



THIS PAGE: A WEATHERED STEAMER CHAIR SITS BENEATH THE CANOPY OF AN INDIAN BEAN TREE (*CATALPA BIGNONIoides*). OPPOSITE: SMOOTH BLACK LIMESTONE, RUGGED COBBLES AND THE CONCRETE BENCH COMBINE TO CREATE DRAMATIC TEXTURAL CONTRASTS.



striking simplicity

After two decades designing traditional gardens, Tom Brekelmans decided that simplicity of line and form, exciting materials and low maintenance were too hard to resist.

Susan Elderkin meets the Dutch designer whose style is full of subtle delights.

Photographs by Maayke de Ridder

First thing in the morning, Tom Brekelmans likes to step out into his garden in bare feet. At this hour, the smooth black limestone path that runs down the length of the garden is shockingly cold. But by one o'clock on a sunny day, it has warmed up beautifully and holds the heat like an electric blanket.

Such subtle pleasures are what Tom Brekelmans' gardens are all about. This 50-year-old landscape architect from the Dutch town of Tilburg is a firm believer in the pleasures of minimalism. Bold concrete structures, contrasting textures, spare but luscious planting and an ever-present trickle of water are the

prime ingredients. Such a garden, he argues, requires so little work from season to season that there is time to notice the feel of the ground beneath your feet.

Tom has been creating gardens for 25 years, but his espousal of minimalism is very recent. An energetic, stocky man with a purposeful stride and blue eyes that are always on the alert, he claims to have introduced the concept of slopes and curves into the flat back yards of the Netherlands after a trip to Switzerland in the seventies. Trained at horticultural college in nearby Breda and in landscape design in Brussels (leaving halfway through his third year, as he was so eager to get started), his designs typically included



ABOVE: WATER IS PUMPED THROUGH STAINLESS STEEL PIPES TO CREATE A CONTINUOUS FLOW ALONG THE CONCRETE BENCH; THE PURPOSE-MADE GALVANISED STEEL GRILLE PARTIALLY CONCEALS THE WATER AS IT TRAVELS BACK TO BE RECIRCULATED.

large flowerbeds and lots of greenery. But three years ago, he had a crisis. “I was making gardens for people who were clueless about how to care for them,” he says with a shrug. “I’d see beautiful flowerbeds vanish, ponds become choked with weed, shrubs turning into trees. I was getting more and more frustrated.”

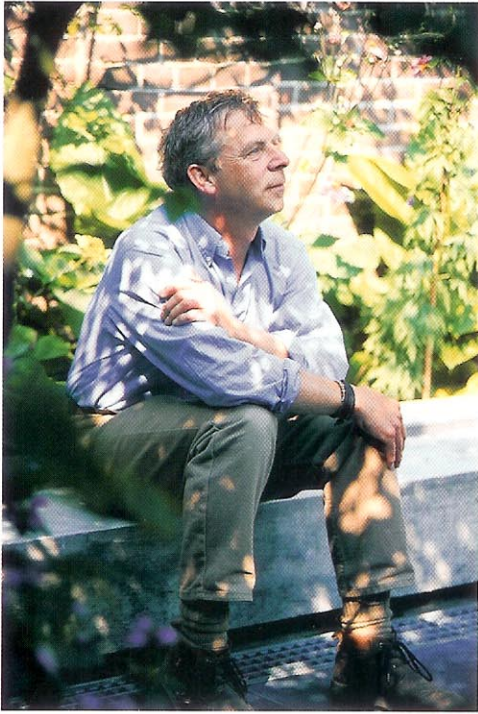
Ever since then, contrasting textures – grey limestone boulders, hardwood decking, glass brick walls and stainless steel formations – have taken centre stage. With new residential development in Holland taking a similarly bold, modernistic approach, his designs are hitting a chord. “The clients are happy, and I am happier too. They’re more fun, these gardens, more modern.”

Tom is a firm believer that the style of a garden should be dictated by that of the house, and his own home in Tilburg, where he lives with his wife Marijke, is a vigorous amalgam of old and new. When they moved in seven years ago, the garden became a construction site; the current design is only one year old. The house is a beautiful 1898 town house with unfeasibly high ceilings, windows and doors, and the black limestone path running down the garden is a literal continuation of the black limestone hallway inside. “It’s a way of bringing the inside outside,” says Tom. “Once you see a house, you know what the garden should be. It was immediately obvious that this should be a garden of straight lines, as the house has no curves or cut-off corners. With every garden,

there is a layout already there, in a sense. Just like Michelangelo said of a piece of marble: you just have to peel away the layers.”

The limestone path is flanked on one side by rough cobblestones lifted from an old stable yard (“I wanted something from the past”); on the other by a wide concrete bench, a sort of raised rill specifically designed to be sat on, which has a recessed stainless-steel water channel running down its length. “During garden parties there are never enough chairs. This is something robust – a gesture from nowadays – while also reflecting the slimline elegance of the house.” Water flows along the bench and out through three small pipes at ground level, so that there is not too much of a splash. “I like my water to whisper,” says Tom.

As the sun moves through the day, so Tom and Marijke find themselves sliding along the bench with it. Most of the garden receives dappled sun, the light falling in patches through the canopy of a big-leaved Indian bean tree, *Catalpa bignonioides*. A fan palm, *Trachycarpus fortunei*, sits in one corner (Tom found it as a seedling on a camp site in Italy 25 years ago), and a lovely central *Cornus kousa* (again, predating the garden), whose top smattering of white flowers is best viewed from the upper-storey windows. In the long bed behind the concrete bench, the large tropical leaves of *Zantedeschia aethiopica* sprout every summer, sending up perfect lily-white flowers. More lush



ABOVE, LEFT: DESIGNER TOM BREKELMANS SITS ON THE CONCRETE BENCH THAT HAS BECOME SOMETHING OF A SIGNATURE. ABOVE, RIGHT: IN THE FOREGROUND THE LOOSE FRONDS OF A SENTRY PALM (*HOWEA FORSTERIANA*) BENEATH A *CATALPA BIGNONIOIDES*.

greenery is provided by a huge hosta in a pot, a *Fatsia japonica* and a pair of standard laurels. An enormous copper beech in the neighbouring garden offers a ruddy contrast to all the fresh green foliage and by midsummer, there are bright spots of colour – *Rosa* ‘New Dawn’, *Clematis alpina* and a red *Campsis radicans* climbing the wall, pink and purple *Acanthus mollis* under the central cornus, and various wild geraniums.

The long concrete bench has become a recurring motif in Tom’s gardens. “This wasn’t intended to be a showcase garden, but it has inevitably become one. I bring my clients here, and they say, ‘Oh, I’d like one of those!’” Many clients have also asked for a ‘summer kitchen’ similar to the one at the end of the garden. Covered by a sloping thatched roof and lit by electric candelabra, there is an open log fire built into the back wall, which allows them to eat out here all year round. There’s also a sink (“so we can prepare fish without smelling out the house”) and two gas rings. A garden Tom designed with a similar outdoor room won him an award in 1992 at Floriade, the world horticultural exhibition held in the Netherlands once every 10 years [the next event, in 2002, will be the fifth, see this issue page 98 for more information]. Together with the all-important bicycle stand near the back door and a chicken coop with six egg-laying hens, few gardens can boast so many practical elements while also managing to look striking and simple.

In winter, the garden is altogether sparser – the trees being mainly deciduous and the perennials dying back. To clients, Tom sometimes suggests filling the gaps with well-placed bundles of willow twigs; but in his own garden he is happy to see empty space. Other than sweeping the terrace occasionally and gathering up the beech leaves in the autumn (which he piles on the beds to protect the tender zantedeschia and to mulch the soil), he says he is hardly aware of doing any gardening. Yes, the concrete greens up in the winter, but he prefers not to interfere with it; by spring the patches of algae dry out and fall off anyway. And though the garden is under nightly siege from snails and slugs, he again prefers to let nature take its course – just picking them off by hand on a regular basis. Although for completely different reasons than his clients, he too revels in the luxury of a maintenance-free garden. “I’m always occupied with someone else’s garden, so I don’t want to be doing any gardening when I come home.”

Marijke, however, feels differently. “I like doing the gardening,” she wails. Happily, though, the couple has found the perfect outlet for her itchy green fingers: an allotment, four minutes away by bike. Bursting with an impressive range of vegetables, this is the garden where she gets to make all the decisions. “I’m not allowed to say anything,” says Tom, a twinkle in his eye. “She just tells me to dig, and I dig.”

REVELATIONS

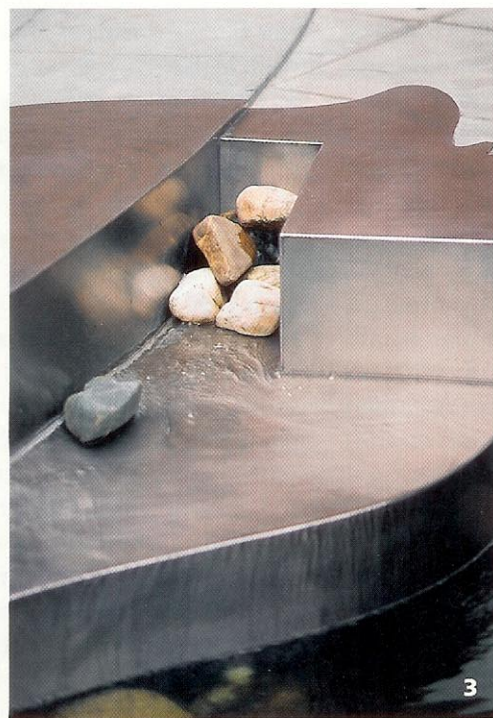
TWO MORE OF TOM BREKELMANS' CITY GARDENS



In his home town of Tilburg, Tom Brekelmans has created two gardens that epitomise his distinctive style. Shown on this page is a garden he designed for a young couple, Jan and Ans van Damme, who live in the heart of the city. Their only specifications for their small 6m x 12m courtyard were for limestone paving and a pond. Tom's solution was to create what he refers to as a steel 'eruption' in the midst of the limestone – a beautifully curving pond whose steel edges flow out like lava over the stone. The stainless steel pond consists of several separate parts, glued together with silicone. The planting is minimal to allow the lines of the hard landscaping to speak out: hugging the pond are *Iris ensata*, *Koelreuteria paniculata*, *Geranium macrorrhizum* 'Spessart' and *Miscanthus sinensis*, while water lilies bloom in the pond.

Pictured opposite is another city garden that Tom was commissioned to redesign for Huub and Hanneke Pompe. The long, narrow space was dark and damp

1. THE SEATING AREA BY THE HOUSE OVERLOOKS THE POND; A STEEL OUTDOOR LIGHT CAN BE SWITCHED ON IN THE EVENINGS.
2. A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE VAN DAMME'S GARDEN, WITH THE SUN GLINTING ON THE POND'S STEEL EDGE.
- 3 & 4. CONTRASTING TEXTURES OF STEEL NEXT TO LIMESTONE PAVING.
5. ZINC PLANTERS CONTAINING *HOSTA* 'SUM AND SUBSTANCE'.
6. A VIEW DOWN THE LENGTH OF THE GARDEN, SHOWING THE TAPERED WALKWAY AND A SEATING AREA IN FRONT OF THE WALL OF GLASS CUBES.
7. IN THE POMPE'S GARDEN THE RAISED WOODEN WALKWAY PROTECTS THE ROOF OF THE UNDERGROUND WINE CELLAR.





when he first visited the site, essentially just a corridor for the owners to get from house to garage, and part of the garden was positioned over an underground wine cellar with a concrete roof. To solve this problem he created a steel-framed wooden walkway (what he calls a 'floating carpet') raised above the cellar roof to minimise damage to it. The walkway is tapered (1.25m at the top near the house, and 90cm at the bottom) to accentuate the length of the garden. To disguise the roof, it was covered with soil and planted with *Festuca scoparia*, followed by a top dressing of white gravel. Tom also brightened the space by building two new walls. One is brick, painted with a light greeny-grey concrete mixture, while the other is made from glass cubes. As well as letting more light into the garden, this wall gives the impression of space because the movement of plants from the neighbouring garden can be seen through it. Planting is again minimal, with *Fatsia japonica* (a plant not often used in the Netherlands), *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Gracillimus', *Festuca scoparia* and *Euphorbia x martinii*. In addition, zinc planters are filled with *Hosta* 'Sum and Substance' and *Pittosporum tobira* 'Nanum'. ■

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 For further information about Floriade, the horticultural exhibition held in the Netherlands, visit www.floriade.nl

