

# A stately pleasure garden

The redesign of the courtyard at the V&A Museum has transformed a dated space into a dramatic and colourful area for today's visitors. By **Jay Merrick**

Forget the Spiral. Say hello to the Ellipse. The V&A Museum in London lost its chance to deliver the strange folds, crumples and fractalised surfaces designed by Daniel Libeskind and Cecil Balmond that would have made its proposed Henry Cole Wing the first British architectural wonder of the new millennium. But exactly a week from today, the pain of that bruising and rather mysterious failure will be salvaged by something that the museum has got absolutely, and charmingly, right.

Looking down into the V&A's courtyard from the edge of the southern roof parapet, the scene is oddly comforting: it's a building site, and a very organised one. There's not much backchat going on; mugs of tea are not in obvious evidence; most of the activity seems unusually intent. In the centre of the courtyard - and giving the V&A a whole new public dimension - several men are making minute adjustments to slabs of Chinese sandstone that are beginning to give colour and weight to the big horizontal ellipse, a brilliantly stylish bangle stepped in Crosland Hill York stone that defines the new topography.

Is this intervention, designed by Kim Wilkie Associates, architecture? Absolutely. Anything that has to forge a distinct physical presence in this space, surrounded by the Victorian decorative excess of the courtyard's façades, must respond to it in architectural rather than casually aesthetic terms.

The courtyard - known as the John Madejski

Garden, after its £2m benefactor - is assuming an engrossing new physicality that seems simple and decisive. But old becomes new with a deceptive certainty. The original architecture is being revived by an entirely different species of space-making - history air-brushed, with obvious consideration, into the background, first by pencil and ink sketches, then by computer-aided morphing.

The signs are good. The courtyard has been titivated before, most recently

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when a previous V&A director, Roy Strong, evicted the statue of Buddha, grubbed up the cherry trees planted after the Second World War, and turned the courtyard into an Italianate garden. But the alders and cypresses grew too quickly, rendering the courtyard dark and sombre, with too many fidgety changes of level. It felt like a space for the great and good, rather than for most of the nine million people who visit the V&A annually.

Gazing north towards Hyde Park across many of the grander roofs of South Ken, one senses the inertia

of architectural tradition that must play on the minds of architects, planners or museum directors here. We are, after all, at the heart of what is the most richly endowed intellectual and cultural city quarter in Britain - a quarter of a square mile of what was known, in the 1860s, as Albertopolis, after Prince Albert.

The architects who created the V&A, Francis Fowke and HYD Scott, relied heavily on decorators and designers to encrust the V&A with the stylistically eclectic surfaces that gave it its gravitas. And it is this faux Italian renaissance presence that Kim Wilkie had not so much to counter, but to defuse.

The courtyard's façades are, to most modern architectural tastes, theatrically effusive. The walls are composed of red brick and terracotta; there are ornamental piers, columns, arches and large decorative terracotta panels; on the south range, the arched windows of the first-storey library are supported by heavily decorated pillars.

Shelling this Victoriana with a salvo of arch-modernity was hardly an option. And rehashing it would have been faintly exclusive, if not repellent, to the multitudes that the V&A's director, Mark Jones, wants to attract to the courtyard.

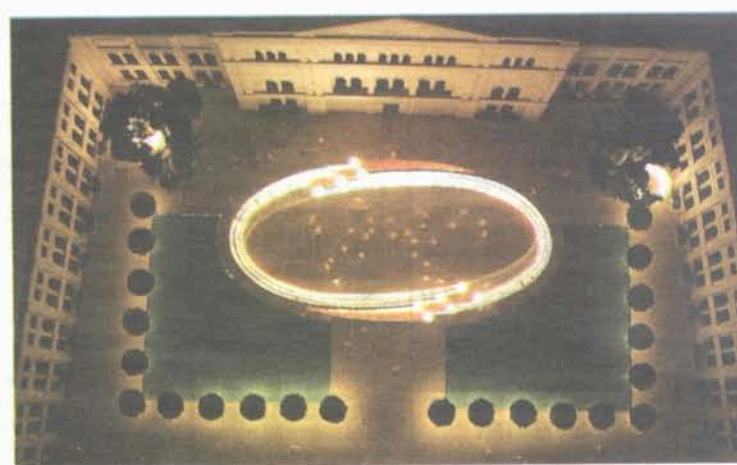
Wilkie, whose commissions include a potential re-casting of Hyde Park Corner, the restoration of the Villa La Pietra at Florence for New York University, and a masterplan for the world heritage site at the Solovetsky Archipelago, Russia, was a modern historian before he became a

landscape architect. He would have grasped the implications of the courtyard's architectural complexity rapidly. It was an entirely ad hoc complexity. The east wing, built in 1858, was the V&A's first building; the west wing followed in 1864, and the northern wing was added in 1869. When the south wing was completed in 1882, the courtyard was formed. In it were nothing more than grass rectangles.

Some of that aesthetically cool simplicity has been re-attained. Wilkie's most significant challenge was to clarify the horizontal plane of the courtyard so that the grandeur of the north façade - the dominant visual hit experienced by those entering the garden through the French doors on the southern side - would not be hampered by any further. Faced with those terracotta columns, Wilkie has created a gentle but sharply etched ripple in the centre of the garden.

That ripple, with stepped seating, six illuminated waterjets and the capability of being converted into a shallow, reflective pond, is actually two ellipsoid forms that interpenetrate. The centrepiece sits mostly in the northern half of the John Madejski Garden, clasped by two squares of lawn and flanked, in the northern corners, by a pair of liquidambar trees.

The north-south axis of the courtyard has been clarified. Entering the garden from the French doors in the middle of the south wing,



Light fantastic: an illustration of the new John Madejski Garden (top) and a model of it at night (above)

there are only the slightly raised edges of the ellipses between the visitor and the main doors of the north wing. With 22 illuminated glass planters - containing lemon trees in the summer and hollies in winter - Wilkie has established a new baseline to the vista. It's a visual counterweight to the imposing north façade - a hip, designer sorbet to mediate the effects of stodgy architectural layer-cake.

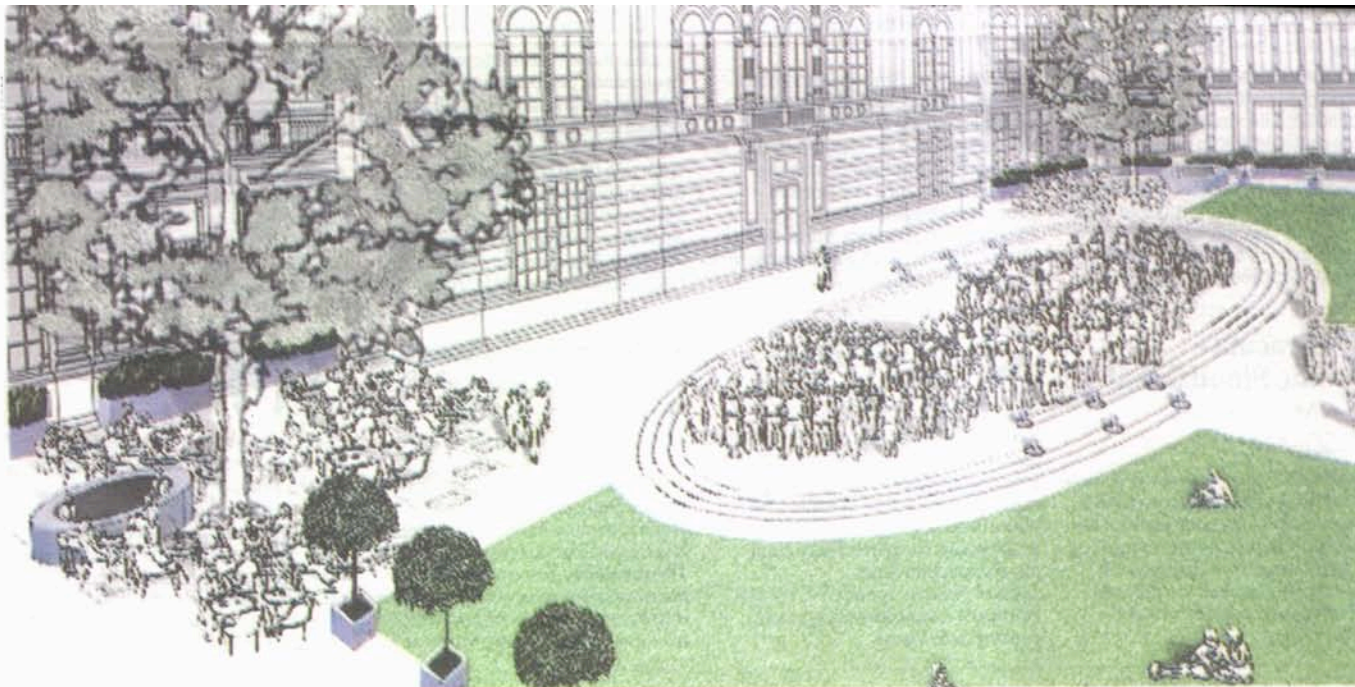
The deployment of colour is intriguing. The earthy red of the Chinese sandstone keys into the generic colour of the courtyard. The leaves of the liquidambar trees, brilliantly green, begin to leave the ripples of celadon decoration on the north façade. Other lighting effects, by The Rolling Stones' luminist, Patrick Woodroffe, will etch the

scene, emphasising form and shadow.

Wilkie is planting two lines of mophead hydrangeas along the east and west walls, to add more graphic horizontals, and balance the flaring green of the liquidambar trees. And, in addition to inter-plantings of foxgloves, echium and irises, a thousand scented 'African Queen' lilies will populate the northern edge of the courtyard.

Wilkie's precise re-punctuation of the courtyard's overwrought architectural prose may yet add a little poetry to the space, a sense of reinvented purpose in a new place and time.

John Madejski Garden, Victoria & Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 (020-7942 2000; www.vam.ac.uk) opens 6 July



## VIP EVENING AT THE V&A

On the evening of Wednesday 29th June, the V&A is hosting a VIP champagne reception in the newly landscaped Madejski Garden. There will be a performance by Lythgoe and Richard Wentwood. This is a rare opportunity to see the fast-changing V&A. The Independent is offering this special evening to our readers who call a pair of

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