

Glamour in the garden

Bizarre proposals for the V&A courtyard have been rejected in favour of a versatile, light-filled design, seen here for the first time. **Giles Worsley** reports

The garden of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London is set to be transformed, thanks to an anonymous £2 million donation that will pay for a dramatic remodelling – revealed here for the first time – by one of Britain's leading garden designers, Kim Wilkie.

The garden will revolve around a swirling sunken central space, which, by day, will be an ornamental pond, but, at night, will turn into a dramatically lit stone piazza fit for parties.

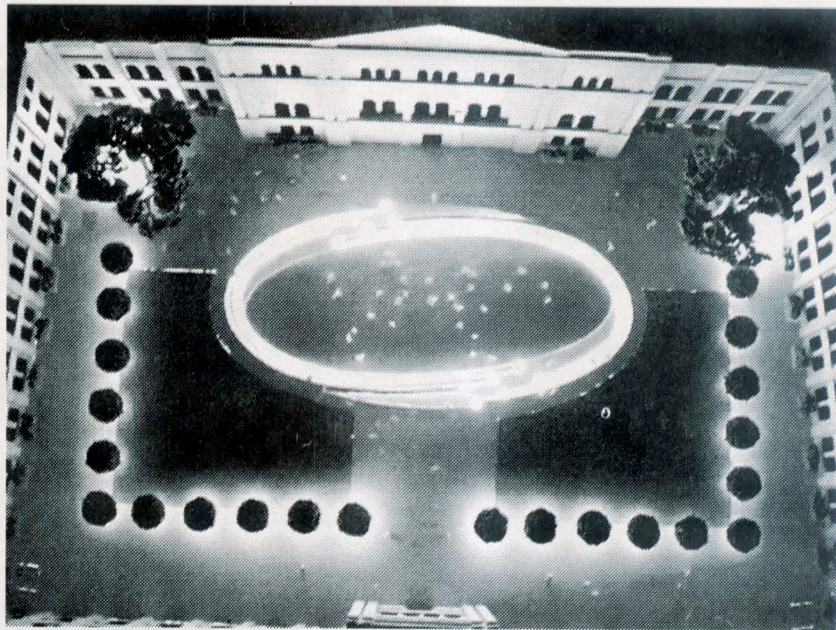
The V&A announced its intention to remodel its garden last year. Set in the central courtyard of the museum, at the moment the garden is dominated by tall conifers, which give it a somewhat mournful air. It fails to integrate with the surrounding galleries and does not work for the large gatherings and parties the museum needs to hold. So some of the world's leading garden designers were asked to come up with ideas to improve the space.

Some of the proposals were outlandish. The trendy Dutch firm of West 8 created a grid of 12 cypresses planted in what seemed like enormously elongated egg cups.

Martha Schwartz wanted to put planters filled with flowers on tracks so that they could be moved around like railway carriages in a siding as the space was reconfigured for different events.

There was a danger that the museum authorities would choose one of these provocative schemes in the hope of generating the sort of controversy – and hence publicity – that Daniel Libeskind's abortive plans for his radical Spiral caused in the 1990s. In the end, sense prevailed and the decision was taken to award the contract to the English landscape designer Kim Wilkie.

Wilkie's scheme gives the museum what it wants: an adaptable space that, by day, is a restful place for those



Bright ideas: designer Kim Wilkie's vision for the V&A courtyard garden

taking a break from gallery-bashing, but, in the evening, could host glamorous parties and events. It allows the rich architecture of the surrounding galleries to remain dominant. But it brings a very contemporary feel to what is a key element in the museum's strategy for the future.

In essence, Wilkie's design seems very simple: a pond, grass, paths and some fruit trees. But this apparently traditional palette has been cleverly rethought using modern technology and lighting.

The water in the oval central pond can be drained away in a matter of minutes, leaving a large open space suitable for parties. This is set in a swirl of steps whose risers are made of glass that can light up at night. Fountains give the space an extra glamour.

Two tall liquid amber trees in the

north corners of the garden will provide movement and dappled shade over the outdoor café and restaurant.

The edges of the rest of the garden will be lined with ornamental lemon trees in the summer and clipped hollies in winter. These will be placed in cubes of frosted glass lit from behind. The use of fibre-optics coming up through the glass will further ensure that light energises the space.

"If you try to be too tricky and too self-conscious with the design, it's always going to feel uncomfortable," explains Wilkie. "With simple shapes and grass, the special effects can turn it into a stage set in the evening. The key is getting the lines and the flow of the spaces right."

Work on the new garden is due to start this autumn with completion expected next summer.