

THE PROGRESSIVE GUIDE TO GARDENS, PLANTS, FLOWERS

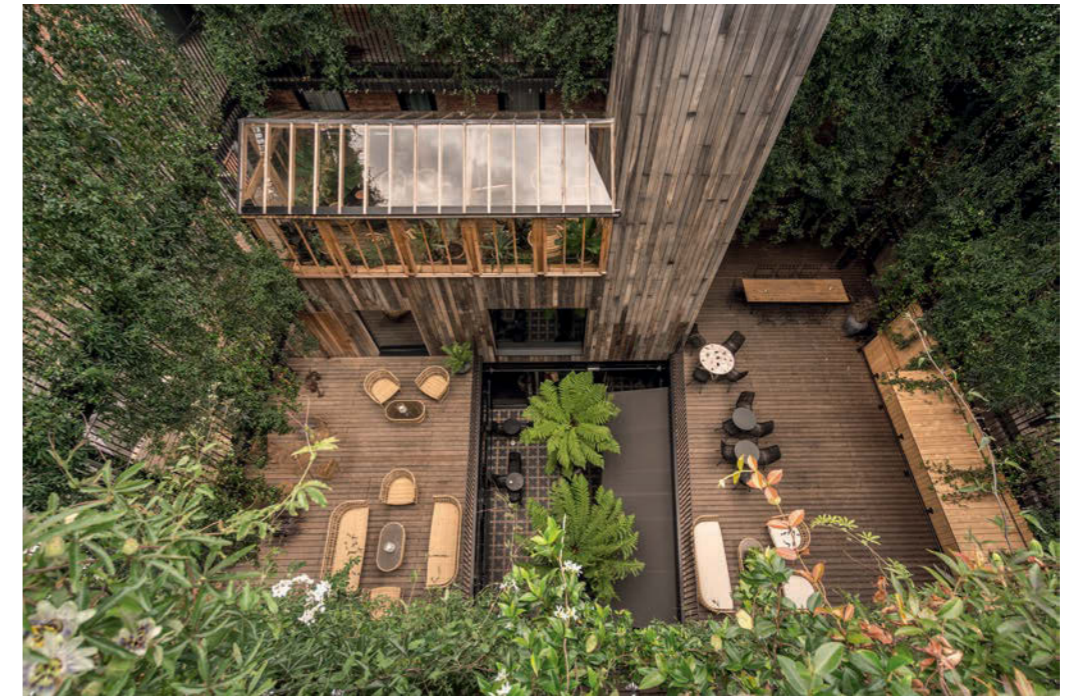
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HANGING GARDENS OF FITZROVIA



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For this hotel courtyard in central London, landscape architect Bas Smets says his brief was to create 'a Garden of Eden on drugs' – where jasmine, passion flowers and vines combine to hallucinatory effect

WHEN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT BAS SMETS was first approached by the owner of London's The Mandrake to design a courtyard garden for his proposed boutique hotel in Fitzrovia, he was instantly intrigued by the Beirut-born entrepreneur's eccentric brief. 'Rami [Fustok] phoned me out of the blue,' Smets recalls, 'and said, "I want you to create a Garden of Eden... on drugs... in central London."'

Four years on, a visit to the hotel's Jurema bar reveals that the brief has indeed been met. The first-floor terrace is located in a deep, open-roofed atrium surrounded by evergreen walls of jasmine and passion flower, arranged around a shack-style bar clad in rough timber. On the second floor, there's also a glasshouse apothecary – used for private dining – filled with exotic medicinal plants, all of which have hallucinatory effects. (These are also used in the cocktails, though presumably stripped of their psychoactive properties).

The space has an instantly calming feel – it's the ultimate central London oasis, despite being 100 yards from Oxford Street – yet there's also something unsettling, or as Freud would have it, *unheimlich*, about it. The garden looks, some have said, like a Mayan temple reclaimed by the jungle, and yet the foliage is ordered, vertical, under control. It feels lush and tropical, like Thailand or southern India, and yet the main trio of plants employed – *Trachelospermum* (star jasmine), *Passiflora caerulea* (passion flower) and *Solanum laxum* (potato vine) – can be found in any English garden. And, on closer inspection, there's also a total absence of visible soil, leaving you scratching your head as to where all this abundant flora is rooted. The effect is discombobulating, almost trippy. And that's exactly what Smets was intending.

'What Rami meant by "a Garden of Eden on drugs" was the idea of pushing things to the limit to create an effect that's almost hallucinatory,' Smets explains. 'Our aim was to make a space that's almost dreamlike, a landscape that wouldn't exist anywhere else. In a sense, when you enter the courtyard, you go through a portal into a different universe.'

The idea of a portal is further reinforced by the layout of the hotel, which you enter via a nightclub-style tunnel that opens into a double-height lobby leading to the hotel's lower courtyard and main bar, above which there hangs a chimera-like taxidermy creature – part kangaroo, part goat, with a peacock tail.

The lower courtyard is also home to a pair of what appear at first to be grand palm trees, their leaves forming an umbrella-like canopy over the tables. Again, all is not quite as it seems, for these are not in fact palms, but fern trees. 'They're actually spores,' Smets elaborates. 'Very ancient. From prehistoric times. I like the fact that they're the type of plants that would have been growing in the time of the dinosaurs. It adds to the sense of being out of time and place. And they're quite happy in this position, with restricted light, because their natural habitat is the understorey of the forest. Here, the building takes the role of 30-metre-high trees.'

Head up in the glass elevator to the Jurema bar, with its vertical walls of foliage soaring towards a rectangle of sky, and two questions pop into your head. Firstly, are the plants climbing or cascading? 'Both!' answers Smets, obviously delighted by my confusion. And secondly,



'Because you can't see any roots you look at the foliage and see a single plant. It tricks your mind. They are actually planted on three levels, some going up, some going down'

what are they growing out of? It turns out that the soil is cunningly hidden in the three tiers of walkways that flank the courtyard and provide access to the guestrooms. 'Because you can't see any roots, you look at the foliage and see a single plant,' Smets explains. 'It tricks your mind. They are actually planted on three levels, some going up, some down.'

Rami Fustok's hotel aesthetic is very much about tricking the mind, creating an altered reality – like that chimerical creature in the main bar – using décor. But as Smets points out, this is harder to achieve with landscape design because plants need basic things: soil, light, water. 'You're dealing with something living, so landscape design is more down-to-earth and practical as a creative discipline. The only way to achieve that sense of unsettling weirdness is by using unexpected scale as well as using familiar plants in surprising ways.' Thus, at floor level, plants we're used to seeing as blousy and expansive, like Fatsia, are restricted in dainty ornamental pots. And then, as we look up, there's what Rami calls "an avalanche of flowers".

Smets rejects the idea of the courtyard feeling like it's about to be reclaimed by the jungle. 'Nature isn't invading,' he says. 'It's not a fight. It's just one layer of foliage – basically a living screen. Having the Jurema terrace so close to the rooms there could have been a problem with privacy, but this design creates a privacy curtain. It also means that if you're staying in one of the rooms, you're greeted by an attractive green-filtered light when you open your door. With photosynthesis, the leaves capture all the light in the spectrum except the green light – they can't use it – which is why the light on a forest floor has a greenish hue.'

Despite having qualified as both an architect and a civil engineer, Smets defines himself as a landscape architect, as all of his work is in outdoor spaces. Right now, his Brussels-based practice is working on projects in 12 countries, including a six-hectare park in Arles that will accompany a new Frank Gehry-designed tower and is scheduled to open in 2020, and another park in The Hamptons. He's also just finished an outdoor space for a Japanese restaurant that's part of the Chateau Marmont complex on LA's Sunset Boulevard.

The design and creation of the Jurema terrace was, he admits, 'quite an adventure. We took some risks. Controlled risks, but risk all the same; we weren't 100 per cent sure how it would turn out.' One way those risks were mitigated was by installing a mock-up of the garden while the hotel was under construction. Smets placed 30 plants on-site to see which would respond best to the conditions, narrowing it down to the ones that now occupy the space.

'Trachelospermum was a sure thing. It's a hardy evergreen climber that has a great scent and beautiful star-shaped flowers. We added Passiflora because its flowers are so beautiful, they're almost hallucinatory. And it keeps its leaves all year if the winter isn't too harsh. And Solanum blooms late, which meant we would have a full range of flowering. It was all based on a very precise climatic study. We realised that heat loss from the bedrooms and the bar created

a microclimate. This means that plants that would not survive elsewhere do well here because it's a little warmer. In a sense we've created a unique ecosystem.'

What response has he had? 'Our aim was to create a landscape that refers to an idea you have of a space but subverts it. With landscapes, we try to process what we see, and define it and pinpoint it, but here you can't. Just like in a dream, it makes sense yet it doesn't. The nicest compliment I've had about the courtyard is that no one can adequately describe it.'

Another source of satisfaction is the way the courtyard has thrived. Naysayers warned Smets that all the plants would all be dead in six months, but it has already survived a very harsh winter. 'I have photos of the plants with snow on the leaves,' he says with a shrug.

Load was one of the biggest technical challenges Smets faced in realising his concept. Working closely with architects Manalo & White, the solution was hit upon to house the soil for the climbing plants in 35cm-by-50cm troughs that run around the perimeter of each walkway. 'It's almost like we created a hidden structural beam filled with earth – which is super-heavy,' he explains. 'The beams are concealed behind the railings facing into the courtyard and then the wood cladding of the walkways goes on top, so the soil is totally hidden. The plants slip through small openings, so you never see where the plant ends and begins.'

Irrigation was another challenge. To water the plants, Smets installed a fully automated system with humidity detectors that respond to the climate and which activated the irrigation system according to the amount of rainfall.

The third problem Smets faced was being able to install the plants fully grown. 'We needed 500 fully grown climbers, which meant pre-ordering; three years before they were installed we had a nursery in Italy start growing them. You need to be working with a client who has a certain vision because you have to pre-pay. But then you put the plants in fully established and the scheme is instantly complete.'

Maintenance is minimal. The plants are happy; they're growing in soil, and they have light and water. Aside from checking that the irrigation system is working correctly, the whole design is practically self-sufficient. A local gardener comes every few weeks to remove dried leaves and prune back the plants a little. But he can do this from the walkways. Unlike other vertical gardens, there's no cherry-picker crane required to keep it looking its best.

As for the terrace's décor, it was Fustok who selected the furniture, including the rattan peacock chairs, à la *Emmanuelle* [the erotic 1970s movie], which add a louche, tropical accent. 'My only suggestion was that we should have lightweight, metallic furniture that didn't root the space in any particular style,' Smets says. 'Basically nothing you can really pinpoint – because that would break the dream.' •

