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Let's Hear it From PATRICIA FOX

For this month's big interview, we visit **Patricia Fox** who heads up **Aralia**, a Hertfordshire based practice with a team of four designers and a Practice Manager

Patricia welcomes us into the practice and we start by asking her how she became involved in the world of garden design. "It was probably a mid-life crisis. I originally trained as a fashion designer and I also attended art school so there was always a creative side to me. I went into cosmetics and skincare, designing products and managing clients. I set up my own company and had trouble with a massive order we had taken. Our client cancelled the order and then reordered, but in the meantime I had to make someone redundant. It suddenly felt like I had no control over my life and destiny and I decided to take two years out."

"That first summer I bought myself a greenhouse and started to propagate plants. A mum at the school gates recommended that I sign up for a course at Writtle College. So, around 12 years ago I signed up for a module on the Garden Design degree course and became obsessed. I completed two modules in the first year. When my children's school organised an Auction of Promises to raise money, a friend and I offered a garden makeover by begging and borrowing from local nurseries! The lady who won the auction was so pleased she asked us to complete the rest of her garden. It was then I started to think about going into garden design professionally. I booked onto

“ I NEVER HAVE THE WHITE PAPER PROBLEM – MY PROBLEM IS TRYING NOT TO BE A SCATTER GUN! ”

more courses and offered garden design in my spare time; I got really lucky and was helped by joining a networking referral group (BNI). Soon, one of the members had commissioned me to do his garden. Then in 2009 three members of the group sponsored me to do my first Chelsea garden 'Freshly Prepped'. It would have all been so much harder had I not had their support and I would strongly recommend it to those new to the industry trying to find new clients.

"One of my early projects was a 13 acre site called St Clouds which I picked up through a local architect. It involved producing 80 construction drawings. To help I took on a student part time, →





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Tristen Knight, who was finishing his diploma at Writtle. I subsequently took on an administrative person and we have now grown to a team of four designers and a practice manager. We are looking to grow the business and are keen to move into public realm projects now that we have two landscape architects on board.”

We talk about the structure of the business. “We design and build, using regular sub-contractors, but we order most of the materials and plants ourselves as we feel this affords us greater control. Commercial projects, however, tend to be design only, such as the commission for a series of 11 rooftop gardens at Chelsea Creek for St George (part of the Berkeley Homes Group) that we are currently involved with, which is, of course, terribly exciting.”

How does Patricia find working with dedicated contractors? “We develop good long-term relationships with our contractor base, but are looking for more contractors to work with us at the moment because we have so many projects going on. We work nationally and currently have projects in progress around the country. We have many projects on the go at one time in various stages and of different sizes:

strong management is critical.”

Where does the practice get its commissions from? “We don’t generally have problems picking up new work. We had lots of enquiries which led to work after the Chelsea 2012 garden, our website generates lots of interest along with enquiries from the BALI and SGD websites. Word of mouth and client referrals are also key.

“We promote ourselves as creating innovative design solutions for a wide range of projects both commercially and for private residential, from small urban projects to large country estates: each presenting their own inherent challenges. We pride ourselves on adapting to the uniqueness of the space and the ability to overcome site limitations through good design. We are, as a practice, good at spatial design, which is an area that Writtle College excel at teaching. We also embrace large projects where we could be working with anything from half to 60 acres.” We ask about maintenance here and Patricia explains this is something they don’t get involved in but pass on to reliable contractors who are specialists in this area.

We ask where Patricia gets her creativity from. “Everywhere! I go to lots of art shows but often spot something whilst I’m driving and just stop the car to snap it. I get inspiration from my

travels abroad where things are often approached differently. I also gain inspiration from other industries such as fashion, product design and interior design. A designer is like a sponge, continuously absorbing new ideas.”

We ask about sourcing new products and Patricia says “we’re probably in quite an enviable position getting inundated with catalogues and samples. Events such as FutureScape are key, particularly to introduce new materials in hard landscaping. We search constantly on websites and in magazines. We have been working with an artist for a few years on glass art panels for use in gardens. We now have a commission for these glass panels in the Chelsea Creek gardens. I can’t wait to see them installed!

Talk inevitably turns to her pricing and costs. “As far as pricing is concerned, the focus is to be innovative and coming up with great ideas. Our residential gardens start from around £30-40k and can go up to in excess of £200k. Great design doesn’t have to be expensive, and as a practice whilst we prefer using the best quality materials, there are always alternatives if costs need to be contained. We always make sure the client is fully informed about what is worthwhile in terms of the materials we use.”

Is the client always clear about what charge is for design work and what are build costs? “Yes. We recently had an interesting situation with a client – we quoted for a £50k project including the design fees along with two or three other designers and everything went quiet. We later found out they thought our fees were too high and had commissioned another designer, paying £500 for an outline plan which they subsequently thought was absolute rubbish. They then came back and commissioned us to do the plan! We are confident about our charges for design – but I do think colleges don’t teach students enough about this and certainly when I left Writtle I didn’t

“ I LIKE TO WORRY ABOUT THE DETAIL OF THE DESIGN RATHER THAN THE DETAIL OF MAINTENANCE ”

charge for initial consultations. I rarely have clients object to charges related to the design consultation. There could be four or five hours of work going into a fee proposal and preliminary design brief, so the nominal fee we do charge is extremely good value for money. Turning that on its

head, many people will respect and value you more if you do charge a fee for consultations.”

So looking toward the future, what are the plans for the practice? “We’re trying hard to find a sponsor so that we can design a garden for Chelsea 2015. We would have loved to have been there this year but a sponsor wasn’t forthcoming. I want to do something different and we do now have a potential sponsor for 2015 so I’m really hoping it comes to fruition. We’re also keen to move into public spaces and Edward Flaxman, our landscape architect who joined us last August is very experienced in this sector. We have also been appointed by the National Trust to redesign the Frame Yard at Mottisfont Abbey, alongside Tristen Knight, which is very exciting. It will be the first time in over 100 years that the National Trust have commissioned an external design team to overhaul one of their flagship gardens. Design work has commenced and the National Trust are in the throes of fund raising to secure the final for the work. It is envisaged that the gardens will be built autumn 2015/2016. (Further

information can be found on the NT website).

“We’re also keen to work with more high-end property developers as we feel we can offer a fresh and innovative approach coupled with a solid and professional background. Commercial clients are pleasantly surprised by the level of our detailing. We will continue with our highly rewarding domestic projects and some international work too: another benefit of being seen at the Chelsea. 2012/13 saw our business doubling in size so we are also strengthening our systems to enable us to continue raising our industry profile.”

We ask Patricia who she admires within the industry, “Andy Sturgeon has always been someone to follow and try to catch up with! He’s done so much for the industry too which is great. I love Martha Schwartz and Diarmuid Gavin who are rather way out but have pushed the industry forward. Steve Martino inspires me to work on landscapes in different climates and with different planting palettes and I adore Luciano Giubbilei for his spatial design and finishing touches.”

What are Patricia’s views on associations? “Overall, I have a very positive view on associations. Designers such as Helen Elks-Smith and Amanda Patton did great things when they were at the SGD but my strong belief is that there should be a salaried person steering the association to carry things through. I’d like to see proper chartership for garden designers as I don’t think the public knows enough about what we do and it would help to raise standards”.

Finally, we talk about what Patricia likes to do when she’s not working. Her overall passion is

sailing; she and her husband own a boat which they moor in Spain. She sailed the boat from the UK over to Spain last year and enjoys harnessing the elements and appreciating the seascape. “We had one horrifically hairy night when I thought I was going to die in a six metre swell, I was terribly seasick and with only three of us on board I had to continue with my three hour watch, but it’s an amazing feeling when you accomplish something like that. I love my own garden and while it’s an unfinished project it has got my 2009 Chelsea garden installed in it. When I get the chance I can be out there for a 12 hour stint. I also have two wonderful daughters and enjoy running and skiing – I just love the outdoors really...”

- 1 The Chelsea 2012 garden ‘Rooftop Workplace of Tomorrow’ Photograph ©Ben Wetherall.
- 2 Wednesday House, large countryside property in Hertfordshire.
- 3 Bowden Project, town house in Cheshire.
- 4 Maltese Road, town house in Essex. Winner of the SGD Award for best Small Residential Garden in 2012 and a BALI Landscape Design Excellence Award in 2010.
- 5 Another view of Wednesday House, large Countryside property in Hertfordshire.

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