

The challenge of reconfiguring a steeply sloping garden in London

Into the woods

Words Caroline Tilston
Photography Marianne Majerus

GARDENS ON SLOPES: in open country there's no real problem, the land can be graded off and level changes accommodated easily. But in cities, where space is tight and access usually tighter, as soon as you want to change the existing levels you find you need surgical precision and deep pockets.

Why do the levels need changing? The scenario goes like this – and I've seen it time and time again: the client has added an extension on to the back of their house; a garden that previously sloped gently up from the house is now in danger of feeling like it's falling right into the new room. At that point the client calls a garden designer and what do you do?

“There was to be no easy movement between inside and out here; the new garden was always going to be discovered after a journey”

You can push back the land further to make a patio on the same level as the extension, remove endless skip loads of earth and build retaining walls some way back; because of the slope, the larger you make this outdoor living area the higher that main retaining wall is going to be. The benefits of creating a garden this way are that you get level access between house and terrace and that new retaining wall can be used magnificently in the garden's design – I've seen it turned into a water feature with water falling the full height of the drop, I've seen the steps up to the higher level used as a sculpture. You can also use this change in level to make a real step-change in the design, so at the lower level you have a very modern, minimalist garden (to fit with the new extension) and wham, at the top of the stairs you discover a garden that's traditional and blowsy.

But what if that's not an option? What if the land is sloping too steeply, if access is too much of a problem, so you can't take away the earth, push the level change away from the extension and make a retaining wall some way away from the house? That retaining wall is going to

The sitting area is designed as a destination rather than simply a passage





Main picture: stepping stones in grid form link new to old; inset: planters filled with *Convolvulus cneorum*



be bang against the new room, natural light into that new room will be restricted and access to the garden is going to mean climbing up stairs. That was the situation that faced Sara Jane Rothwell at this garden on one of those incredibly steep hills around Alexandra Palace in North London.

The problem of getting natural light into the new room has been solved by making a pure glass roof held up with light-coloured, polished concrete pillars. The first issue for Sara Jane was the access between house and garden. There was to be no easy movement between inside and out here; the new garden was always going to be discovered after a journey. The given in this garden was a long set of steps alongside the new extension. Painting it all white helps to lighten it but a further problem was a huge spoil pipe that runs down this access way. "We could have boxed it in but that would have made the passageway narrower and drawn more attention to it," says Sara Jane, "so I decided to paint the spoil pipe a light colour and use other things to draw the eye up and away from it." Three planters filled with *Convolvulus cneorum* and placed along the side of the raised sitting

area catch the eye as you move up the steps. Set into the wall directly ahead is a sculptural tile from Kathy Dalwood which also pulls your attention up and out to the garden.

If you are able to move the change in level back so a wall surrounds the paved area you create a definite 'room', a courtyard linked to the house and separate from the garden. But here the paved sitting area is separate from the house yet not defined by high walls. So there's a conflict in the design: the need to link the sitting area to both the modern extension and the traditional woodland garden but at the same time make it a distinct, comfortable space to be in.

To demarcate the new 'room' and make it a destination rather than a passageway, a strong, dark slate floor visually outlines the area on the ground. Sara Jane has also put in a low wall to surround the area and give a strongly implied division between the new and the old. Along the top of the bed is a line of green planting (*Euphorbia characias* subsp. *wulfenii*, *Stipa arundinacea* (now *Anemathelle lessoniana*), *Heuchera villosa* 'Palace Purple', *Allium hollandicum* 'Purple Sensation').



Sketch showing steps alongside new extension

The garden maker

Sara Jane Rothwell MSGD spent 10 years as a theatre designer before retraining in garden design at Capel Manor in 2003. The outdoor spaces she designs are characterised by her passion for plants and inventive use of hard landscape materials. This combines with her meticulous attention to detail to create atmospheric gardens that are distinctive yet practical. Since setting up her Glorious Gardens company, Sara Jane has received two BALI design awards for her design work.

Contact Sara on 0207 700 4354 or 07976 155 282 or check out her website at www.gloriousgardensdesign.co.uk

They act as a very soft 'hedge' at the end of the lawn and also raise the height of the enclosure offered by the wall.

Once that division is made a connection needs to be formed between the new area and the minimalist extension. That link is a crisp and clean blockwork wall, which is rendered and painted off-white, running alongside the area. This wall continues into the garden beyond, tapering off and taking the modern element right back into the old garden. And, while it recedes, it provides a great contrast of line and form with the full and fluffy planting of black bamboo, *Phyllostachys nigra*, underplanted with *Hakonechloa macra* 'Albo-aurea', *Dryopteris erythrosora* and *Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens'.

This peters off, this stepping down as you move from new to old, is also reflected in the grid work of stepping stones in the lawn. To get diagonally across a lawn you might expect stepping stones to curve around or to step across, but Sara Jane has laid them dead straight to the new patio area in a grid form and tapered them to draw the eye to the pathway through the woodland beyond.

You are led diagonally across this garden several times as you move through the space – as Sara Jane says, she wanted to "lead people on a journey". From the entrance your eye is drawn across to the central steps and up to the lawn. From there the stepping stones lead you further across to the woodland entrance. Once in the woodland Sara Jane has re-laid the path, which swings back right and left before it reaches the den at the bottom of the garden.

The woodland has been redefined, with the provision of the well-marked path and an underplanting of hellebores and spring bulbs. The effect has been to turn it from a ramshackle wilderness into a woodland to discover. "It even has an open glade halfway along," explains Sara Jane, "to sit in."

The garden goes from minimalist extension to classical/modern sitting area to woodland walk in the space of a few metres and much of what is in the design was unchangeable. As Sara Jane says, "This wasn't a blank canvas and there were some quite difficult design problems." But you wouldn't know it from looking at the finished garden. Subtle cues and clever design have made this space work seamlessly.



The redefined woodland path leads to a den at the bottom of the garden

Fact file

Garden designer:	Sara Jane Rothwell MSGD
Contractor:	Vince Robertshaw, New Look Gardens
Owner:	Private
Location:	North London
Size:	40m x 8m (including 30m of woodland)
Aspect:	South-west facing
Soil:	London clay
Weather:	Sheltered and mild
Design started:	Jan 2007
Completion:	April 2007
Total cost:	£17,500 (soft landscaping £2,500)
Outstanding features:	Mix of clean contemporary lines, with a woodland garden; wall sculpture
Public access:	No

