

## Andy Sturgeon

*"Timeless landscape" creator*



Photo by Neven Hocking

"We used to break in at weekends," says Andy Sturgeon, with whom I'm sharing a desk at his central Brighton studio. I'm asking Andy to recount the formative outdoor experiences of his youth at Claremont Gardens in Surrey – a world away from his office, mid-refurbishment, in which his sizeable team is packed in like cobbles.

"It was owned by the National Trust but it was all massively overgrown, so that was like our adventure playground really... It's a landscaped garden in the traditional sense, so it's quite big – lake, huge amphitheatre, huge rhododendrons."

It's a handy device, but it seems probable that the impressive scale of Claremont has informed much of Andy's work. "Making a garden can often be about the atmosphere," he says. "On more of a close up level, the work that I do is quite architectural... I've rarely ever done a minimal garden,

they're quite plant rich." He takes inspiration from everywhere – from travel, art, sculpture, film sets, furniture and even shop-window dressing. "What we try to do," says Andy, "is to create timeless landscapes."

Andy's team are now busy working on schemes for some of the grandest outdoor spaces. On the drawing board – the National Trust's Benningbrough Hall, a Carribean Resort and the redevelopment of Earls Court. Andy is fresh from receiving his seventh Gold Medal at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show, where his garden for *The Telegraph* also won Best in Show. The garden, inspired by geological events, is characterised by giant bronze fins representing a mountain range, surrounded by plants that thrive in Mediterranean-type climates around the globe.

"It's relatively formulaic to go and win a gold



medal," says Andy, "but to do something different with a gold medal is a different thing. It would be pointless to go there and do something that's been done before, so the challenge gets harder... it all comes from you. The stress that brings gets more and more intense."

Aside from Claremont, Andy says, until his thirties, he never did garden visits. He had "never been to Hidcote," the most visited UK garden. "I worked at Wisley Gardens, which fed my plants appreciation and knowledge, but I never felt a desperate urge to go... I was in my twenties, my friends weren't interested in gardens!"

I wonder whether this disregard helped Andy become one of few designers, like peers Cleve West and Christopher Bradley-Home, credited with modernising horticulture. It seems, however, that the idea of a modern garden is something of a construct. "Going back to the first medal that we got [at RHS Chelsea], which in hindsight was a fairly brave design, that was all down to naivety, so it can be a good thing," says Andy, laughing. "I always think we're quite constrained by gardens' historical baggage in this country. Things move very slowly in the world of gardens."

It seems 'contemporising' is a less charged, more accurate way to look at it. "Modern, it gets used all the time in a misleading and incorrect way in the gardening media," says Andy. "It's kind of a bug-bear of mine, what is something that is modern, that's new and forward looking?"

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