



Blue sky thinking

Not content with transforming the V&A's courtyard garden, landscape architect Kim Wilkie oversaw a sea change in his own back yard

REPORT **KATHERINE SWIFT** PHOTOGRAPHS **NICOLA BROWNE**



Right: the back wall of the house supports a crimson glory vine. This page: ceanothus complements the blue of the garden bench and the parking area. Inset: Kim Wilkie





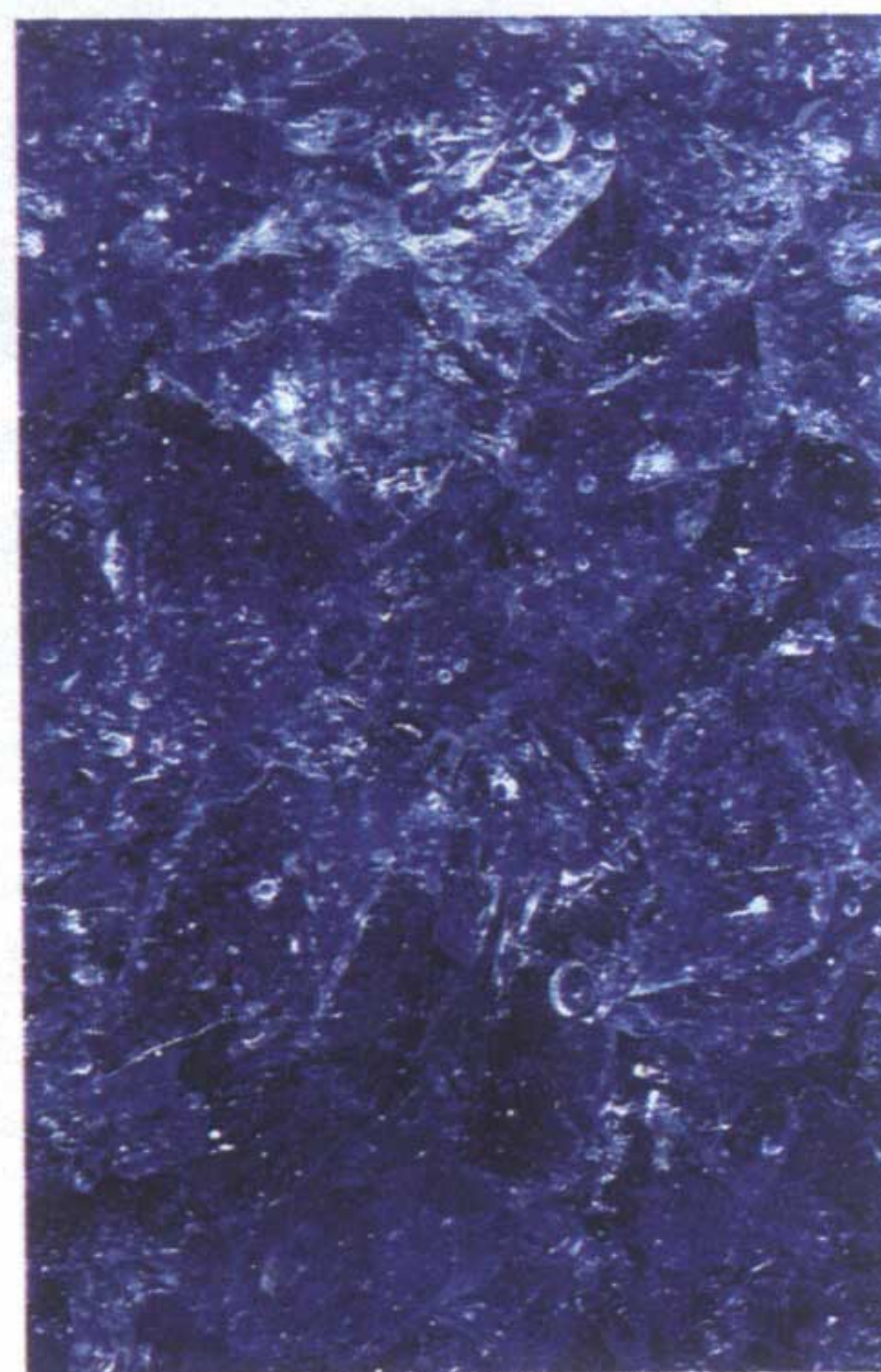
For a man within days of launching possibly the most high-profile commission of his career – a major new garden at the heart of the Victoria and Albert Museum – Kim Wilkie seems remarkably composed. When I meet him, he is watering pots on the balcony above his 20m by 6.5m back garden near Richmond Park in London.

“This was a concrete wasteland only two years ago,” he says, gesturing to the ribbon of green below. “Just a place for parking the cars, and for the bins. It didn’t even have walls.” Now, it is a serene space with a ripple of turf, a sunny lunchtime seating area for Wilkie and his colleagues, and trees, flowering shrubs and bulbs – and there is still somewhere to park the car. The long and curving bench is reminiscent of a surfboard – or the propeller-like seeds of the big old sycamore beside it. It was commissioned from sculptor Ben Barrell in cornflower-blue glass to match the agapanthus and ceanothus (*C. azureus* ‘Concha’) that surround it. The same material is used for the parking area, lit at night by 80 tiny, winking, fibre-optic lights buried within the blue glass, giving it a deep-sea phosphorescent glow. He laughs. “It’s sort of trashy, like disco lights – but I love it!”

Contrasting with the glass are the warm, cinnamon-coloured trunks of *Arbutus x andrachnoides* and the rust-red metal of the screen that separates the parking area from the garden. This is made of reinforcing rebar for concrete – slim, light and cheap to buy.

But it’s the grass that really draws your eye. Wilkie has always been fascinated by earthworks: in 2003, at the country house hotel at Great Fosters in Surrey, he unveiled a spectacular, kilometre-long earthwork incorporating a vast, stepped, grass amphitheatre. Here in his own garden he has sculpted the earth into a series of ridges, rippling towards the house. The effect is heightened by differential planting – on the steep scarp slopes he has used the soft, plummy Yorkshire Fog grass (*Holcus lanatus*) which is allowed to flower, while on the gentle dip slopes he has used finer grasses which are kept short – and by concealed lighting, which makes patterns of light and shade, movement and stillness, culminating at the house in a cascade of green rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis* ‘Prostratus’). Linking the various spaces, and providing a walkway over the ripples of the lawn, is a boardwalk made from untreated and weathered grey sustainably grown hardwood, which also serves to conceal the lighting. Wilkie loves lighting in landscapes, but says it is often too harsh. For the launch of the earthwork at Great Fosters, he lit the amphitheatre with thousands of tiny wax night-lights.

Across the back of the house, an ochre-coloured, two-storey extension provides additional workspace for Wilkie and his colleagues. On top is a roof terrace, where the pale-green glass of the table doubles as the skylight above Wilkie’s desk on the floor below.



He breakfasts on the balcony most mornings, even in winter. Leaning over the rail and looking down into the garden is like being on a ship’s fo’c’s’le, he says. “In a way, the whole garden was inspired by the sea – the waves rolling in from the phosphorescent depths at the top, the Yorkshire Fog giving the effect of spray, and the boardwalk reaching out into it. It reminds me of California.” Wilkie studied at Berkeley, and still teaches landscape design there. “California is my second home. Making this tiny urban garden here means I can grow Californian plants like arbutus and ceanothus, which would look out of place in the countryside.”

On the balcony, deep planters of greenish oxidised copper contain vegetables – currently scarlet climbing runner beans, broad beans, leeks (“for their flowers”) and purple sprouting broccoli. The planters were commissioned from Simon Thomas and have a swirling linear design like the pattern of medieval ridge and furrow in the landscape, or the thumbprint of Wilkie’s company logo. “I can grow enough vegetables and salads up here – like rocket, chard and spinach – to make a meal a week,” he says.

The John Madejski Garden at the V&A is Wilkie’s most glamorous commission so far: by day, it is a silent, sunny courtyard full of lemon trees and dappled shade; by night, it becomes a vibrant social space with dramatic lighting effects by Patrick Woodroffe, lighting designer for the Rolling Stones.

After the launch, Wilkie and his colleagues plan to take time out to reconsider their aims. There has always been a strong sense of community and urban regeneration in Wilkie’s work. Past and present projects range from advising on the landscape restoration at a 15th-century Siberian monastery formerly used by Stalin as a prison, to restoring the promenade and opening up the views from the once-grand Terrace on Richmond Hill, which sparked the whole English landscape movement. “I want only to take on projects where we can really make a difference,” he says. It will be interesting to see in what direction his philosophy takes him now. ■

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**‘THE GARDEN WAS
INSPIRED BY THE SEA –
THE WAVES, THE SPRAY,
THE BOARDWALK’**



From left: the balcony table doubles as a skylight; resin-bound glass was used for both the garden bench and the parking area; the garden from the balcony, with the custom-made bench, left, and "waves" of grass stretching to the parking area; *Holcus lanatus* grass with the boardwalk and concealed lighting

DESIGN NOTEBOOK

- A car parking area needn't be grim. It can be a design feature in its own right.
- Grass doesn't have to be flat. With just a few millimetres variation in height, you can turn a lawn from a negative space into something sculptural.
- Make something really beautiful of your roof terrace, balcony or patio, with a good table: this is where you'll spend most of your time.
- With a small garden, aim for impact with the planting: use masses of one or two sorts of plant rather than extending the season with lots of different ones.

SITE VISITS

These gardens designed by Kim Wilkie are open to the public:

Great Fosters, Stroude Road, Egham, Surrey (01784 433822). Visitors are welcome all year, groups by prior arrangement.

The John Madejski Garden, Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 (020-7942 2000). Opening hours 10am to 5.45pm daily; 10am to 10pm Wednesday and the last Friday of the month (selected galleries remain open after 6pm). Admission to the museum and garden is free.