

# Kim Wilkie Associates

Nicola Kearton reviews the work of landscape architects and urban designers Kim Wilkie Associates, whose interest in the intimate relationship between land, culture and place has enabled them to combine the restoration of historic landscapes with radical new designs in both rural and urban contexts.

Describing themselves as landscape architects, urban designers and environmental planners, Kim Wilkie Associates have in the last decade produced a body of work that is remarkable for its far-reaching and innovative solutions in a wide variety of settings. (Their own setting is an office on leafy Richmond Hill in London.) In London they have won acclaim for a proposal which provided a 100-year landscape strategy for the River Thames. Following on from this they produced a detailed study of the densely urban area of Borough at London Bridge, a masterplan for the redesign of Hyde Park Corner and are now working on a plan for a new square in Greenwich. International projects include the restoration and management plan for Sir Harold Acton's estate at La Pietra, now the New York University campus in Florence, described by Wilkie as a perfect relationship between man, garden and the productive landscape; a masterplan for the ancient monastic complex of Solovki, set in a highly sensitive environmental area that was once the site of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*; and a competition design for a 'Garden of Forgiveness' in the central area of Beirut. Many projects involve public work and community spaces but the practice also creates lyrical pieces of landscape art, most notably the series of elegantly curved grass terraces at Heveningham Hall in Suffolk, which evokes the ancient British tradition of turf-covered earth sculpture. Or the new botanical gardens in Moscow where in winter a long pool flanked by Siberian birch trees is artificially kept a few degrees above freezing in order to form a frozen mist over the water, thereby coating the nearby trees with ice.

The practice works on the regeneration of historic landscapes both urban and rural, applying radical new designs that spring from a close study of place. The sense of place as something formed by the intimate relationship between man, culture and nature greatly preoccupies Wilkie himself, who graduated with a history degree from Oxford before studying landscape architecture at Berkeley. He is drawn by the Enlightenment theories of the wholeness of man and nature



and the idea that the cultivation of land was intrinsic to its beauty. He prefers to emphasise the 'use' aspect of Alexander Pope's famous dictum: 'All must be adapted to the Genius and Use of the Place, and the Beauties not forced into it, but resulting from it.'<sup>1</sup>

Kim Wilkie Associates' work in cities has been marked, where appropriate, by a desire to bring the country into the urban environment thereby blurring the distinction between town and nature. The 100-year Landscape Strategy for the Thames concentrated on the area between Hampton and Kew but has now been adopted as a prototype for conservation and development for the whole river. The aim was to reinstate the river as one of the great natural spaces of London, the symbolic lifeblood of the city, and maintain a continuous pedestrian route along the river bank, saving it from becoming a ghetto of luxury development. The study was notable for its analysis of the river and its banks as a working landscape of boatyards, docks and commercial centres; a unique natural habitat rich in pastures and flood meadows and an unparalleled historical landscape of vistas, parks and gardens which has inspired poets, writers and artists since the Tudors.<sup>2</sup> A painstaking consultation process with local groups that crossed many different local authority boundaries produced an agreed series of environmental

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Kim Wilkie Associates produced a master plan for the restoration and management of the estate of the Villa La Pietra, Florence, 1997-2000. Originally Sir Harold Acton's property, La Pietra is now the Italian campus of New York University.



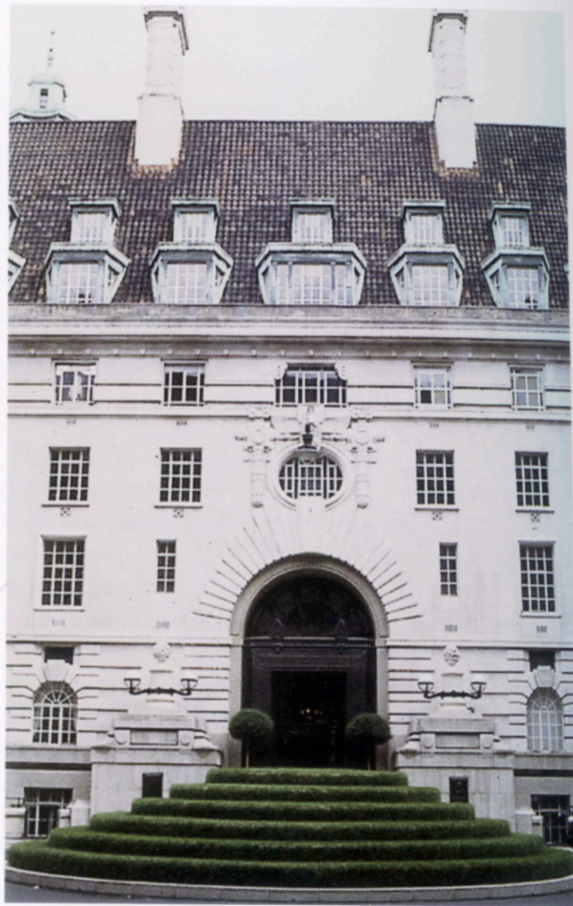
policies as well as specific project proposals to reinstate and enhance the landscape and the lives of Londoners.

Wilkie is also keenly interested in the allotment movement as, he says, 'Growing your own food is a real antidote to the unreality and sense of dislocation which can come about in urban life'; in fact, reintroducing allotments into some of London's Royal Parks is one of his dreams. Community gardens are forming part of a small-scale scheme in Winchester, which also illustrates the consultation process and the close ties that have to be formed with the local community if such a project is to be successful and take root in the future. A small public park is being designed with adjacent allotments and the people who work in them will also oversee the park, providing an overall supervision which should help prevent vandalism. A scheme has also been introduced at La Pietra involving students in the harvesting of locally grown produce from the estate, an idea which harks back to Platonic ideals of manual work enhancing the mind.

One of Wilkie Associates' most important and complex projects to date is a study prepared for English Heritage to provide a framework for the short- and long-term enhancement of Hyde Park Corner in London. Central London depends on traffic flowing smoothly around this vitally important junction but public perception has rarely seen it as more than a large traffic island in the middle of a seemingly anarchical junction, an awkward impediment on the pedestrian route from Hyde Park to Green Park and onwards to Westminster and the Thames. As Wilkie puts it, 'Easing the conflict between vehicles, infrastructure, people, horses and cyclists could transform not only movement through the centre of the capital, but also help to change the identity and perception of the city itself.'<sup>3</sup> London's image as a walking city is still poor compared to its continental rivals such as Paris.

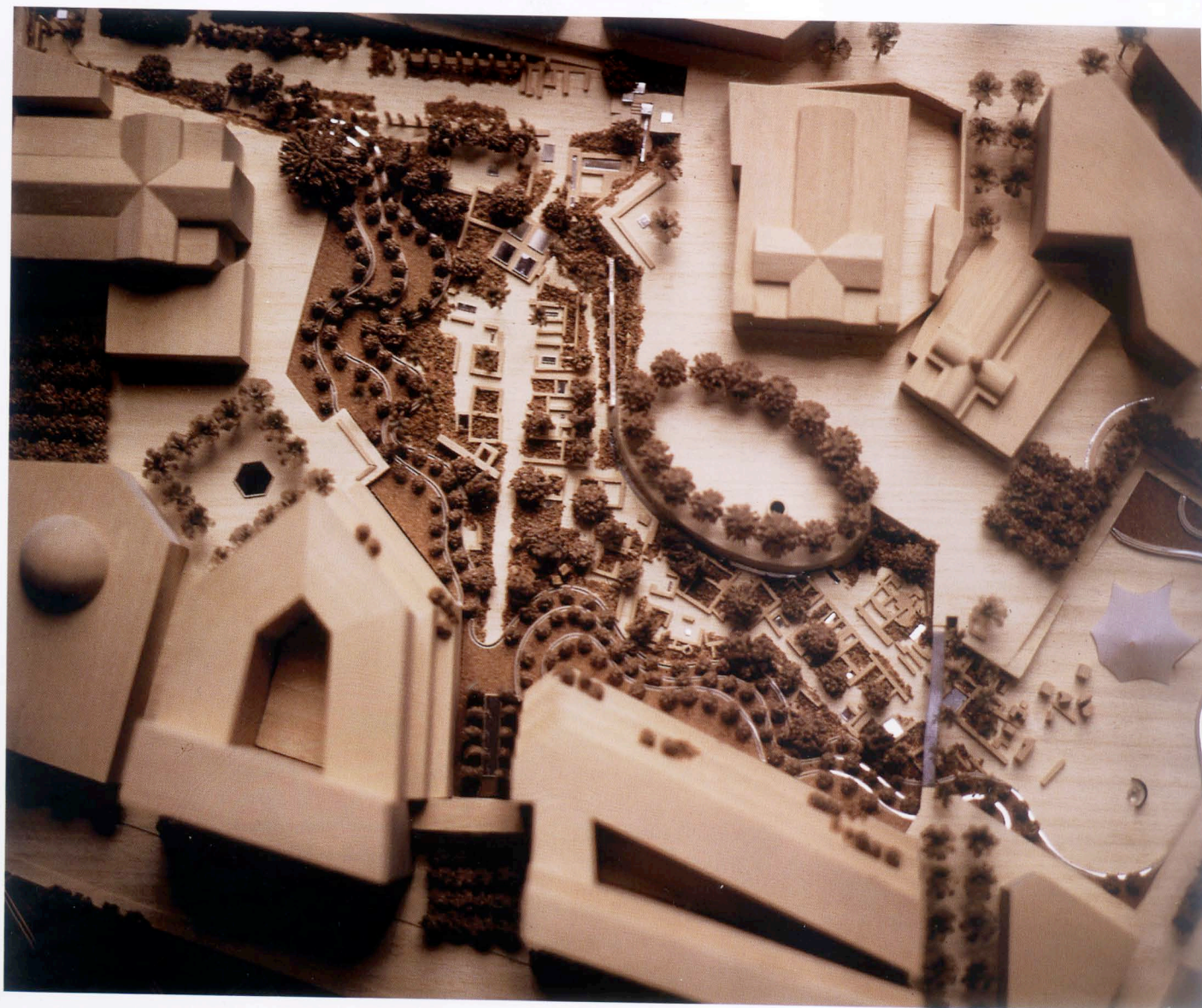
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Design for the former GLC Members Courtyard as the new hotel entrance for the London Marriott Hotel, 1998.



One of Wilkie's pet projects is to produce a pedestrian map of London to rival the clarity of Henry C Beck's 1933 Underground map, still in use today and so successful that it tends to determine the mental map of London.<sup>4</sup> 'Walking maintains the publicness and viability of public space', as Rebecca Solnit puts it in her book *Wanderlust - A History of Walking*.<sup>5</sup>

Hyde Park Corner is in fact a not insubstantial small park in its own right, 1.5 hectares of green space that contains some of the city's most important monuments, with a deeply confusing network of tunnels and an Underground station beneath. Wilkie Associates' proposals include a visual realignment of the royal ceremonial route from Admiralty Arch and Buckingham Palace, taking it through the Wellington Arch, the centrepiece of Hyde Park Corner, through the Ionic Screen at the entrance to the park and northwards to Marble Arch. North of the arch a smooth sloping grass bowl will be framed by a stone seating wall, and the land above the wall will be thickly planted with pollution-tolerant plants in order to provide protection from the traffic. Statues will be repositioned with a



curving sweep of York stone. The most radical suggestion is for a wall of water and light to contain the southwest corner, which is the lowest point of Hyde Park Corner as well as the noisiest. The idea for this stemmed from the Wall of Water in Paley Park, New York, by Zion and Zion, where the use of this naturally washes out the surrounding noise and pollution rejuvenating and entirely altering a previously stressful urban environment. This was, Wilkie admits, the piece which most inspired him to take up landscape architecture. The wall of water and light has evolved to become the Australian War Memorial and plans for it have been drawn up by Australian sculptor Bob Woodward. The running water will be seen from both sides, thereby also providing visual refreshment for the traffic at the Grosvenor Place junction. The area above it will be remodelled to provide a grass cup which could hold considerable numbers of people for ANZAC Day ceremonies, marking an entirely new role for Hyde Park Corner.

Below

One of a series of earth sculptures or fan-like grass terraces at Heveningham Hall, Suffolk.

Below

Spiral at Franklin Farm, Hampshire.



The entrance to the Underground will be simplified with one opening instead of two, the steps turned south by 90 degrees and a café/bar created in the newly formed space. Simplifying barriers, vistas and pedestrian routes, enhancing the natural environment and providing a consistent lighting scheme across the whole area would emphasise a sense of place and encourage visitors to linger as well as to pass through Hyde Park Corner. It would be a celebration of the vibrancy that has always marked it as a unique urban experience.

In his writings Wilkie makes great claims for landscape architecture as a broadly based discipline which, 'at this point is immense and pivotal. Landscape architecture addresses both the built and the cultivated environment. It thinks about city as well as countryside; housing as well as agriculture; cultural history as well as nature conservation. It is particularly well placed to deal with the fundamental questions of how the land should be used – if at all. It places and shapes buildings and infrastructure. It deals with connection and movement. It is the general start point from which the particular specializations can proceed.'<sup>6</sup> ▢

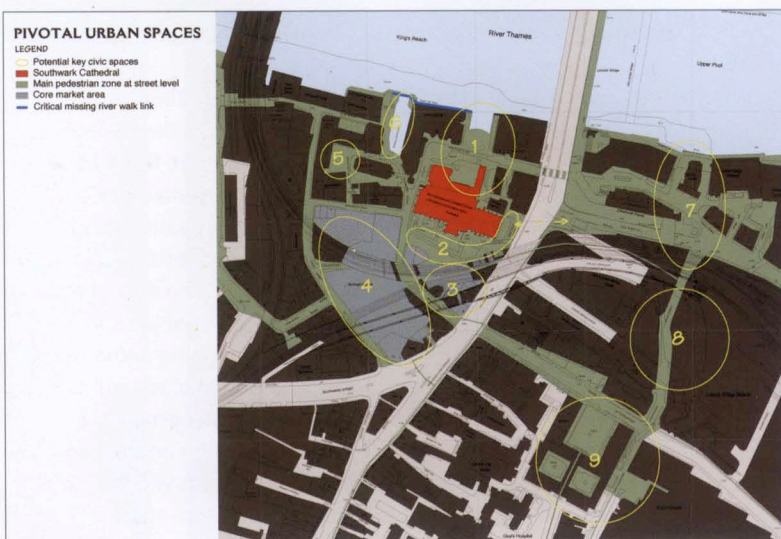
The Editor of *Art and Design* for many years, Nicola Kearton is a freelance writer and editor.

#### Earth sculpture at Heveningham Hall, Suffolk (1995–2000) and Franklin Farm in Hampshire (1997).

Kim Wilkie has a particular interest in earth sculpture. As he states, 'There has been a tradition in the British Isles of sculpting the earth into sensuous forms, held firm by close-cropped turf. Rain helps to grow abundant grass. Sheep and rabbits help to keep the surface short and smooth. And the low northern light shows off the subtle forms to perfection – particularly with the accent of ground frost.'<sup>7</sup> At Heveningham Hall, Suffolk, as part of a large-scale restoration of a historic 18th-century landscape, Wilkie Associates created a series of sweeping fan-like grass terraces based on a golden-mean-section spiral creating a natural amphitheatre that used the house as a backdrop. The same spiral appears again in the mound which rises from a field at Franklin Farm in Hampshire. Echoing the mound is an uncoiled spiral sunk into the lawn in the garden.

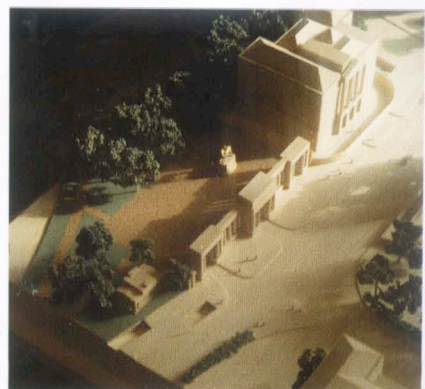


**Urban design study for Borough at London Bridge (1998–2000).** Commissioned by English Heritage, this urban design study proved crucial to an understanding of the broader urban context of one of the oldest and most chaotic parts of London. This was at a time when Borough was starting to undergo radical regeneration with the development of projects such as the Globe, Tate Bankside and the Millennium Bridge. Cut through by roads and railway viaducts, the area is home to many different communities as well as one of the most vibrant markets in London. The report aimed to establish a coordinated vision for future development which would not allow the area to become bland but would maintain its sense of gritty urban energy and excitement. It aimed to 'understand the elements which make the area special – the memories and associations, the people, the movement, the buildings and the spaces – and to explore how they might respond to change in a way which amplifies rather than mutes their intrinsic character'.<sup>8</sup>



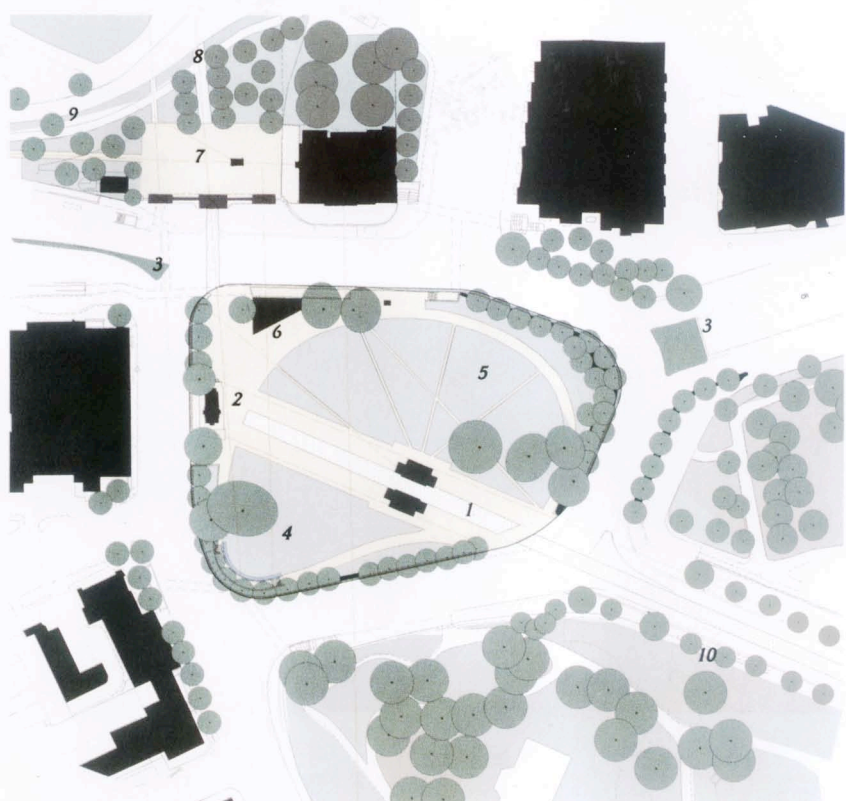


**Hyde Park Corner: Turning the Corner (1998–2000).** This is a detailed framework for long- and short-term development, prepared for English Heritage. It aims to change the public perception of Hyde Park Corner as being an awkward impediment on one of the most important pedestrian and ceremonial routes in London, as well as a dangerous traffic junction and potential deathtrap for cyclists. The designs will focus attention on the fact that it is a substantial park in its own right, 1.5 hectares of green space containing some of the city's most important monuments. A sense of place will be emphasised clarifying access above and below ground, particularly to the London Underground station and the royal processional route through the Wellington Arch will be reinstated. Central to the scheme is a new memorial for Australians killed in the world wars, in a departure from the more traditional heroics of the other monuments on the site, which will take the form of a refreshing wall of water and light.



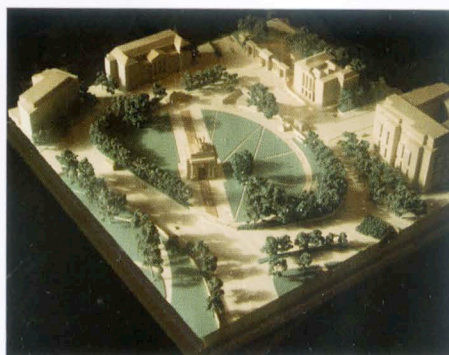
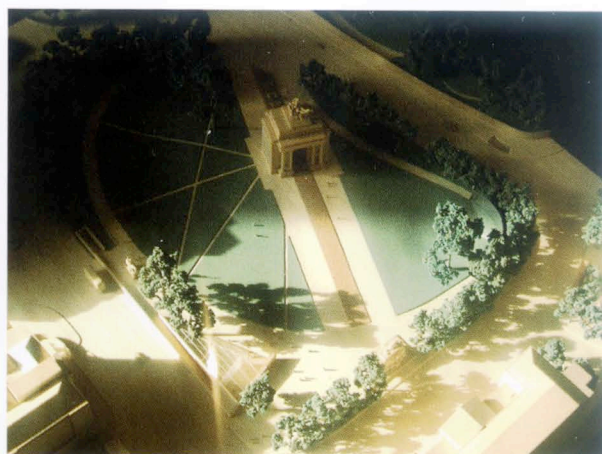
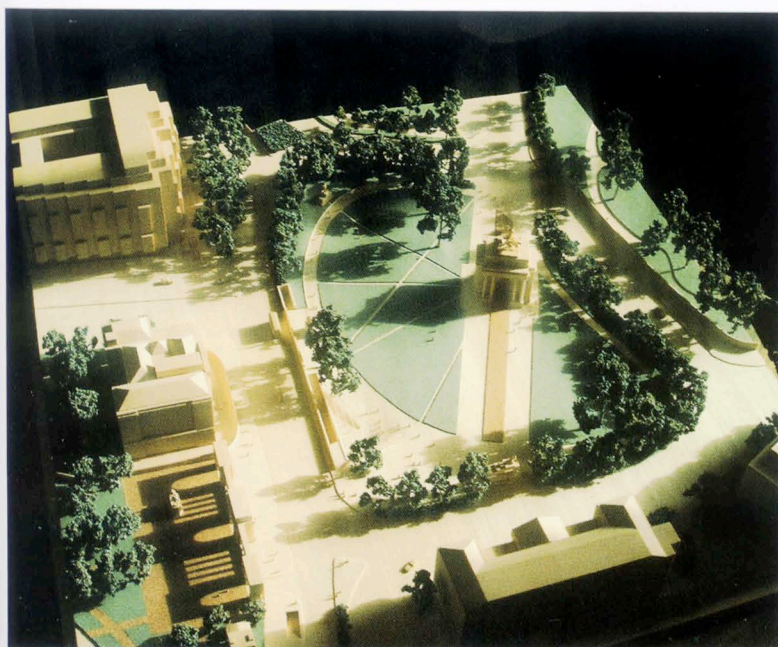
*Proposals:*

1. Repave the processional route through the Arch
2. Repair the Royal Artillery Memorial and setting
3. Green the tunnel portals with holly hedging and increase tree planting around the outer ring of the space
4. Reform and replant the lower cup with a memorial wall of water and light at the south-western corner
5. Reform and replant the upper bowl, repositioning statues with a curving sweep of York stone
6. Create a south-facing café to link to the underground entrance
7. Replace the traffic islands with a simple parade ground which relates to the Ionic Screen and Apsley House
8. Extend the Broad Walk Avenue southwards
9. Reduce the South Carriage Drive from dual carriageway to a single two-way road
10. Replace the Buckingham Palace garden walls with railings



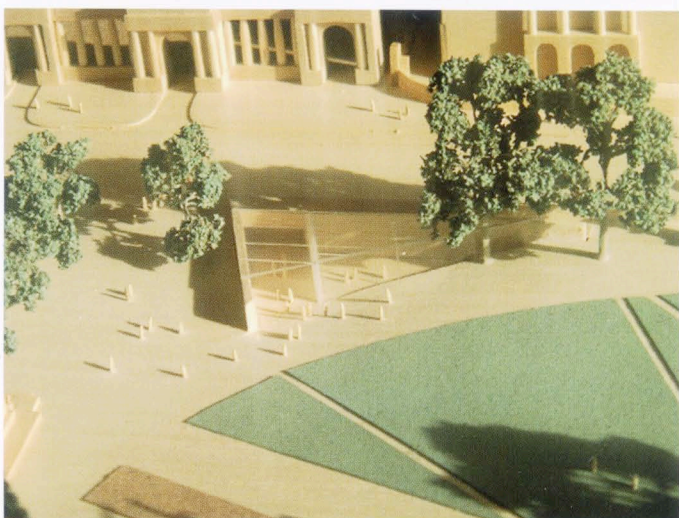
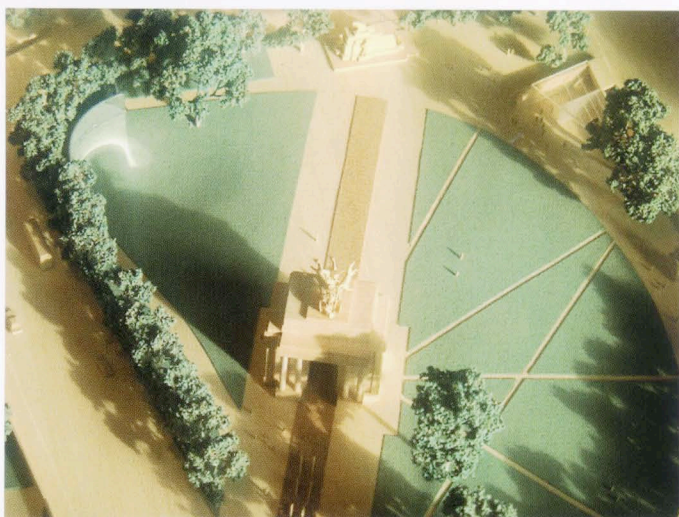
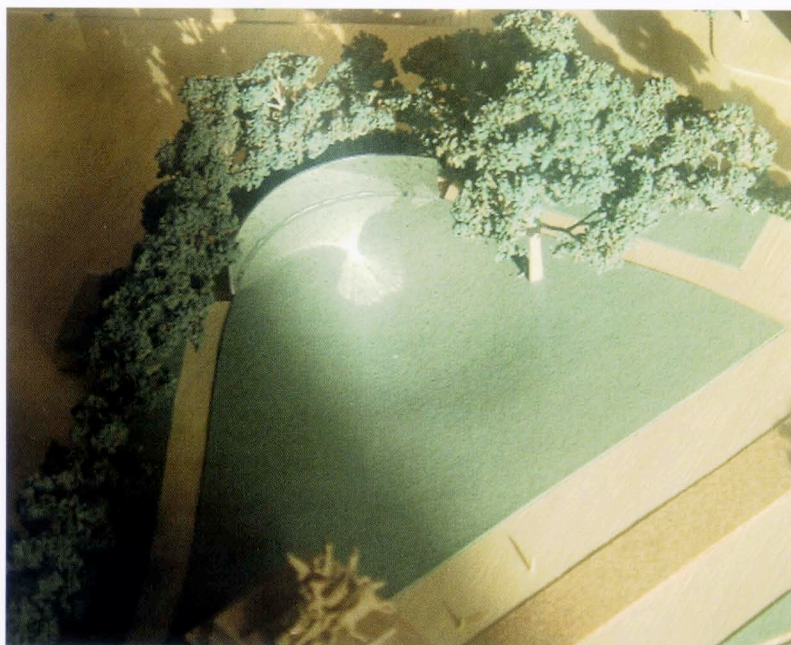
The proposals for Hyde Park Corner

(not to scale)



Below top  
Wall of water and light designed for Hyde Park  
Corner as part of the 'Turning The Corner' proposal.

Below middle and bottom  
Proposed café and subway entrance to the Hyde  
Park Corner underground station.



## Resumé

- 1989 Kim Wilkie founded Kim Wilkie Associates.
- 1990–2000 Great Fosters, Surrey, for Great Fosters Hotel. Restoration and redesign of moated Arts and Crafts gardens with masterplanning of newly acquired holdings.
- 1991–7 Thames Landscape Strategy, for the Countryside Commission. 100-year plan for the river through London.
- 1995–2000 Heveningham Hall, Suffolk, for a private client. Masterplan and landscape designs for restoration of the hall and Capability Brown parkland.
- 1997–9 Moscow Botanic Garden, Moscow, for Moscow University. Design of a new botanic garden, and restoration of the gardens of Peter the Great and Catherine the Great.
- 1997–9 Beirut City Centre, Beirut, for Solidere. Creation of a Garden of Forgiveness in the archaeological ruins in central Beirut.
- 1997–2000 Villa La Pietra, Florence. Restoration and management plan for Italian campus for New York University near Florence; formerly Sir Harold Acton's estate.
- 1998 Merlin Teleport Centre, Hampshire. Design of a satellite-dish teleport in an old walled garden on the edge of Portsmouth harbour.
- 1998–2000 Hyde Park Corner, London, for English Heritage. Plans for redesign of Hyde Park Corner.
- 1998–2000 Borough at London Bridge, London, for English Heritage. Urban design study for the area around London Bridge.
- 2000 Solovki, Russia, for the Prince of Wales Business Leaders Forum. Strategic masterplan for World Heritage site on the edge of the Russian Arctic Circle.
- 2000 Blackwell, Lake District, for Abbot Hall. Design for a modern garden for a restored Baillie Scott house, to be used to exhibit sculpture.
- 2001 Stockwell Street, Greenwich, London, for architects BWCP. Urban design for development site in Greenwich town centre. Awarded an Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

### Notes

1. From the introduction to the poem *Fourth Epistle to Lord Burlington* quoted in 'Kim Wilkie – Landscape Architect', *Country Life* interview, 28 March 1998, p 86.
2. Kim Wilkie, 'A Landscape Strategy', *Urban Design Quarterly*, no 55, July 1995. For full details see Mavis Batey, Henrietta Buttery, David Lambert and Kim Wilkie, *Arcadian Thames: The River Landscape From Hampton to Kew*, Barns Elms Publishing (London), 1994.
3. Kim Wilkie Associates, *London: The Green City – Hyde Park Corner: Turning the Corner*, English Heritage, 2001, page 1. This report provides a comprehensive study of the proposals and history of the site with all important funding possibilities.

4. See Kim Wilkie Associates, *On the Ground*, in association with English Heritage and the Greater London Authority, 2001.
5. Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust – A History of Walking*, Verso (London and New York), 2001, p 176.
6. Kim Wilkie, 'The Future of Landscape Architecture', 2000; see philosophy section, [www.kimwilkie.com](http://www.kimwilkie.com)
7. Kim Wilkie, 'Earthworks – Working the Earth', 1998; see philosophy section, [www.kimwilkie.com](http://www.kimwilkie.com)
8. Kim Wilkie Associates, *The Borough at London Bridge: An Urban Study*, English Heritage, November 1999, p 6.