

DESIGNER PROFILE

TOM STUART-SMITH

PERSONAL HISTORY: TOM STUART-SMITH



Tom Stuart-Smith, the 42 year old landscape designer has been practising as a qualified landscape architect since 1984. Originally he read zoology at Cambridge University (1978–81); then landscape design at

Manchester University (1981–83). He has worked for landscape architect Hal Moggridge and for Michael Brown on a number of projects. Then, after leaving Brown's practice, he developed his own design business which he describes as a "beneficial experience in understanding how to run a business". He then joined landscape architecture practice Elizabeth Banks Associates. Having worked there for eight years, he wanted to downsize in 1998 — "not work for a large company" and "to have more control on project details" — and his current business was created.

The Chelsea Flower Show is
"quote"
absolutely exhausting, but
great fun — plus you are in
complete control of the design



NEW CONCEPTS

To work up his designs, Stuart-Smith uses a three-dimensional computer-based programme [Key Terraforma and 3D StudioViz], rather than making scale models. "It allows me to really understand the design," he explains, "by having a 360° view of the site." The designer used this programme for his 'Jubilee garden' (above) at Windsor Castle, Berkshire — "as changes were made to the site plan and the brief, I could change the dimensions on the 3D virtual model and see immediately how the design would change". The image above shows a virtual view of the garden on the right, with the castle beyond.

ANDREW LAWSON



ANCIENT A

Working in a range of styles and locations has provided landscape designer Tom Stuart-Smith with a broad understanding of designing exterior space. Chris Young met him to find out more

Whether Tom Stuart-Smith would agree or not, his name has become synonymous with technically sound — and beautiful — interpretations of historical gardens. Whether it be the style of landscape designer Andre Le Nôtre reinterpreted at the Royal Horticultural Society Chelsea Flower Show in 2000, or the historical proportions of a stately home, Stuart-Smith has an in-built understanding of proportion and space. Yet such work is not his only forte, as seen in his 'Laurent-Perrier Harpers and Queen garden' at Chelsea in 2001, in which a strong contemporary structure was over-planted with a modern, meadow-like perennial mix.

It was an element of fate, rather than a cradle-born calling, that led the 42 year old into gardens. Having opted to read zoology at Cambridge University in 1978, he realised at the end of the course that studying "the jaw bones of primates was



Left: One of Tom Stuart-Smith's latest schemes is a large rural garden in Oxfordshire. Here the view shows the undulating planting with the natural landscape beyond

ND MODERN

not my ultimate aim." At the same time he was lucky enough to meet two significant landscape designers: Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe and Lanning Roper. Stuart-Smith remembers them fondly, and recalls that Roper "was a completely charming man." With such contacts and an inquisitive mind, he decided to attend a landscape design course at Manchester University. "Overall, the course was intellectually unstimulating," he states, "except for one lecturer Alan Ruff, whose discussions on ecological approaches to design really caught my imagination." Since then, he has not looked back.

DESIGNS IN DETAIL

Having worked for a range of landscape practices, as well as periods on his own, he has found a happy medium — he shares an office in London with landscape historian Todd Longstaffe-Gowan and garden designer Jinny Blom. "We work on some projects together," he states, "but generally I work on my own." This set-up not only gives him the freedom to monitor projects, but has the benefit of close peer interaction. "It would not be good to work purely on my own," he adds. "I have tried and it can be a very lonely experience."

Stuart-Smith has a natural desire for quality and project control, qualities he has gained from his varied experience. After leaving Manchester University in 1983, he worked for landscape architect Hal Moggridge — "a great experience". After three years he left to work on urban design projects in London with Michael Brown, but was unhappy, "as I was working on a lot of Sainsbury supermarket car parks". After a couple of years he left to spend time renovating his home in Hertfordshire, and undertaking private garden design commissions. "[Garden designer] Penelope Hobhouse was a friend of the family," he explains, "and she gave me my first project — a garden surrounding a Lutyens house for a couple in West Sussex." Remembering this project, Stuart-Smith smiles: "It was a hugely helpful experience in learning to deal with rich, impatient clients!" After a while he became dissatisfied with working on his own, and joined the landscape architecture practice of Elizabeth Banks Associates, which specialises in a range of corporate, private,

historical and large-scale projects. "I worked for eight happy years at EBA," he explains. So why therefore, did he leave such a prestigious

company? "Mainly because I was working in a hierarchy," he explains honestly. "I prefer to be 'hands on' rather than take up a semi-managerial role." He also cites the perennial complaint by many landscape architects that their skill is only part of a team — and often "deemed significantly less than that of architects or engineers".

FRESH START

While working for EBA, Stuart-Smith was approached by Chanel fashion house to design a garden for Karl Lagerfeld at RHS Chelsea Flower Show in 1998. "I designed 'Le Bosquet de Chanel' garden, and really enjoyed it," he admits. That same year he left EBA and started his current practice. "I realised then how much I enjoyed designing and overseeing the whole project — from design to completion," he explains. "The show is absolutely exhausting, but great fun — which is why I continue to show at Chelsea," he says. "You also have complete control." In 2000 he created 'A garden in homage to Le Nôtre'; in 2001 'Laurent-Perrier Harpers and Queen garden' (the stunning red sandstone bench, sitting over a blank-lined pond) — and in 2003 he will be designing another. ■

DESIGNER PROFILE

TOM STUART-SMITH

OFFICE HOURS

Tom Stuart-Smith currently shares an office with the landscape and garden historian Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, as well as garden designer Jinny Blom. Even though the three work independently most of the time, they do sometimes share projects and ideas. "It is great to work with other people in the office — to bounce thoughts off each other," Stuart-Smith states. When the workload becomes too much, he employs freelance assistants — "this allows me to execute the work, but without having to invest too much time or money in employing a full-time designer."

I am not frustrated by the
"quote"
historical tag — I make new
gardens in old settings



HOME FROM HOME

One of the ultimate benefits for Stuart-Smith in his understanding of plants and design, is having the



opportunity to practise at his home in Serge Hill, Hertfordshire (above and left). The garden (just under one hectare) features some of his favourite plants — including echinacea, miscanthus, stachys and verbascums.

CONTACT DETAILS

Tom Stuart-Smith, 43 Clerkenwell Road, London EC1M 5RS.

Tel: +44 (0)20 7253 2100.

Email: <tom@landskip.com>.

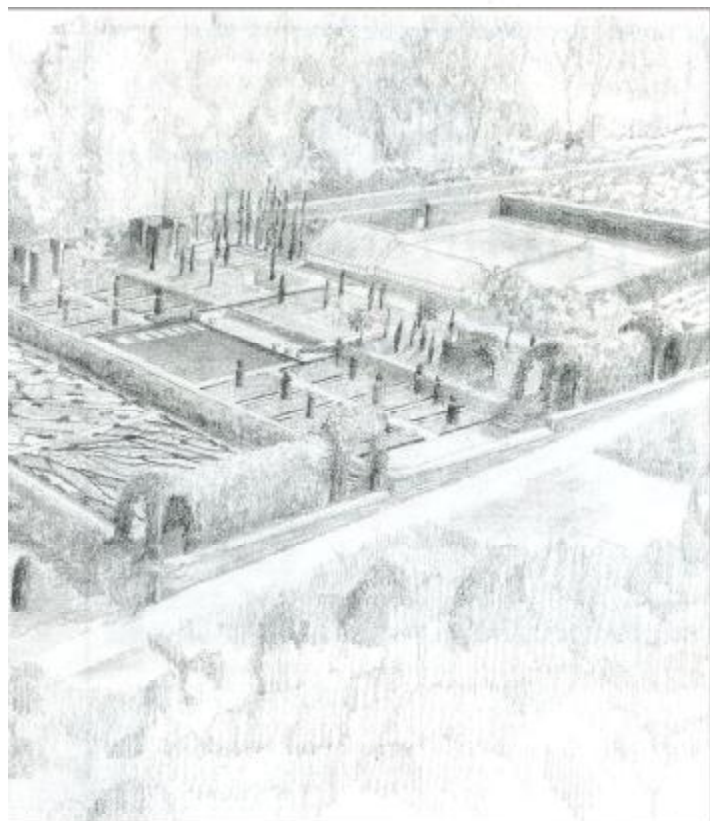


Top: When working at Elizabeth Banks Associates, Tom Stuart-Smith undertook the design of this courtyard for the Wellcome Trust, Hixton Hill, London in 1997.

Above: 'The Laurent-Perrier Harpers and Queen garden', at the Royal Horticultural Society Chelsea Flower Show 2001

In response to the claim that Chelsea is theatre, with little in the way of 'honest planting' (mixing spring flowering bulbs with summer flowering shrubs for example), Stuart-Smith replies: "The show is a stage set, an opportunity to see gardens on their own as installations." He disputes the claim that Chelsea should be more realistic, arguing that "it is an opportunity to give the public ideas without limits". However, he agrees that planting should be more sustainable and would welcome a garden that not only looked good in May, "but would continue to look good later in the year".

Some would assume that exhibiting at Chelsea would lead a designer to receive further commis-



sions, but Stuart-Smith believes that "it raises the profile of the designer, rather than securing work". Much of his work is from recommendations and contacts, yet he always retains an ethical stance: "I do not work on projects that I feel opposed to in principle" he states. Rarely does this happen though, as Stuart-Smith's manner could easily persuade a client into changing their mind — though never to the point where he would impose too many of his own preferences. "When clients change their mind or alter the design," he explains, "I enjoy it. I see no reason why designs should not be adaptable, and as designers we must incorporate that."

He recognises that many of his clients are very wealthy, which allows him to work on magnificent gardens, often in stunning locations (all over Europe) — yet this is not his only work. He has been working for four years on a large-scale project at Trentham Gardens, Stoke on Trent: "The landscape project at Trentham is potentially amazing," he enthuses. "The 350ha site features a Charles Barry garden and a Capability Brown park. The client wants to create retail development on the east side of the site, and some wooden holiday lodges on the southern tip, while rebuilding the house [demolished in 1912] to be used as a hotel." Stuart-Smith was employed to "explore and understand the site, and give guidance as to how the development could be successfully integrated into the landscape." This work obviously stimulates him, yet he has opted not to take the project any further: "If I was to execute my recommendations, I

would need to employ a whole team of landscape designers, which would completely change the balance of my work." It is for that reason that he has made way for Land Use Consultants to take over the running of the project.

UNDEFINED TERRITORY

One of the interesting aspects of Stuart-Smith's work is to see how his design style will evolve. Undoubtedly he has a skill and extensive knowledge in the relatively formal, traditional style of designs, but he is keen not to be stereotyped. "I am not frustrated by the historical tag," he says, "but I make new gardens in old settings. Sometimes they may be historical, other times they may take influences from the past and be recreated in a modern interpretation," he continues.

Speaking with Stuart-Smith in his London office, it can be seen that he is a skilled designer: his somewhat chaotic filing system belies the knowledge that he has accumulated over his working life. He has carved out an enviable niche, working for a predominantly wealthy clientele on a range of sites, but there is more to him than that. He is a designer who likes to work on a range of projects (private to public, grand to intimate), but as long as he can keep his "hands on" approach. Maybe the desire to know details and facts, an evident part of his zoological training, has had a more profound impact than at first imagined.

CHRIS YOUNG IS EDITOR OF GARDEN DESIGN JOURNAL

Above left: Stuart-Smith's sketches help him illustrate design proposals for his clients (in this case a garden in Oxfordshire). However, when working in the studio, he uses a range of computer software to help him understand the site and his design proposals.

Above: The landscape designer's own garden in Hertfordshire has been a useful canvas to experiment with planting structures, species variety and design styles