



A linear, structured, outdoor living space overlooks the more free-flowing planting scheme. Below: designer Jinny Blom.

A sense of escape

Camilla Phelps visited a small oasis of a city garden in Hampstead to discover how designer Jinny Blom has melded modern materials with more delicate, free-flowing plantings. Photographs Nicola Browne

CONCRETE CAN BE A HARSH AND UNCOMPROMISING MATERIAL. You might think twice about using it extensively in the enclosed town garden of a genteel Victorian terrace in north London, but this garden challenges you to think about concrete in a different way. The poured concrete walls and steps are bold and solid and, perhaps surprisingly, appear as majestic and beautiful as if they were crafted in natural stone.

Used in conjunction with a froth of soft perennial planting, glass, limestone and wood, the concrete takes on an almost luminous quality; any thoughts of this material being dense, monolithic and unforgiving are banished when you step into this calm, free-flowing family garden. The owners, Emma and Bernard Shapero, wanted an uncompromising, contemporary outdoor space to suit a sociable lifestyle involving three young children and lots of entertaining. "We wanted a garden that was pared down, relating back to the house, but that had some sense of escape too," says Emma. "We enjoy being in the country, but didn't want a replica of a cottage garden and we didn't want a generic modern garden either."

The house was already a departure from the traditional as architects Eldridge Smerin had transformed the

building with a radical, modernist facelift. A four-storey glass extension and terrace to the side of the house doubled the width of the classic, long, thin London garden to 15m, and maximised the south-facing light and views over Hampstead rooftops towards the heath. When Jinny Blom came on board, she shared their creative vision to design a garden that would work seamlessly with the building.

For Jinny, it was the perfect opportunity to create a concrete garden. "The main ambition was to connect the garden to the house," she explains. "I wanted to create a space that was strong and elemental with simple materials. It is the concrete that holds things together structurally and visually, anchoring the design. I also really like the subtle colour – ready-mix concrete has a blue-grey tint and this was really important in terms of the planting, which has a strong magenta and dusky purple theme. It also contrasts really nicely with the pure creamy white of the limestone."

The garden has a beautifully straightforward design, which divides the space with clean, geometric lines, interconnecting slopes and defined textures. A perforated steel ramp leads down from the glazed terrace, over a bed of shade-tolerant ferns and *Brunnera macrophylla*.





Jinny linked the garden to the house with a steel ramp and geometric concrete structures.

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The middle terrace is divided into two areas – one of buff limestone chippings and the other of smoothest white limestone paving. A wide, limestone-topped concrete bench bridges the two surfaces, like a piece of functional sculpture.

For Emma Shapero this focal point is a favourite place for sitting and enjoying the sun and the surrounding planting, which is soft and pretty with a hint of wilderness to it. She was keen to avoid the cliché of using bold architectural exotics in a modern garden. “I didn’t want to pretend we were in the South of France. I wanted to enjoy being in England and for the garden to be a celebration of the relationship between the hard landscaping and the plants. As soon as spring kicks in you have this wonderful tapestry of leaves and flowers.”

Three river birches add height and texture, with their peeling, almond-coloured bark and delicate foliage, and the walls are lightly clothed with *Clematis* ‘Madame Julia Correvon’ and *Wisteria floribunda* ‘Multijuga’, chosen for its outsized flower panicles, while gentle drifts of perennials are repeated through the main planting areas. It’s a glorious mix of a few carefully chosen varieties: delicate *Panicum virgatum* ‘Heavy Metal’, the neat-flowering *Geranium* ‘Patricia’ and *Persicaria amplexicaulis* ‘Rosea’ are punctuated by the heart-shaped leaves of *Cercis canadensis* ‘Forest Pansy’, while *Cirsium rivulare* ‘Atropurpureum’ and drumstick alliums emerge like starbursts.

From the middle level, a cleancut concrete staircase slices through the banks of abundant planting to lead you down to the basement area. Traditionally, this would have been a dingy well and not the most inviting of spaces. Here, however, it has been trans-

formed into a bright, generous space for socialising or playing, surfaced in functional crumb rubber. In fact there is so much light reflected from the glass terrace and walls that the concrete walls seem to soak it all up and appear all the richer for it. It feels quite intimate and inviting too; enclosed by the purple haze that tumbles down from the upper level, the rooftops of Hampstead seem a world away.

But where do the children fit into this landscape? If you thought contemporary, clean design does not equate child-friendly, this garden wrong-foots your preconceptions once again. Emma Shapero says the children – footballs and all – use it all year round. “They can run around and do whatever they like, climb all over the bench and they can even peel the bark on the birches without doing any harm. There’s nothing about which you have to say, ‘Get off!’ or ‘Be careful!’”

Three years after completion, the garden lives up to its low-maintenance brief and the planting continues to evolve. It really comes into its own from spring onwards, with the succession of perennials, but, as Emma says, the garden holds its colour until well into the autumn; and even in the winter the boldness of the concrete and hard landscaping instils a sense of peace. “To me it’s quite warm and friendly,” she says. “And as the garden matures I think it will become richer, wilder and more detailed.” ■

Camilla Phelps is editor of BBC gardening website, bbc.co.uk/gardening

Further information

See page 30 for our Chelsea designers’ profile on Jinny Blom.



The pinks, purples and magentas of the planting are set against the creamy limestone and blue-grey concrete.

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PLANT CHOICES

Here are a selection of plants used that give a feeling of softness and warmth, juxtaposed with the harder lines of concrete and glass. The predominant colours are shades of magenta and purple, along with soft grasses against the greys and creams of concrete and stone. (The garden is not open to the public.)

- Allium sphaerocephalon*
- Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation'
- Baptisia australis*
- Betula nigra*
- Brunnera macrophylla*
- Calamagrostis brachytricha*
- Cercis canadensis* 'Forest Pansy'
- Cirsium rivulare* 'Atropurpureum'
- Clematis* 'Madame Julia Correvon'
- Geranium* 'Patricia'
- Panicum virgatum* 'Heavy Metal'
- Persicaria amplexicaulis* 'Rosea'
- Salvia guaranitica* 'Blue Enigma'
- Salvia verticillata* 'Purple Rain'
- Stipa splendens*
- Wisteria floribunda* 'Macrobotrys'
- Verbena bonariensis*



Waves of plants softly tumble from the concrete enclosures.