

Rills and reflecting pools are enjoying a renaissance, as designers channel time-honoured concepts to conjure gardens with architectural edge, says **Helen Chislett**



RILL SEEKERS



For anyone who has visited the great Renaissance gardens of Italy, from Villa d'Este near Tivoli to Villa Gamberaia in Tuscany and Villa Lante in Bagnaia, it is impossible not to marvel at how water has been used as both an architectural and ornamental element – as with the swirling water chain that spirals down the steps from the Fountain of the Dolphins at Villa Lante before reappearing as a rill along an extensive stone table. Of course, the rill (a form of narrow canal that cuts through a landscape) has a history far longer than that – it was the Assyrians of ancient Iraq two millennia earlier who were first celebrated for their pleasure gardens, irrigated by ornamental pools, fountains and canals.

Today, rills and reflecting pools are enjoying something of a revival among garden designers and architects, who are as intrigued and captivated by the architectural properties of water as their classical predecessors.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALLAN POLLOK-MORRIS, CARL BENGTTSSON



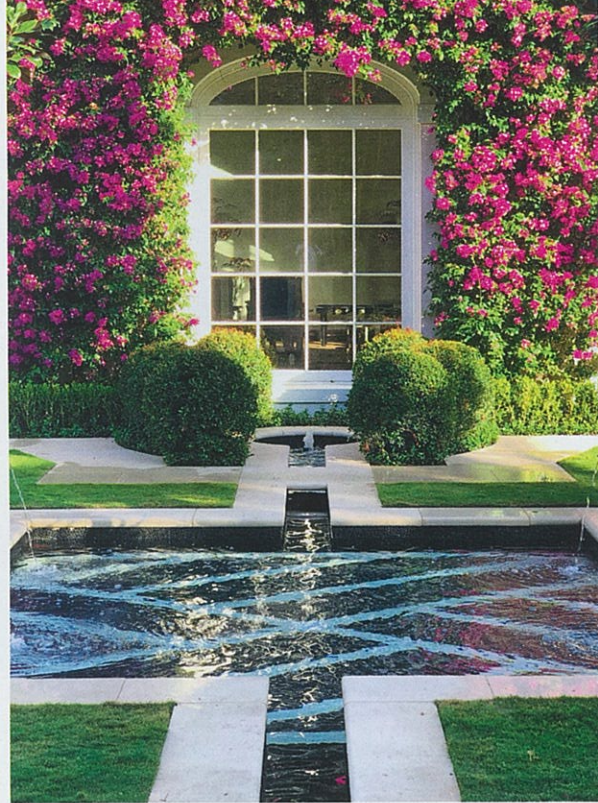
Landscape consultant Kim Wilkie is famed for the way he gently manipulates earth and water to powerful effect, and when asked by the Duke of Buccleuch to create a 21st-century garden at Boughton House, he came up with Orpheus – an inverted pyramid sunk into the earth that serves as a visual metaphor for the famed musician of Greek myth spiralling down deep into the Underworld to reclaim his wife Eurydice from Hades. As visitors approach Orpheus, they encounter slim rills (pictured overleaf) cut into the turf with such a magical and otherworldly quality that they transform the landscape into a piece of living sculpture, while staying perfectly in sympathy with the surrounding 18th-century parkland.

Wilkie admits that his heart usually sinks if a client requests a “water feature”, as it implies something busy and rather intrusive. “The sound of rushing water is not dissimilar to the hum of traffic – when it comes to it, you really have to choose between sound or reflection,” he

says. “The beauty of a rill is that it is virtually still. This allows one to quietly enjoy the reflections of the sky above, making it a much more peaceful, subtle and contemplative experience.”

Wilkie is also a firm believer in an approach that is sensitive to the landscape. For a private client in Hampshire, he was asked to restore water meadows that had been lost to the previous owner’s demand for a polo field and helipad. Rather than devising an exact recreation of the meadows, Wilkie suggested creating a habitat for the endangered southern damselfly by cutting shallow rills into pasture that undulate gently across 40 acres. “What this achieves is warm, alkaline water meandering through the meadows, which is ideal for the species,” he says. “In fact, we were delighted that the damselflies and otters had moved in before the diggers even left.” The brief from the Environment Agency and Natural England was that nothing was to be either taken

These pages: Luciano Giubbilei’s design with its slender rills won Best Show Garden and an RHS gold medal at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2014



Slim rills cut into the turf with such a magical quality that they transform the landscape into living sculpture

away or brought onto the site, so Wilkie simply quilted up the banks with the dug earth and cut turf, which provides a crop of hay each year for the sheep that graze the land. "It is a very successful, natural wetland habitat, but also a complete sculptural form on a really big scale," he says.

Of course, a rill can be equally effective in a small city garden. Garden designer Richard Miers chose to make one the centrepiece of a 20m Chelsea garden (pictured overleaf) that had been reduced to a concrete desert after extensive renovations. "The clients had dug down to create a giant basement level, meaning that there was not much soil left for pockets of planting," he says, "so I decided to design a rill that travelled through the garden, taking inspiration from the water channels used for the cultivation of gardens since ancient times." Made from polished black granite, it is just 2mm deep and yet creates dramatic reflections of light and cloud. "Rills are so clean and pure that they are akin to a sorbet during a meal – they cleanse the palate," he explains. "The blackness of the granite and the purity of the water combine to produce these wonderful reflections. You look down and suddenly see a cloud scudding across the surface. They are also very architectural features, a way of visually emphasising the connection between garden and house."

It is a sentiment echoed by Keith Williams of Nievera Williams. For a major restoration project in Palm Beach (pictured top left), Williams integrated house and garden by designing a series of rills that create a strong axial relationship with focal points of the architecture. The inspiration came from Thomas Jefferson's famous residence Monticello, which was designed along the neoclassical principles of Andrea Palladio. "Fountains, troughs and channels have derived from the traditional ways of collecting water through cisterns and aqueducts.



Clockwise from top left: Nievera Williams' design for a Palm Beach house has rills that relate to focal points of the building's architecture. Olson Kundig placed a moat-like reflective pool alongside Pavilion House in Bellevue, Washington. Kim Wilkie's Orpheus, at Boughton House in Northamptonshire, features rills that lead to an inverted pyramid beyond. Munkenbeck+Partners brought the idea of floating to a private residence in north London with an indoor/outdoor swimming pool

The client is a history buff and is very involved with the preservation of Monticello, so it was wonderful to use water as a way of defining spaces within the garden," Williams says. "Water also has the ability to lead the eye and provide direction, creating a natural hierarchy between architecture and landscape."

Garden designer Luciano Giubbilei was inspired by the simplicity of Japanese gardens, the rills of Islamic schemes and the formality of Italian landscaping when coming up with the design that won him Best Show Garden and an RHS gold medal at the Chelsea Flower Show in 2014 (pictured on previous pages). His composition included slender rills that created a strong underlying geometric layout in contrast to the naturalistic planting. "The presence of water in a garden is totally absorbing, because it offers an ever-changing pattern of scattered light and shadow," he says. "Gardens are more than the formal elements of flowers, trees and hedges. They're the sum of



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the sensations they evoke, forging an emotional connection and a sensory encounter between people and place.”

Residential developers are also rediscovering the joys of incorporating water into architecture, as with Squire & Partners’ design for Chelsea Barracks that features a rill along the almost 400m length of Bourne Walk. Partner Henry Squire says this was inspired by the “lost” River Westbourne that once flowed across the site, until driven underground by development in Belgravia. “As part of our desire to connect Chelsea Barracks to its historical roots, we set out to honour the memory of the River Westbourne, devising a visual, ecological and sensory buffer between residences and road in collaboration with Gustafson, Porter + Bowman,” he says. “We have also introduced a large, shallow water scrim in Whistler Square, designed to reflect the sky like a mirror.” The company took similar historical inspiration when designing 50 St Edmund’s Terrace in Primrose Hill, paying homage to the formal ponds and decorative fountains found in London’s historic parks. “The buildings are organised into three main pavilions connected by pocket gardens punctuated with shallow reflecting pools,” Squire explains. “These have low jet fountains that create a gently rippling surface, animating these micro garden spaces.”

For an award-winning residential development along the Yangtze (pictured above right), landscape design firm SWA made water integral to the architecture through a series of courtyards connected by reflecting pools and cascading steps that lead the eye to the river views beyond. Chuhan Zhang, who worked on the project, says the idea is to produce a sense of inner peace within an urban setting. “We wanted to create a Shangri-La experience within the city centre inspired directly by the surrounding nature. Shallow water on a large scale requires very good craftsmanship, otherwise it evaporates, but for us the results far outweigh the technical challenges.”

Architect Alfred Munkenbeck, founder of Munkenbeck+Partners, also views water as a material in its own right. “The idea of creating an island when designing a house intrigues me. Water has the effect of taking the weight out of a building, so that it feels light as if it is floating,” he says. “You can create this effect with very little water, so long as the bottom is black.” For one private residence in north London (pictured on previous page), Munkenbeck brought the idea into the house with an indoor/outdoor swimming pool. He went even further with a contemporary moat – a channel bordered by bulrushes that surrounds the glass bay of one of the rooms, giving the impression of being in a boat with ripples all around. “It is like sitting in your own private world.”

Jim Olson and Tom Kundig of Olson Kundig have designed many private residences that create a similar



Clockwise from top left: the reflective pool at Olson Kundig’s Desert House in California mirrors its surroundings. Richard Miers made a rill the centrepiece of a 20m Chelsea garden. At a residential development next to the Yangtze, SWA created a series of courtyards connected by reflecting pools and cascading steps that lead the eye to the river beyond

floating effect (Pavilion House pictured on previous page and Desert House pictured top left). Olson cites inspiration from the Mexican architect Luis Barragán and the infinity pools of Amandari in Bali, seeing water as a way to bring life to architecture. “Sunlight sparkles off water and the reflected light dances on the walls of a house or trunks of trees,” he says. “That reflective quality brings the infinity of the sky and the cosmos into our special place, conjuring a universal connection. No wonder it has such a calming effect.” Kundig agrees. “Water connects us back to nature – that makes it a good way of decompressing from the high anxiety of urban life,” he says. For this reason, he introduces water into his designs whenever he can. “It is meditative, peaceful and reflective. It also engages with the sky. Water is completely transformed by what is happening in nature and the climate – whether it’s raining, snowing, windy, sunny or overcast. In that sense, its personality is always changing.” ♦

RILL AND GRACE

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