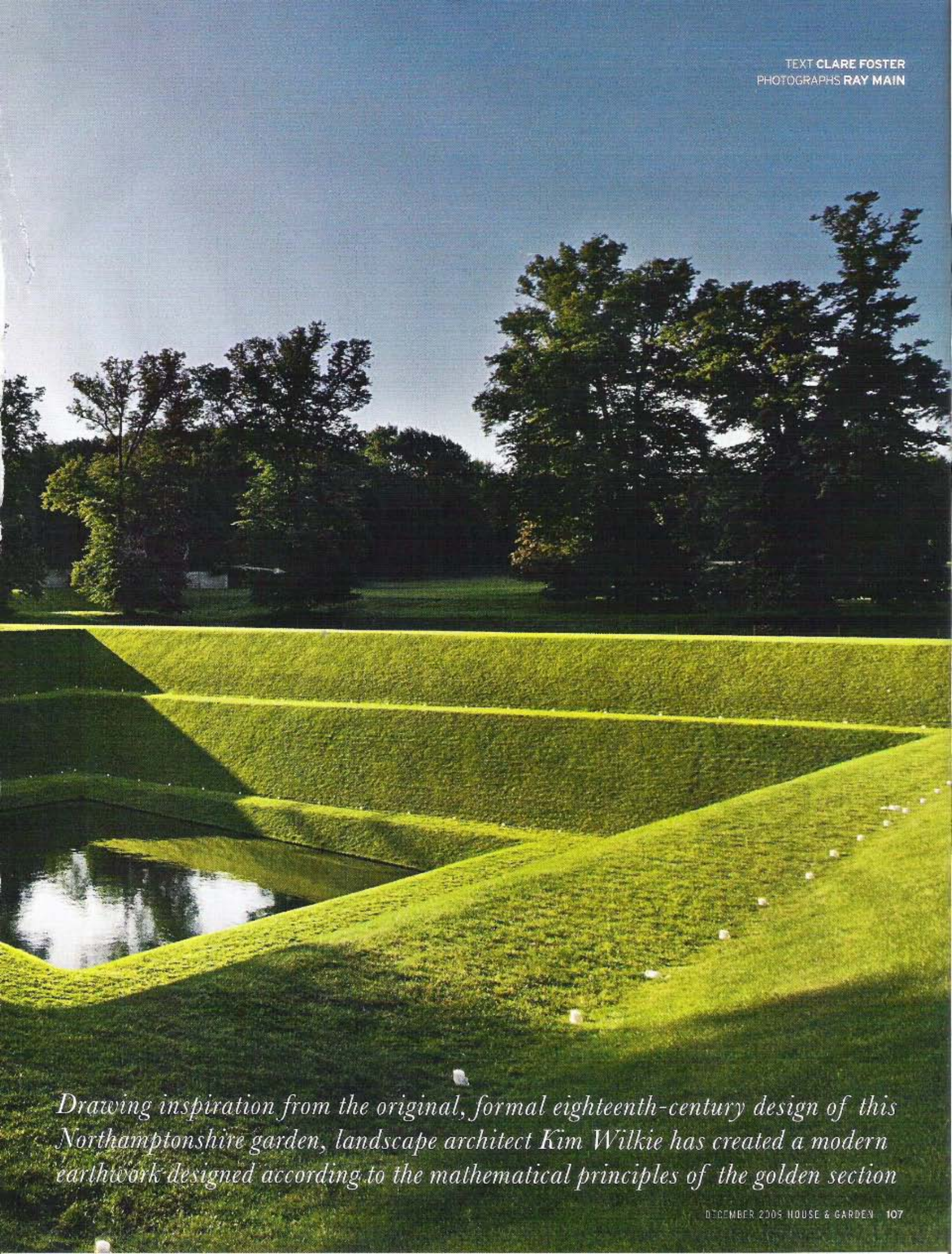


The main feature of Kim Wilkie's dramatic Orpheus earthwork at Boughton House in Northamptonshire is a vast hole in the ground, dug in the form of an inverted, truncated pyramid to mirror the shape of the eighteenth-century Mount that stands above it. At its centre, an inky-black pool lies seven metres below ground level. To avoid the pit's filling up with water, the walls were lined with blue clay to prevent groundwater from seeping into it.

*Natural science*



*Drawing inspiration from the original, formal eighteenth-century design of this Northamptonshire garden, landscape architect Kim Wilkie has created a modern earthwork designed according to the mathematical principles of the golden section*

THIS PAGE Above the pit is a rectangular grassed area with a York-stone rill in the form of a spiral, and a stainless-steel cube. This space conveys the geometric purity of the golden section and ties in with the layout of the eighteenth-century estate, which was also based on meticulous mathematical precision. OPPOSITE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP The grand façade of Boughton House overlooks sweeping acres of parkland. The eighteenth-century Mount is reflected in the restored canals. The dramatic scale of the new Orpheus earthwork is highlighted by figures walking down the gently sloping paths. With its unique acoustic, the space will be used for music and theatre



Creating a modern feature in a historic garden always poses a degree of risk, but landscape architect Kim Wilkie has carried it off with huge aplomb in the eighteenth-century landscape of Boughton House in Northamptonshire. His recently opened Orpheus earthwork is a masterpiece of intelligent design – an exciting, yet seemingly simple landform that merges into the eighteenth-century landscape, rooted firmly in the past, yet at the same time intensely modern.

The landscaped gardens at Boughton are not widely known, but they have an intriguing history. Laid out at the beginning of the eighteenth century by the 1st Duke of Montagu – forebear of the current owner and a former ambassador to the Court of Louis XIV at Versailles – they were modelled on the French ideal, with a complex system of formal canals and basins, elaborate parterres and grand avenues; very different from the less formal gardens that were fashionable at that time in Britain. In the 1720s the 2nd Duke simplified the layout and added the Mount. It was this feature, still intact but overgrown, that became the starting point for Kim's ingenious design for the present Duke of Buccleuch, who in 2003 began an ambitious programme of restoration of the grounds.

In an inspired move, Kim decided to dig a colossal hole in the ground, exactly mirroring, at its foot, the truncated pyramidal form of the Mount. 'The first time I visited Boughton, the Duke led me up to the top of the Mount, and we peered through trees and brambles to look down on a vast empty space,' Kim recalls. 'I think the expectation was that I'd create another mound or similar landform, but it occurred to me that we should go down rather than up. I wanted to make something that wouldn't intrude on the original landscape, that would complement, not compete with, the existing Mount.'

From a distance, this vast, 60-metre-wide, square crater is all but invisible, but the impact of coming across it at the last minute, as you are almost teetering on the edge, is dramatic and wonderful. Suddenly, there it is in front of you, a cavernous opening in the ground, luring you down via gently sloping grassy paths towards an inky-black pool seven metres below ground. As you descend, noise levels drop and the air becomes unnaturally still, creating a calm, almost other-worldly atmosphere. Down here, looking up at the sky, the symbolism of the story of Orpheus, who journeyed down into the Underworld, hoping to reclaim Eurydice, is easy to grasp. Ultimately, as Kim explains, the pool reflects the sky, reminding you of the world above, but, unlike Orpheus, you have the chance to return without loss.

Back in the real world, there is one more part of this extraordinary land creation to absorb. Above Orpheus is a 'golden rectangle' grassed area with a spiral in the form of a water-filled York-stone rill, culminating in a cubic, stainless-steel frame. Designed according to the mathematical principles of the golden section

– which expresses classical geometric proportions also found in the natural world – this area represents life on earth. Further up the hill, near the house, on the same axis as the Mount, is a medieval pond, also 60 metres square, above which used to be a bowling green of the same size. To take the motif yet further, Kim has planted a series of four squares of wild flowers, leading down the hill towards the new earthwork. 'The whole estate was formed on meticulous mathematical precision,' he explains, 'and this has been extended to the new landscape.'

Herein lies the genius of this new addition to the Boughton garden. Like the 300-year-old Mount, which could easily be mistaken for a twenty-first-century feature, Orpheus is of its time yet timeless, excitingly modern yet inextricably linked with the past, and its presence here seems entirely right, thanks to the unwavering vision of both patron and designer □

*Kim Wilkie Associates: 020-8332 0304; www.kimwilkie.com | The gardens at Boughton House are open by appointment until May 1, and are open to the public from May 1 until September 1. For details, visit www.boughtonhouse.org.uk*

