

THIS PAGE: The house in the valley. This page: er tower designed by architect Craig Hamilterson, reflected in the small ping stoneetres of dark basa lt. The whole family wanted sperterteace for a barbecue anerd dining table, which John placed centre stage



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BORDER LINES

Commissioned by the owners of this London garden to make the most of a small plot, John Davies introduced false walls and then divided up the remaining space to incorporate a fish pool and an outdoor dining area, softened by massed planting

TEXT JODIE JONES | PHOTOGRAPHS RICHARD BLOOM

The concept of the borrowed landscape has been favoured by garden designers for centuries, but when John Davies was called to a small garden on a hill in Greenwich, south-east London, it seemed more as if the landscape was borrowing the garden. The 6 metre by 12 metre plot gently sloped up away from the house, but at its farthest boundary the land rose sharply, leaving Mike and Kathy Bentley with a view dominated by a crumbling brick wall and a steep thicket of brambles.

'Often, I would try and embrace the view beyond the boundary of a small garden, but on this occasion we needed a different approach,' says John. 'We didn't dare tinker with the existing wall, because it was retaining such a mass of earth, so I suggested building a pair of freestanding walls in front of it, that could become sculptural features in their own right.'

Today, the walls are painted a rich burgundy and divided by a central slit which frames a tantalising glimpse of the troublesome bank. Visual trickery has transformed an eyesore into something more like a slice of Narnia. 'And it created a useful bit of hidden space where garden tools, pots and so on can be tucked out of the way,' adds John.

Bold features abound. Mike wanted a fish pond for his cherished collection of goldfish, including shubunkins, so John created a pool that spans the entire width of the plot, crossed by modern stepping stones of dark basalt. The family [so are there children?] wanted an outdoor dining area with a barbecue, which John placed at the end of the garden. Here the furniture has become a decorative feature in its own right and an invitation to move out and explore the space. 'If we had put the table on the terrace closest to the house, there would have been no incentive to walk down to the end of the garden. That sense of a journey is

always important.'

The design divides the space into stages. Stepping over the pond, you come to a carpet of compacted gravel where a pair of armchairs are angled to catch the last rays of the setting sun. From here, one single monumental slab of basalt forms a step up to the dining area with a view back towards the house. This geometric framework is beautifully proportioned and saved from starkness by a billowing mass of planting.

'I like hardscaping that makes a strong statement, but then I soften the edges with lots and lots of plants,' says John. Ferns, hellebores and epimediums thrive in the shadier areas. *Pittosporum tobira* is clipped into loose domes. *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Limelight' fills a sunny gravel bed, and its cousin *Hydrangea petiolaris* (formally *Hydrangea anomala* subsp. *petiolaris*) scrambles happily up a shady wall at one end. There is a beautifully shaped Japanese maple rising out of a sea of *Hakonechloa macra* and dusky red *Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Taurus', and more *hakonechloa* threads throughout the garden. 'I use it to create a sense of flow, leading the eye in diagonals to make the most of every inch of space.'

There are commonplace good 'doers' [er? favourites?] such as *deschampsia*, hardy geranium 'Rozanne' and the pretty, deep purple *Clematis* 'Étoile Violette', but a few rarities as well. These include the waxy yellow-flowered woodland *Kirengeshoma palmata*, which brightens up a shady corner from late summer through to mid autumn. Even the fish pond contains a small waterlily.

In front of the new walls at the end of the garden stands a row of four silver birches, beautifully silhouetted against their deep purple backdrop. After dark, discrete uplighters further increase

