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GARDEN DESIGN JOURNAL

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ECO STEALS THE SHOW





Left: An uninspiring patch of circles and gravel provided a blank canvas
Right: Extending rather than replacing the deck saves money



Going it alone

Designing your first garden for a client after graduating is a major milestone. **Sarah Naybour**, SGD Student of the Year 2009, kept a diary of her inaugural project...

It's just before Easter 2009 and I'm working like mad on my final project for college, as well as preparing for a family holiday. Then Rachel, one of the parents from my daughter's school, mentions that she needs someone to design her garden, and I jump at the chance. I'm looking forward to putting all I've learned into practice.

When I see Rachel's garden, I can see why she feels depressed about it. The previous owner seems to have 'designed' it using a compass – or did he just draw around some plates? Gravel and grass circles – that's all there is. At least it gives me a blank canvas. The only problem is the budget...

Working to budget

On my college course we were given budgets to work with, but these were pretty idealistic, based on what the client *should* be spending, rather than the cash they actually had in the bank. That's fair enough – we were learning to be as creative as possible with budget no

object. But now I find myself having to be creative with very little money.

Working with what's there is key. Rather than ripping the garden up and starting again, I need to alter and re-adjust. Still, I start out in exactly the same way as I did with all my college projects: very free and creative; working with the dimensions of the house; creating a good, solid ground plan for the garden. I'll then adapt this using the existing materials. For example, there's a very narrow deck, which means that dining on the terrace blocks any flow of movement into the garden. Instead of replacing the deck, I widen it.

I straighten all the curves. This is a small garden surrounded by buildings; those circles are what made the original garden look so awful. They just don't fit the angular surroundings. Many people think that curves make a garden look more organic, but I feel it's the plants that do that. They soften the lines and give natural undulations. Curves can complement ➔

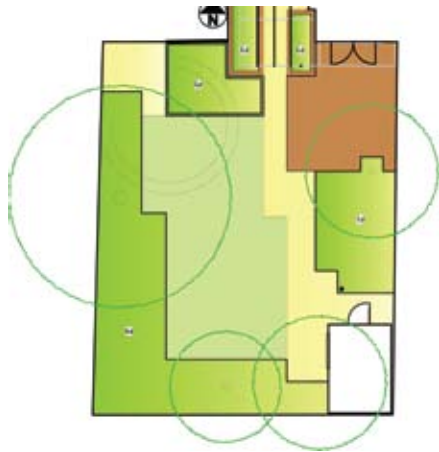


About the author
 Sarah Naybour graduated from Oxford College of Garden Design last year and has now set up her own company, Sarah Naybour Landscape and Garden Design (www.sarahnaybour.co.uk)

The client says...

"Having Sarah design my garden has been a great experience. I was unhappy with the garden in our new house – it was gratuitously modernist, flat, unsympathetic with respect to the house and lacked planting space.

"Sarah listened and understood what I liked, and saw what was needed. The garden is still contemporary but has lines and proportions that unite it with the house, and several distinct levels between the generous planting spaces, created using the existing contours, raised beds and a bold, modern pergola. The planting mixes many of my old favourites with interesting new things, and leaves spaces because Sarah recognises that I will not be able to resist adding more... I am thrilled to bits with the result and can't wait to see the first year's growth come up and mature."



➤ outlying landscapes in large gardens, but they don't work in urban spaces.

Viewing plans

I present the plans to the whole family one evening and it is wonderful to see their reactions. The children are talking about lying on the lawn, the husband thinks about drinking a beer in the shade of the pergola and Rachel just seems delighted to have a garden that will be hers.

Rachel is a very 'planty' client, and gives me a list of plants she wants. She loves cottage gardens, but doesn't live in a cottage. Fortunately, she understands this, along with my reasons for not wanting to use Cotswold stone or brick paving.

Her interior leading to the garden is ultra-modern, white, minimal; a heavy timber pergola would look all wrong. So I opt for slim, white steel, to support climbers, frame the entrance to the garden, and allow light in through the kitchen windows.

The design I come up with is simple. The planting is full and lively – and we're on budget! We're ready to start the build. I'll be there to check the contractors stick to my specifications, but I'll stand back and learn from the experience too.

The initial scene is one of devastation as the old garden is stripped away. Matthew Ellett, the contractor (www.melandscapes.co.uk), is very careful to keep anything that can be re-used. We double-check the pergola dimensions and realise the house walls bulge out 3m above the ground, where it will be fixed – and the steel can't be adjusted on site.

Practice makes perfect

All the theory I've learnt now goes into practice. Amid lots of questions from client and contractor I realise that despite my detailed plans, when working with retained features it's hard to get all measurements accurate; we need to adjust as we go. I'm lucky to have a cooperative and exacting landscaper in Matt, who checks every detail.



It is getting very late in the year to plant, so we decide to prioritise planting with the build still in progress. As I arrive with the plants Rachel's face is like a child's on Christmas morning. For her this is the best part; it's she who will develop, love and nurture it. It's messy work in November, but the plants look happy enough and symbolise what's to come.

The deck has been extended, the beds constructed and planted, steps and paths almost finished, but the pergola is going to be a week late. I know that delays are common, but it's still frustrating.

When it finally arrives, it feels like a big event. Matt has it fixed in place within two days and we plant beds below. It's the icing on the cake – all that remains is to lay the lawn.

Total transformation

The transformation from brown to fresh green lawn is amazing. Everything looks big, bright, new and shiny. I'm amazed at how much the finished garden actually looks like my drawings! On my course, all the projects were hypothetical, so to see my designs turn into fact has given me a confidence boost to go on and make my ideas reality.

Months on, I'm busy designing gardens all around Oxford. My second build is very different, but I'm equally excited, and know now that what's now 2D will soon be 3D. ➤

Above left: Sarah's plan: she removed the curved lines from the small space, letting the plants provide the soft edges

Above: The end result is something the whole family can enjoy, and suits the clean minimalism inside the house

A first project

Details of Sarah's first project, in brief...

Before:

- A 10 x 11m urban space with narrow, raised planting beds
- Lots of gravel
- Large circular lawns
- Sunken trampoline area screened by a laurel hedge

Client requirements

- Lots of planting including a small vegetable area
- Pergola with seating beneath
- Easy to maintain lawn
- Destroy the laurel hedge!

Solution

- Proportions of the house used to create a strong ground plan of planting beds
- Decking extended to allow for comfortable outdoor dining
- White steel pergola reflects the lines of architectural detail and connects the enlarged raised beds to the house
- Edge of the bed forms seating below the pergola
- Sunken area becomes a gentle slope in the lawn and helps form a dual-level vegetable bed