



# Accessible garden design

When asked to design features for a specialised space, my first step is to find out what the space is now and who it's for. What it is to be comes later on in the design process, writes **Jo Thompson**.

**A** lot of the issues in the design of public green spaces are issues we all face in our own private spaces: if it's easy to get to, we use it; if it's comfortable, we sit on it. If we have a good experience, we'll use that area again.

We know that public spaces need to provide access, purpose, comfort and sociability. Looking at the elements I tend to incorporate in my design, both public and private, there are a number which crop up consistently. It provides somewhere comfortable and

accessible to sit, large trees for atmosphere, structure and shade, and strong lines are softened by abundant planting.

The spaces themselves develop further than their original brief and tend to have more than one function. A play-space in the garden of a children's hospice is also a retreat for families and a dining area for medical staff. A display garden in a plant nursery showcases new plants, provides visitors with a place to sit and also becomes a stage for summer music events. A terrace in the Docklands is accessed

by workers who want to escape the office and relax in a garden setting; it is also a meeting place and provides the main view from the boardroom.

The Thrive Urban garden at RHS Chelsea 2010 was developed to the horticultural therapy charity's brief not to cater specifically for a disabled person. Only on close inspection is it apparent that it addresses the needs of somebody who's finding it a little more difficult to get around. There are raised planters, posts for support when gardening, non-slip surfaces

# “PUBLIC SPACES NEED TO PROVIDE ACCESS, PURPOSE, COMFORT AND SOCIABILITY.”



**LEFT and BELOW:** In this Montreal community, large outdoor furniture revises the idea of the street.  
Pictures by Stéphanie Najman.



**BELOW:** The brief for the RHS Chelsea 2010 Thrive Garden was not to cater specifically for a disabled person.  
Picture by David Devins.

## in any space

and plenty of spaces to sit.

At the onset of the design stage I took what I need in my own garden – essentially large trees and places to sit – and then put them in a space I'd be happy in.

Clean structural lines, neutral wall colours and fabulous multi-stemmed *Prunus serrula* were brought together to create a restful place where a few people can comfortably relax or garden, or both, as they wish. This garden has been relocated since the show at Thrive's headquarters, and is in daily use as a workspace, lunchspot and outdoor classroom by both clients and employees of the charity.

Going against the 'less is more' banner often adopted, to me a garden is a living space, thus I need to incorporate within it those elements which I need to 'live' outside.

So we start with a list which usually goes something like this: seating (lots of it in different areas if possible), a source of heat, cooking facility, planting (vegetable and ornamental), play area, storage, lighting, screening, shelter; shade. I know this is a pretty long list to get into a small space, even a larger area, so rather than compromise on function I need all features of the design to fulfill at least more than one purpose.

An example of this multifunctional design can be seen on the terraces at the new offices of the National Youth Theatre and Ideas Tap in London. A range of people use this overlooked exposed outside space, and the whole scheme needed to be approved by estate landlords who were not initially prepared to allow any form of hard or soft landscaping outside.





**TOP:** Demelza Garden, RHS Chelsea 2009.  
Picture by Leigh Clapp.

**ABOVE:** The nursery display garden showcases new plants but also has plenty of places to sit.

The proposed functions and positive elements of the scheme needed to be clear. Oak benches at 450mm high were designed to provide both ample seating area and adequate space for shrubs and perennials which now give privacy from neighbouring buildings, shelter from winds as well as an attractive view from the boardroom.

Similarly, the sound-themed garden for the Demelza children's hospice also needed to offer screening, but more in the sense of providing a refuge and a feeling of safety for those who use the garden.

Again, the design offers adequate seating in the form of a low stone-capped brick

wall which curves round a small terrace big enough to hold a wheelchair; but small enough for parents to sit in and just 'be'. Multi-stemmed *Betula pendula* were selected for the movement of their branches and for their towering presence. These would have been all wrong in the Thrive garden, where the *Prunus serrula* provided a show of their own with their mahogany-coloured bark.

Once we have trees and we have function, we need interest. The areas of interest in the Demelza garden comes in the form of a piece of interactive artwork: outside tethered steel chimes easily accessed from the seating. The Thrive garden again has a decorative element

## “ACCESSIBILITY IS NOT COMPLICATED, BUT WE CAN OVER-COMPLICATE IT.”

which is also essentially a bit of fun: a multi-layered sculpture which reveals different forms depending on where it's viewed from. It's something to talk about, or just to sit and look at. The important thing is that everyone can see it.

Within a public space I need to provide zones, giving different areas different feels. Raised beds, as well as being accessible and providing seating, also create different routes through a garden to different focal points. This might be a tree on a roof terrace which also provides shade, a fireplace which also provides warmth, or a temporary art exhibit in a nursery's garden. I keep the routes wide enough to provide universal access throughout, yet narrow enough to still be inviting.

An admirable communal space which addresses these issues simply yet effectively is the Urban Soland design for the Chemin de la Cote-des-Neiges in Montreal. Large-scale street furniture in the form of benches and tables along terraces revises the idea of the street in the public mind. It becomes a place to stop for a while and be human and interact, rather than just to be rushed along. Forty bronze apples anchored to the tables are inscribed with phrases commemorating the multi-ethnic community which uses this area.

This busy street has been transformed into an unlikely oasis. That, I guess, is my main aim when dealing with a public place, however big or small.

Many public spaces fail because of the lack of places to sit and lack of gathering points, poor, uninviting and uninteresting entrances, features that aren't functional, paths that don't go where people want to go, domination of vehicles and lack of things 'going on'.

Piazza Navona in Rome has got it right, so has the Chemin de la Cote-des-Neiges, and so has Siena's Piazza del Campo: three very different spaces in different areas. Accessibility, it seems, is not complicated, but we can over-complicate it. Make it a place where people want to go to, make sure they can get to it, and make sure it's a pleasant experience once they're there.