

KIM WILKIE

INTERVIEW BY FRANCESCA GREENOAK • portrait by Charles Hopkinson

Kim Wilkie has the quiet assurance that comes with a strong sense of direction. He believes that “landscape is central to our lives” but he tempers his approach to his work with a seductive playfulness. Kim has altered our perception of the Thames, opening up vistas that have been shut out for years, and has brought a freshness to garden restorations, always adding a new element to a landscape while paying due respect to its history. Now in his forties, he has an enviable track record, with cityscape transformations and large ongoing landscape projects, including the gentle restoration of Great Fosters in Egham, Surrey (see page 42).

Kim was born in Malaysia, moving to Baghdad when he was eight, although he was schooled in England. “I went from humid jungle to the deserts of Iraq and then to England, so from an early age I was aware of climate extremes and landscape,” he says. Among his first memories are happy days walking in the desert and exploring ancient ruins. “I used to play on the Tigris and Euphrates and sleep in the desert – I never lost my love of it.

“I made mud landscapes in the jungle when I was small,” Kim continues, “and in the desert I liked to carve small cities in the compacted sand.” On breaks from school, he and his sister stayed with their grandparents in Winchester and created miniature garden scenes, constructed in gaps in an old wall.

With his flair for languages and love of foreign climes it was assumed Kim would join the Diplomatic Service. He did not object and took modern history at Oxford. “I was brought up with the idea that

the privileges of a well-off middle class could only be justified by service to the wider public.”

In the 1980s, the threat of the atomic bomb brought home a sense of mortality. This was compounded for Kim when he suffered an accident in Mexico and gangrene infected his leg. He was told it would require amputation, but when he reached the hospital in Guatemala an earthquake made an operation impossible. By some miracle he recovered, but felt a sense of urgency to do something worthwhile and fun while there was still time.

Kim enrolled on a “brilliant” environmental design course at the University of California, Berkeley, where he worked under Michael Laurie, who impressed Kim with the “clear thought and logical beauty of his work but most of all, his fundamental integrity. He lived out what he believed and I began to see that developing your particular skills and working at what you love doing is in itself a useful service”. He still regards Berkeley as the most stimulating School of Environmental Design and is a visiting professor there.

Back in Britain in 1984, Kim worked for the fledgling Land Use Consultants before setting up Kim Wilkie Associates in 1989. “I needed the freedom to take on projects that might make a loss. When you are small you can pursue what is interesting and important.”

He worked on projects with Gilly Drummond, former chair of the Hampshire Gardens Trust, and then, in the early nineties, came the Thames Landscape Strategy, a 100-year plan for the river through London. “It started as an idea to renew the significance of the river,

and sketches went on show at the Royal Fine Art Commission,” explains Kim. Mavis Batey (former president of the Garden History Society) and the local community helped to persuade the authorities to turn the plan into action. “I realised you don’t need slick presentations – by just putting the ideas into sketches and a language that makes sense to regular people, you create a forum in which they can speak for themselves.”

Kim’s designs nearly always involve flowing forms in preference to harsh effects. He explores the visual effects of sound, with tiled rills, and falls of water that make different sounds at each step. His short-listed proposal for the V&A museum courtyard in London has a pool rising through the grass lawn ellipse. He loves the drama of large landscapes with sensuous earth sculptures created by bulldozers.

His current projects include the redesign of Hyde Park Corner in London and Broad Street in Oxford, as well as projects in Russia, Italy and Romania. As for the future, “I am still fascinated by the way land can inform the way we live”, he says. “I have areas of particular fascination, for example flooding, looking at how we can reintegrate the flood plains and grazing in town centres.”

Kim is nowadays too committed to take off on a whim but still kayaks with friends in wild places such as Vancouver, Karelia and the Sea of Cortez. He loves the imperative of the elements: “In a storm, everything is stripped back to survival, and you are most yourself.” He responds most completely to “genuineness – people who think independently without pretension. They become wonderful in old age”. ■



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