

WHAT DRIVES YOU FORWARD?

Never stop learning, and look for advice from many sources, says **James Scott FSGD**

It must be wonderful to create beautiful spaces for people to enjoy.' This has been said to me many times and, of course, it is true. Designing gardens is extremely rewarding, not least because each one is unique.

Every new project needs to be based on a robust thought process blended with design inspiration and creativity. To achieve this, it is essential to stay aware of developments in the design world, be open-minded to new ideas, and to continue learning. This means constantly adding to my mental 'bank' of ideas so that I can meet each new client's needs with a bespoke design solution. To help me do that, I have a number of key methods that have served me well over the years.

Learning from other designers

In my early days, among the designers who influenced me most were Christopher Bradley-Hole, David Stevens FSGD and the late John Brookes OBE. I was inspired at the time by their innovative schemes and their work provided me with the building blocks for my nascent knowledge bank. In particular, I was very taken with the controlled geometry of a John Brookes or David Stevens garden and of course, I still have their books on my shelves.

More recently, leading garden designers including Cleve West FSGD, James Basson MSGD, Tom Stuart-Smith OBE FSGD and Dan Pearson OBE FSGD have been big influences. I want to understand the narrative behind their gardens. All of these designers use strong geometrical design, which allows them to overlay with more naturalistic – but poised – planting. I love, for instance, how James' RHS Chelsea gardens broke away from the search for contrived perfection and celebrated the beauty in imperfection. Tom's asymmetrical and complex layered designs are inspiration and benchmarks for my own work, touchstones even.

Over the years, my company has built gardens for designers such as these and those projects have allowed me to see into the workings of the designer's creative thinking and design solutions. To later dissect why they have done something a certain way is not just fascinating, it is an opportunity to learn and to put a new idea, technique, or consideration into practice for myself.

Visiting gardens

We are so lucky in Britain to be able to visit outstanding gardens and flower shows. They are →



James Scott FSGD

a Fellow of the Society of Garden Designers and an Accredited Designer member of BALI, founded The Garden Company in 1991. Based in Hertfordshire, James and his team create places of enduring meaning through expert design and landscaping. Their award-winning work is rich in detail and drawn from years of expertise and experience. They build to their own designs and also collaborate with other professional designers seeking to build projects in the south-east of England and north London. The Garden Company's ethos is to create bespoke, handcrafted spaces that people love. thegardenco.co.uk

MAIN IMAGE: In nurturing his own garden, James has learned the value of experimenting with plants and planting schemes, and design solutions.

a constant source of design ideas. During my early career, I was greatly influenced by the gardens at Hidcote Manor, and the atmosphere generated by the series of outdoor ‘rooms’ there.

Each year, I make a close study of as many as possible of the show gardens at RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Importantly, this includes examining the finishing details as well as considering the overall concepts. I like to do the same when, through the National Gardens Scheme, I have the opportunity to visit the gardens of fellow designers that are not normally open to the public.

Learning from my own garden

Since becoming a homeowner, I have designed several gardens for myself. Nurturing them has taught me a huge amount and, especially, the value of experimenting with plants and planting schemes. I have also learned that you never finish making a garden – I know I shall always be tweaking and making small interventions.

Looking beyond garden design

Of course, being inspired and learning from what I have seen can apply to many things beyond the design world. I often learn from nature, where rhythm, repetition and randomness exist in abundance. The atmosphere created by bluebells in woodland, waves and sand patterns on a beach, natural colonies of plants, or even the layout of agricultural land – all of these and more can give me ideas.

Recently, I have been researching the concept of biophilic design and realise that I have been trying to create a connection between people and their innate love of nature throughout my design career. I am now more formally considering how I design using these principles as laid out in, for example, Terrapin Bright Green’s paper, *14 Patterns of Biophilic Design*, which provides a good overview of the concept, along with practical ways to implement it. The writers describe 14 different patterns that exist between the built environment, nature, and human beings, including ‘Complexity & Order’, ‘Presence of Water’, and ‘Mystery’.

Another useful source of ideas can be found in a paper by Sahar Hady and Mohamed Abdel Hady, published in the *Journal of Engineering and Applied Science*, in which a number of case studies are presented which incorporate biophilic design patterns.

Reflecting on my early years

As a child, I was quite unaware that I was



LEFT: the connection between the built environment, nature and human buildings is key to James’ design work.
ABOVE: *Southern Gardens*, 1913, by Paul Klee.
BELOW: the M&G Garden by James Basson MSGD, for RHS Chelsea Flower Show 2017.



Photographs (clockwise from top left), Andreas von Einsiedel/Alamy, Everett Collection Historical/Alamy, Rod Whitworth/SAP Photos.

MY DESIGN RESPONSE IS STRENGTHENED BY THE WORK I PUT INTO CONTINUOUSLY REFINING AND ADDING TO MY BANK OF IDEAS OVER MANY YEARS.

engaging with nature every day. Growing up in the Cotswolds, I walked through lovely woodlands to school and often played (or helped out) in my grandparents’ somewhat overgrown garden and orchard. Now, I am highly aware of how nature affects and benefits us and it guides my efforts to recreate those feelings and emotions whenever I design a garden; I want each one to have a special atmosphere and a tangible ‘sense of place’.

Art, architecture and landscaping

Abstract art provides a valuable demonstration of the relationship between certain proportions, geometries and colours, and I view it whenever I can. On

holiday or visiting new places, too, I make a point of studying the local architecture – the beauty of stonework created hundreds or thousands of years ago often impresses – and I try to pick up details about the local landscaping craftsmanship wherever I can.

Professional associations

Being involved with the Society of Garden Designers (SGD), and also the British Association of Landscape Industries (BALI), helps me to stay up to date on a professional level. I am on BALI’s adjudication panel for new designer members and have recently joined the SGD’s accreditation panel and, for a number of years, I was the SGD Council



Photograph and garden design, James Scott FSGD

member responsible for the SGD Awards. These roles and attending professional trade events such as the SGD and BALI Conferences and shows such as Landscape and FutureScape, have brought me into close contact with the detail of a broad range of design work, peoples and expertise, and helped me develop skills of analysis and assessment that are so essential in design work.

The importance of developing our minds

When new design opportunities come along, I need to act on them with confidence and creativity. I need to come up with a robust solution to the client’s brief that is functional, aesthetically pleasing and which will withstand scrutiny by other professionals, as well as that of the client. The design process is essentially a series of questions posed by the client, the site, and

the surroundings. I believe that my design response is strengthened by the work I put into continuously refining and adding to my bank of ideas over many years.

Many of my clients are very well-informed; they follow garden design trends and I need to stay ahead of that. There is also an element of performance in the early stages of working with clients, while you win their trust. It is vitally important to be able to justify and explain every design decision.

Hare or snail?

Of course, the success of the whole design process depends on how well I have listened to the client at the start. I find this to be the most important and critical element of creating a successful scheme with enduring value. The range of possible design solutions is endless, and it is a highly subjective process; once everything

Whenever James designs a garden, as here at Gaddesden Place, he wants each one to have a special atmosphere and a tangible ‘sense of place’.

has been evaluated, it is unlikely that two outcomes will be similar even if you use the same design building blocks.

Gathering design experience or developing as a professional is a slow-build process. Also, while learning is important, it is usually not urgent and so it risks being neglected. In my opinion, the key to success is to cultivate a mindset of continuous learning within your ‘day job’.

In addition to what I have mentioned here, the practical learning habits that work for me include always making space in my diary for certain industry commitments – the SGD Conferences, accreditation panel meetings, visiting RHS Chelsea, and judging a *Pro Landscaper Awards* scheme, for example – and subscribing to some high-quality design publications, *Garden Design Journal* included, of course!

Creativity is a positive power

I feel very lucky to be in this creative industry, which brings such joy to people. Happy clients, awards and accolades are all valuable motivators. However, what truly keeps me going is the sense of excitement that I feel at the start of every new commission. I feel driven to produce something better than last time, without being overly stylised or controlled. I am a fan of Leonard Cohen’s thoughts on this: ‘Forget your perfect offering, there is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.’

I am a huge believer in the transformative power of garden design. I always feel the weight of responsibility due to the trust (and significant amount of money!) that is invested in me and my team, but it is a privilege to design spaces that become the settings in which people live their lives. This is what always drives me on. ○

USEFUL REFERENCES

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