

LET'S HEAR IT FROM... ANDY STURGEON

Garden Designer **Andy Sturgeon** has a plethora of awards for his contemporary and innovative styles, has enjoyed extensive media work including presenting on TV and writing for various newspapers and has also published three books. It's no wonder the thing he would most like to learn about now is how to make more time for everything...

Andy, explain to us how you got into garden design?

I was born and grew up in Surrey near Claremont Gardens, as a child I used to go there a lot before the restoration programme started in the mid-1970s. In later years I realised the gardens had been a big inspiration to me. When I left school, as with many people, I didn't know what to do, I originally wanted to go into the army as I loved being outside, so when I decided that wasn't going to happen, I discovered through working for my brother's landscaping business that this industry ticked all the boxes – I was able to work outside in a physical job, plus it was creative – it felt great to stand back after it was finished and look at what had been achieved.

We were building gardens from other people's designs and although I had no plan during those early years I just discovered it was what I wanted to be able to do, so I looked around for design courses. With hindsight I

wish I'd gone to Kew Gardens, but I had very little knowledge about how to approach it at that time. I looked at the local authority courses but none fitted the focus I wanted – Landscape Architecture generally focused on the less exciting side of design such as car parks and motorway embankments. I made the decision to study interior landscaping at the Welsh College of Horticulture in Mold, North Wales, mostly because of the design element – and a fair bit of what I learnt there I have since put into practice. In the middle year I went to Wisley Gardens, and other than a couple of tiny projects I haven't done any interior landscaping since, but I did learn a lot about tropical plants which has enabled me to work abroad which I am very interested in.

When I left college I worked for David Stevens for a year and really cut my teeth there. When I decided to leave and work, freelance design wasn't really an industry in the way that it is now. Of course this all changed in the mid-'90s mainly with the media explosion that included *Ground Force* and an abundance of magazines coming on to the market. This was when it all changed.

You started your own garden maintenance business?

Yes and to this day I maintain that Surrey is the best place in the world to be a landscape gardener, because of the concentration of wealth in the area. I started the business and did design in the evening. This was really at the beginning of the last recession and I honestly didn't realise there was a recession, the business just grew and grew, I employed lots of staff – and all this happened with no advertising or going out trying to gain business. The work purely came from recommendations by the clients I was working for. Essentially, all this was to fund my design practice which was an area that hadn't yet really taken off in the UK. I did this for five years and then needed a change.

In '94 I sold the business and went abroad – on my travels I visited every botanical garden I could – which was all part of the education – also looking at architecture and art which I'm also hugely interested in. I spent a year in Africa, three months were in Madagascar where most of the plants we know as houseplants grow like trees, it's truly amazing. From there I went to South East Asia and worked in Hong Kong as an engineer – this was where I learnt how to bank a crane, which seems bizarre but has since come in quite useful.



started to go up, so this influenced the amount that people could spend on their gardens.

Why aren't there any garden makeover programmes now?

The BBC officially stopped doing makeovers because they took a lot of criticism for it. But they did give birth to an industry and like it or not *Ground Force* was a big part of that. All the contractors disparaged it because you couldn't build a garden on the cheap in a few days but that absolutely wasn't the point; it spawned the idea that you could do something different and break out of the mould.

Unfortunately, Channel 4 had its fingers burnt when it did *The Landscape Man*. The show didn't work despite extensive research being carried out and was pulled after the second series. It suffered because it didn't take the advice to film it over the course of a couple of years. But what everybody wants is the reveal where they're amazed by the results. It's a shame and maybe Channel 4 won't do it again, but I think it will come back to this type of programming because it really can't think of anything different and of course it's cheap TV.

For some reason these types of shows have raised and dipped in popularity, but to be honest I



- 1 Great Ormond Street Hospital Roof Gardens.
- 2 Roofgarden in Hampstead, London.
- 3 Chelsea Flower Show 2005.

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We don't advertise – other than being at Chelsea and having editorial in magazines. I've just taken on an office manager who will actively deal with marketing and those sorts of things.

How do you select the contractors on a job?

We recommend contractors and then mostly oversee the work. We normally put forward two contractors and get an itemised quote. We then do a tender comparison then put that forward to the client – in an ideal world they will have met the contractors as the client/contractor relationship is really important too.

We use medium-sized experienced companies, as the consistency with staff seems to be better and they can be more competitive because they have lower overheads. We choose them for other reasons as well, such as how tidy they keep the site, whether the clients like them, and price of course. Quite often we are doing new builds and refurbishments. I have a constant battle to avoid clients using builders to build their gardens – they really don't have the expertise that landscape contractors have, often make mistakes and it rarely saves money.

The relationship between designer and contractor?

Designers usually choose a contractor for a project as that relationship is so important. Although long since outlawed by the Society of Garden Designers, there is unfortunately still a culture of backhanders where some designers demand a 'commission' from a contractor, which is dishonest and totally wrong. Contractors keep quiet about it as they rely on these people for work but it means that the designer and contractor have a loyalty to each other instead of to the client. My feeling is

that these people should be named and shamed. It keeps design fees unrealistically low because these people are 'topping up' with the commission and it makes it impossible for professional designers to compete on price.

Would you be interested in working with local councils on their green space areas?

I have spoken to someone in our area who works in the parks – we had a conversation about doing something in the future so I hope this will happen.

Of all your gardens, which one is more special than any other?

That's difficult because there is more than one. Two Chelsea gardens, 2005 and 2010, but they're in an unreal situation; The Great Ormond Street Hospital Roof Gardens which was one I did three years ago, and a tiny roof garden in Hampstead which was a particularly painful process and very complicated, but I was very pleased with the result.

Which other designers do you admire?

To be honest I've never really focused on other designers – I really like Fernando Caruncho's work purely because his style is so totally different.

What trends are you seeing?

There's been a huge change in lighting with the introduction of good quality LEDs, it's hard to specify and is a minefield so we've put an enormous amount of research into it. I can't remember the last time we did a garden without lighting. Of course there are always new plants and materials coming along.

How much input do the clients have?

Without them even discussing what they want

don't think the industry needs it now. With TV you really need instant results and gardens often take years to become established and look their best.

So where's the business at now?

We focus on complicated private gardens and commercial projects. The ratio is currently 80% private and 20% commercial projects.

We have four full-time designers and landscape architects. Some people see garden design and landscape architecture as two different principles: landscape architecture looks at the bigger picture, whereas garden design is more about concentrating on the detail. There is an overlap and the way I see it, our practice sits in the middle both in terms of our vision, and also the level of complexity and detail that we can handle. Of course, commercial work can bring larger, longer term projects so you only have to take on a couple of these to tip the ratio balance.

How do you get your international work?

The internet has obviously been a big help and the Chelsea Flower Show is great because we get recognised internationally and it seems some other countries are more impressed with awards than we are here. So essentially we get the foreign work through winning awards.

in their design there's a lot to go on – I look at how they live and their practical needs, what their house is like, the site, the budget etc, then form a picture without having to go into too much detail with them. There's this saying 'give them what they didn't know they needed'.

Over the years things have changed but a lot of my ideas come from experience and clients tend to let me initiate a design. There's a fair bit of psychology in design – I listen and look as much as I can when I'm with them and then can turn the whole thing into a brief.

Are you the client face of your business?

Initially yes, then one of our designers will work on the project, but I'm always involved. Most work is in the practice – usually once the work is underway we don't go out on many site visits unless we are actually overseeing the project. Apart from email, skype and telephone calls we tend to let the contractor get on with it, which goes back to why I need to use contractors I can trust.

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Is there a lower value level you work at?

We can't really justify what we do unless the garden costs between £40-£50,000. There are lots of drawings produced and huge amounts of work put in with research and sourcing supplies.

If you were in a room with 15 young designers what tips would you give them?

I don't really know, but some of the most successful people who've come into this business as a career have been good at marketing. So that's a start.

Do you ever look at other contractors and think you'd like them to work on your projects?

Yes definitely, I have never worked with Mark Gregory so I'd love to do that. But it all depends where they are based and the size of project – you have to fit the work to the project. They need to be a decent-sized company to be able to provide the back-up the clients require.



Chelsea Flower Show 2005.

How did you get to be one of the Times Top 10 Designers?

It's a small world and Chelsea obviously plays a part in being known. Editorial in magazines helps, also getting good clients who we often create more than one garden for, and finally, being recommended. The internet plays a big part in being 'known'.

Your next TV/Media?

There is nothing in the pipeline right now, but I'd like to get into it – it would have to be interesting though and either design- or plant-based. I write for a number of papers on an occasional basis but it's all a juggling act with the business.

You have also had three books published. Are there plans for any more?

They're not great money-makers but I would like to do one on big gardens to follow on from the one I had published on small gardens.

Do you get involved with any of the industry Associations?

I'm a member of BALI and The Landscape Institute and have just been made a Fellow of the SGD but I don't have time to get involved in any of them as much as I'd like to.

Any further plans to work overseas?

I've worked on projects in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Bahrain and Europe. I like travel and working in different climates – its good fun but difficult sometimes with the differences in time zones. I've not worked in the Caribbean but would love to – I know the plants that grow there and you can make a great garden really quickly as everything grows so fast in the climate.

What projects do you have coming up?

We've got a big project in Russia – which is difficult as the climate influences the design massively. We have also got a project in Kiev which is all lakes and hills. We've pitched for a couple of healthcare projects in the UK which would be quite nice. One is private and the other an NHS project. On the NHS project the landscape is really important and valued which is integral to the whole thing – so this would be an opportunity to have the landscape valued where it absolutely should be.

Your plans for Chelsea next year?

We are doing the garden for (show sponsor) M&G, which is a traditional, 100-year-old investment bank. It's all been designed and we're currently talking to fabricators. The contractor will be Creative Landscapes which we have worked with at Chelsea in the past. The garden theme will be based on the Arts and Crafts style which is 150 years' old, and although I do contemporary gardens they are frequently based on Arts and Crafts ideas. We work a lot with craftsmen and will use the types of materials used in that era, for example, oak and copper. I came up with the idea for 'The New English Garden', which is essentially modern yet based on the fundamental aspects of Arts and Crafts.

Will you be on site all the time?

No. I will have done everything I need to by then and will let the contractors get on with it. They follow our plans and if they need me I will go but usually I just turn up for the positioning of the trees and the planting. I will have seen all the different components beforehand such as sculpture and stone, so will know exactly how it will look.

Thanks for taking the time to talk to us Andy, it has given us a great insight into the business of being within a successful design practice. We look forward to seeing more of your projects and wish you all the best for the coming year.

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