



Kim Wilkie. Photo:
Andrea Jones

If the V&A garden seems to sit a bit oddly in the centre of the museum, it is because it was never meant to be there. Or at least that was not the intention of Francis Fowke, who designed the ornate Italianate building that surrounds it. Until 1909, when Aston Webb created a new frontage on to the Cromwell Road, the courtyard was in fact a forecourt, the impressive entrance to a U-shaped building. An arcade ran across the middle, most of which disappeared when Webb connected the two arms to make the reception area and medieval galleries still in existence today.

Since then, the garden has had a chequered history: dug up and turned into a vegetable patch in the Second World War, then filled with cherry blossom trees and a large statue of Buddha, and given its makeover as the current Pirelli Garden in 1987. Yet it has never quite worked in the flexible and modern way the V&A now intends.

Last year, a competition was announced for some of the world's leading landscape architects to produce designs for this potentially pivotal space. This in itself is somewhat unusual. Too many museums ignore the possibilities that gardens can add to the visitor's experience. There are some notable exceptions: the Museu Serralves in Porto, with its contemporary Alvaro Siza-designed museum and garden adjoining a rare 1930s Jacques Greber garden, or the subtle landscaping of the Chillida-Leku Museum near San Sebastian, exploring the relationship between Chillida's sculptures and the textures and forms of the natural world. But these are rarities. The Museum of London almost lost the secret herb

garden at its centre during recent major renovation. Other British museums languish with unloved municipal designs, frumpy, out of date and unrelated to the institution's architecture or artefacts.

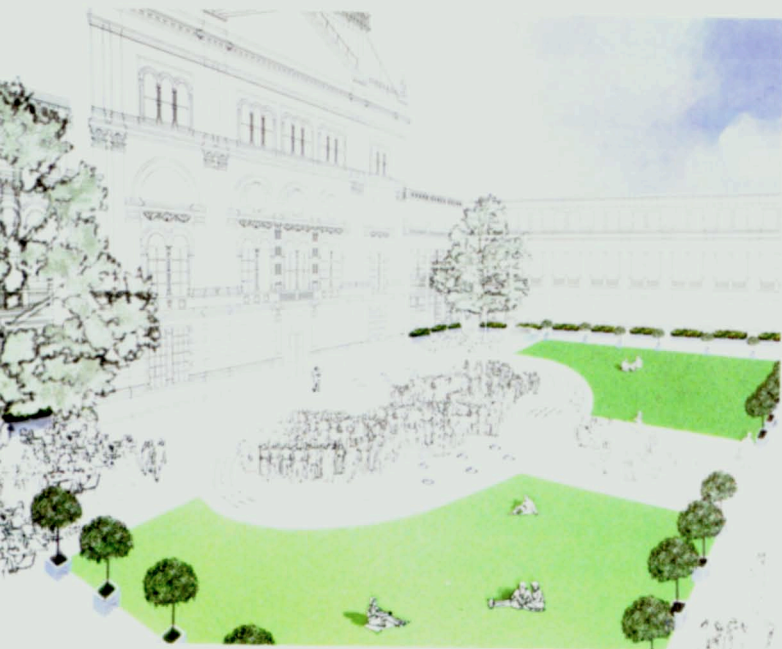
Kim Wilkie's designs avoid all these elephant traps. He has worked on historic gardens such as Heveningham Hall in Suffolk and Villa La Pietra in Florence, on urban design from Hyde Park Corner to the Moscow Botanic Garden, and on one-off pieces of landscape art, such as a sunken grass spiral at Great Fosters, Surrey.

"I don't come to projects with a strong preconception of what they should be like," he says, but acknowledges that he likes a particular aesthetic. "My favourite museum garden is MoMA's in New York because it has a sculptural quality that seems highly relevant to museums. It has a simple elegance. The secret is to take into account both the history of the site and its contemporary usage: "There is no space in Europe that is not an historic space. The point isn't to see the history of a site as a separate entity, but to consider the way the character of the space has built up over the centuries, and how it might be used in the future."

The brief for the V&A garden was challenging because it called on the selected designers to accomplish several tasks at once. It asked for the area to incorporate cafés and spaces for events, performances and educational activities, as well as being suitable for the display of sculpture and other artefacts. It is also central to the museum's physical reorientation as part of the FuturePlan: blinds in the surrounding galleries will be lifted to help visitors to navigate the

A calm and
fragrant place...
most of the time

Kim Wilkie interviewed
by Jane Morris



Above: Kim Wilkie's design proposal for the V&A garden. Illustration: Chris Connor. Above right: how the garden will look at night. Model: Jackie Hands. Images courtesy Kim Wilkie Associates

V&A's labyrinthine spaces. And there are proposals to open the doors along the gallery on the south side of the square to create a transitional space between the interior exhibition area and the garden.

Wilkie's solution is sculptural, simple and flexible. A sunken stone ellipse with steps down forms the centre of the courtyard, providing seating and standing areas, flanked by two lush green lawns. The "clue" for the ellipse came from the shape of Pringle Richards Sharratt's new steps for the Cromwell Road entrance, a design that Wilkie says has created "one of the most successful new spaces in London". He has also nodded to Eva Jiricna's curved, lit reception desk – the edges of the ellipse can be lit up, as can the planters that surround the lawns. These touches are subtle, like the tiny jets of water on the edges of the steps. But thanks to the involvement of Patrick Woodroffe, the Rolling Stones' lighting designer, the whole scheme can be cranked up, with rock lighting and high gushing jets if the occasion demands. An aurora borealis effect can be created with "fog" and beams projected over the ellipse.

But on ordinary days, the garden will be a calm, fragrant place, somewhere to socialise with a coffee under the dappled shade of the liquid amber trees, or to relax after the feast of the galleries. In summer, lemon trees and lilies will scent the air, reminiscent of



an Italian courtyard, and the ellipse can be flooded to create a tranquil pool, with the tiny jets murmuring gently in the background.

"Water was part of the brief," Wilkie says. "It gives the garden a freshness, and an Italianate feel. But the critical thing with water is to have a 'dimmer switch' – the sound of water goes a long way in a courtyard: the higher the octave, the more it sounds like traffic; lower it, and it is more peaceful, more like water in an Islamic garden."

Wilkie's design is deliberately conscious of the surrounding architecture. Unlike some of the other entrants, he was careful not to compete with its demanding style. But within these constraints, his own architectural vocabulary is evident. Much of Wilkie's aesthetic refers to his love of the English countryside, perhaps most obviously in the grassy steps and spirals he designed for Heveningham Hall. "There is a soft and gentle sensuality in the English landscape," he says. "Grass grows very well here, and the light is low and brings out subtle changes in the topography in a way that doesn't happen at the Equator. It is quite fascinating how dramatic you can be with these gentle, sinuous land forms."

It is a beguiling thought – a little of the countryside in the heart of one of London's great, bustling museums; a space that integrates with the treasures that surround it, but also provides a place for contemplation. If, as Wilkie hopes, the garden opens next summer, the V&A will finally have a courtyard that befits the richness of the museum.

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