

# The secret garden

The £2 million John Madejski Garden at the V&A opens next week. Philippa Stockley takes a bird's-eye view

**Y**OU can tell a lot about a building's finances by the state of its roof. You could eat off the Victoria & Albert Museum's — invisible to the public and the size of a hamlet. Giving views of the cupolas and domes of Knightsbridge, its hotchpotch of skylights, odd levels, stairs and giant extractor vents float fresh paint and gleaming tiles.

The pristine roof is part of the museum's 15-year revamp, which in 2001 produced the popular £31 million British Galleries, new silver galleries and the Architecture Gallery — and will add a Medieval and Renaissance wing for 2009. Next week, the garden, destined to become one of London's favourite "secret" places, opens, free to all.

Its designer, Kim Wilkie, not bothered by a sheer 100ft drop, gazes down on the rectangular acre in the belly of the museum, where seemingly tiny workers race around in the hot sun. Piles of stone slabs that look no bigger than beer mats, giant bags of cement, various cranes, and raw earth, make an arresting sight. When the hard landscaping is done, planting can start. But the opening is next week and the clock is ticking.

The £2 million garden has been funded by art patron John Madejski (a donor of the Fine Rooms at the Royal Academy). In the garden's middle, a huge stone oval, or "ellipse", has been sunk, shaped by two opposing sweeps of curving York stone steps. Its floor is pink sandstone — from China. "Because it was cheaper," explains Wilkie. However, most of the materials, bar the plants, are British. And all the computer-cut stones are different shapes and hand finished.

The stone ellipse will be used as a meeting place, and visitors crossing from the garden's entrance in the rearranged sculpture gallery to one of the two alfresco cafes will pass through it. It can also be flooded. In an hour, to create a shimmering pool, the pink stone turning in a flash to bristled purple glinting through the shallows, echoing the deep red, daunting Italian facades soaring up all around. But — unlike the Diana Memorial — the 10cm-deep water is still.

Wilkie cheerfully admits he is not trying to be "fashionable". But he is fast gaining worldwide status for elegant, time-resistant work. In the 2003 competition for the job, he beat five international designers, including big names Kathryn Gustafson and Martha Schwartz, and Dutch radical WS (which proposed sky-high trees planted in what looked like golf tees on stilts).

"I don't feel that I'm the most trendy designer," Wilkie says politely, "and this is slightly aside from what's



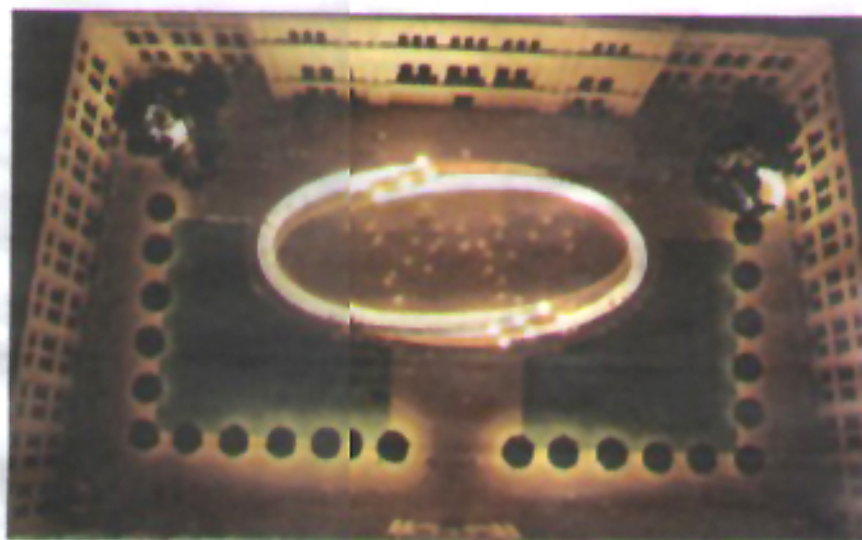
Total ellipse of the art: Kim Wilkie, designer of the V&A's new garden, on the roof of the museum, while below him, work continues on the garden's York stone and sandstone ellipse centrepiece. At night it will be lit up (below), in a design created by Patrick Woodruff, the man behind many Rolling Stones' concerts

happening elsewhere: it's counter-fashion." Oxford and Berkeley-educated Wilkie's previous jobs include re-landscaping Hyde Park Corner, and major streetscaping in Oxford. He is also working on a natural flood-plain for the Thames, between Richmond and Kingston.

This £2 million garden is intended to last. There is no part that is not of the highest quality. And unlike its predecessor, the Fivoli Garden, which in 1987 replaced the old cherry-tree garden, it is versatile.

The curving gold steps conceal lights, and have a dozen adjustable, water jets whose sprouts can either trickle, or belt out six-metre vertical spikes of water that can be lit in synchronisation. This *eau-de-lumiere* is part of an integrated system by Patrick Woodruff the man behind concert lighting for the Rolling Stones, which includes uplighting the window-rebates in the museum facade, and cubic-metre etched-glass planters (which hold Sicilian lemon trees in summer and holly trees in winter), so they glow like Art Deco ice cubes. By night, the whole garden goes fairytale and glows mysteriously, the ellipse's curves traced in bluish lines of light.

But you cannot have a proper English garden without plants. The planting is divided into three. First, there is



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