



# Root and Branch

BY PETER SHEARD

Michael Branch's Berkshire garden has not only stood the test of time: even more since receiving a favourable review from Peter Youngman in 1998.



**IT IS** appropriate that in this 300th anniversary year of Lancelot Brown's birth, we reflect on that fundamental and guiding principle of great landscape design, time, to see just how visionary and adept Mr Brown was in realizing its significance.

Uniquely in the design professions, landscape architecture embraces the passage of the years and uses the 'fourth dimension' as an inspiration. We are fortunate indeed from our position in the 21st century to see for ourselves what Lancelot Brown was able to just dream. He took Arcadia and made it into an English landscape, and was largely instrumental in establishing a distinctive, new landscape style which would influence the world. Brown always stated he did not make gardens; rather he made landscapes, and on seeing a site he

would say it had 'great capabilities'. Contrary to popular belief, the moniker referred to the site, not the man. Even now, an appreciation of the *genius loci*, as well as of a site's 'capabilities', is fundamental to all good landscape design; and all good landscape architects.

Fast forward more than 200 years and we encounter the post-War challenges: the growing New Towns; new infrastructure projects; and the reconstruction of shattered city centres. A whole generation of landscape architects rose to the challenge, amongst whom was Peter Youngman, an erudite Yorkshireman who developed a particular compositional approach to designing these new landscapes that was firmly rooted in 18th century principles of landscape design, and enabling new structures to be accommodated into the landscape.

Cumbernauld New Town, Sizewell 'B' and Milton Keynes all benefitted, in the latter case by having its initially rigid grid of roads deflected by the gently rolling landscape. Peter became the head lecturer-in-charge at University College London where he first came into contact with Mike Branch, a young and keen landscape student and the protagonist of this article.

Significantly, Mike started his career running a landscape design-and-build company, getting his hands dirty, mainly implementing private gardens, before setting up Landscape Design Partnership. When this entity joined forces with Highpoint Rendell Group in the 1980s, Mike developed a very reputable portfolio of work across many fields which he continues to supplement to this day. Meanwhile, back in the late 60s he and his wife Pat moved into Lephins, a picture-windowed, timber-clad house, sitting on a bare 1.5 acre plot on a chalk ridge just south of Wantage, and the story of the garden began.

It must have been a daunting challenge: the plot had an open aspect with few trees, exposed to the harsh winds from the east; with a thin chalk and flint soil. However, the views were, and remain, spectacular providing a prospect over the Berkshire Downs. Throughout his career, Mike always understood the relevance of the site: like Brown and Youngman before him, he would search out what the site was telling him before designing anything. In his garden this proved both essential and inspirational.



The garden was the subject of an article in the Landscape Institute's magazine back in 1998 by, of all people, Peter Youngman. He called the design 'an individual combination of flowering and rigid patterns that owe no particular allegiance to past styles or contemporary fashions... where plantsmen's skills and interests are guided with artistry'.

The garden Youngman saw in 1998 has remained largely unchanged from Mike and Pat's original design intent to this day. It is in the 'artistic guidance' that the clue lies to its success and its value. The garden has a deceptively strong framework and it is not quite as random as Youngman stated. Mike himself says that the main elements of the garden were established from the beginning: the challenge has been to allow them to develop and to manage them.

- 1 – Mike Branch admires the view.  
© Tom Lee
- 2 – Mike Branch in the garden that he made.  
© Tom Lee
- 3 – The garden as it looked in the 1990s.  
© Michael Branch
- 4 – Mike Branch has let the landscape guide him in the design of the garden.  
© Tom Lee



The house itself is tucked away in the north-east of the site, enveloped by vegetation which encourages a sense of mystery and discovery. The principal space, when viewed from the house, is the main lawn which stretches down the sloping ground to the south, visually linking the plot to the paddocks and landscape beyond. As a counterpoint to this view, there is another contrasting vista from the house directly eastwards along a semi-formal grass path through the wooded part of the garden. This is not an avenue as such: rather a gap between the trees which loosely define the path, and which evokes the Ridgeway path across the chalk ridge.

Well over half the site is given over to the woodland: a random mixture of ash, cherry, field maple, hawthorn and Austrian pine. In 1998, this area was an 'open area of trees in grassland', but has evolved to be the small copse and shelter belt which was originally envisaged. This growth has also allowed the creation of small and, at times, enchanting clearings, which contain a variety of garden ornaments: a pair of blue benches; a small 'tump' for viewing the landscape; or a secretive, mossy, stone table from Ireland. These are ornamental for the visitor; but memories for Mike and Pat.

The pattern of woodland and clearings has allowed a variety of microclimates to develop which respond to careful management and reflect tiny variations in the site. After years of toil, Mike now knows which areas will grow certain plants better than others: 'Nature will always win in the end, and you have to go with the flow', he says sagely.

The other major organising elements are hedges. Again, these were established early on to provide shelter to the site and define the scale and structure of the garden. There are loose, native hedgerows on the north boundary, spiked every now and again with ash and beech trees; whilst in the centre of the garden are tall hedges of beech and box. These have the effect of creating a sequence of garden rooms, each with their own character and planting palette.



5 – The house looks out onto the main lawn.  
 6 – The trees that Mike Branch planted have evolved into a small copse and shelter belt.  
 7 – A carefully positioned bench in one of the clearings in the woodland.  
 8, 9, 10 – Hedges create a series of 'garden rooms' each with their own individual character.  
 All images © Tom Lee



This has been a huge undertaking on such an exposed site, and has ultimately allowed the establishment of two of the most interesting spaces in the whole garden. Firstly, the 'gravel garden' with its closely cropped dwarf pines, rocks and sentinel stag's horn sumach (*Rhus typhina*), now entirely secluded from the house, and partly sheltered by one of the old beech trees. Secondly, perhaps the most delightful part of Mike and Pat's creation, the 'box garden': its 1.5 metre high box hedges providing refuge for a rich variety of shrubs and herbaceous plants, all closeted behind the green walls.

On my visit, sitting in full sun on a timber bench, with the air buzzing with bees, surrounded by the gentle blues, yellows and greys of the plants, one could close one's eyes and be transported to Eden. The gentle sounds of bleating sheep in the distance only magnified the slightly unreal quality of this space. When I told Mike of this magical experience he answered (with a knowing grin and a twinkle in his eye), 'yes, we feel it's special too.' But that's the reward you get after 50 years of effort I suppose.

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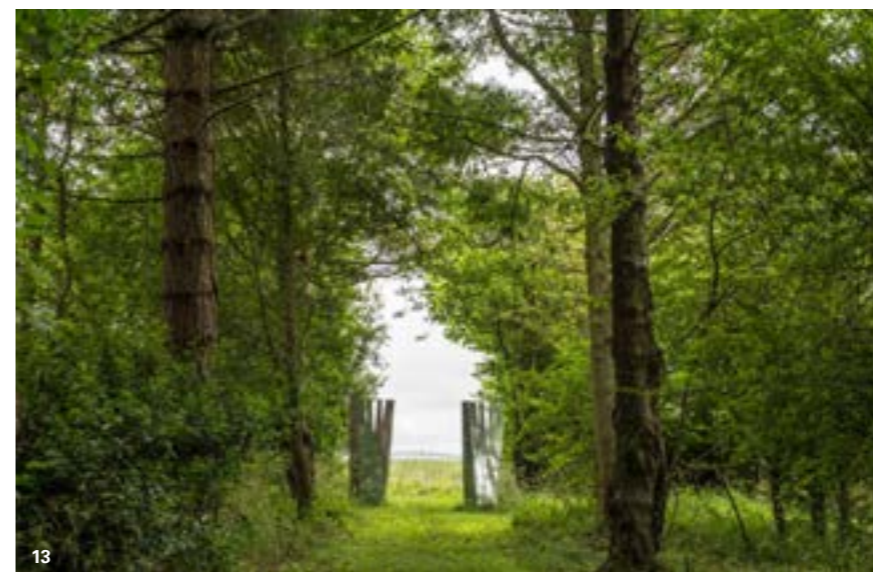
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11 – The fern garden.

12 – A blue timber screen enlivens the suntrap space.

13 – Vistas connect the garden to the surrounding Berkshire countryside.

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Other more incidental, though no less interesting, spaces include the fern garden with its timber steps, moss and frogs (a welcome by-product of a small pond in the southern corner of the lawn); and, to the west, a small suntrap of a space with raised planters with bamboo and *Glyceria*, enlivened by a blue timber screen and several esoteric sculptures. Indeed, the whole garden had a series of eye-catchers, mainly of stainless steel, placed around the site: an elaborate gateway here, a metal and glass sculpture there; but the most impressive was the pair of shiny metal totems at the end of the woodland axis. In Youngman's day this was a confection of shiny tubing, but now the vista is completed by what look rather like a pair of giant hands reaching up to the woodland canopy and the sky, their mirrored surface reflecting the greenery and the light.

Mike's own summary of his garden is that 'it is an asymmetrical layout grounded in the Berkshire Downs'. The lack of a strict balance makes for a more interesting linkage between the main garden elements, 'and the fun is in the subtlety of the linkages'.

The original concept has altered very little, and has only become stronger since Youngman's review nearly 20 years ago. The woodland has become a woodland; the hedges have grown to maturity; and the few existing trees have been cut and shaped according to the changing passage of light and shade.

Management, Mike insists is the key: 'I had an intention, an ambition when I started out... but modifying the design has to be permitted'. There were things he would do differently: for example the preponderance of ash in the woodland makes its management extremely challenging; but the impact of establishing a small wood has been an ambition fulfilled. Additionally, the hedgerows have created shelter and habitats, but the hawthorn they contain also spreads into the clearings. This has only engendered an admirably stoical attitude in Mike: 'a mature garden has to work as a concept, but that concept has to keep changing and developing'. Looking around he smiled and said: 'Nature will make you bend'.

This attitude permeates his approach to landscape architecture in general. A good plan has to have strong initial design moves which can survive the test of time. Mike has witnessed many schemes which were well designed and established but too delicate to withstand the ravages of time and bad management. Some schemes he said were 'too good' to last': his design at Channel 4 HQ in central London (in collaboration with Richard Rogers), being an example where his own management plan was ignored and the resultant overgrown landscape replaced. Meaningful landscape design needed to be robust yet flexible to last the test of time: and it is time as a dynamic process that demands to be understood and embraced.

Back in 1998 Youngman said Mike and Pat's garden showed no particular allegiance to past styles. I disagree: in many ways it's rooted in the sort of 'compositional landscape' so beloved by 'Capability' Brown and the Post-War pioneers in the landscape field. Mike's own practice's work is similarly influenced; and for the better I might add. As for Mike and Pat's garden; it is a testament to a design with a strong concept and effective management over the last 50 years or so. Just as they are a part of the garden, so it has become a part of them: which is how it should be.



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14, 15 – The garden is both timeless and very much of its time.  
16 – Carefully chosen sculptural elements punctuate the garden.  
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Peter Sheard is a freelance landscape architect, garden designer and writer in London.



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