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RED AND GREEN MAKE THE SCENE

To unify the revised and replanted basement courtyard, walls and roof terraces of a townhouse in north-east London, garden designer Adolfo Harrison MSGLD has used coral red accents to provide contrast and consistency, with award-winning results

WORDS: PHILIP CLAYTON PHOTOGRAPHS: RICHARD BLOOM

Adolfo Harrison MSGLD's striking vertical forest garden design for a house in Islington, London, has turned a series of separate outdoor spaces on different levels into dynamic, planted layers, each with their own unique function but which together create an exciting and cohesive whole.

Built just ten or so years ago, the house is arranged over four levels and has a little over 1,076 square feet (100 square metres) of outdoor space, including two roof terraces. The current owners (one an architect, the other an art curator) wanted to update and improve the spaces with a scheme that would blur boundaries between the inside and out, make the first-floor terrace a relaxing oasis, and turn the roof garden into a comfortable, sociable space that would be perfect for entertaining.

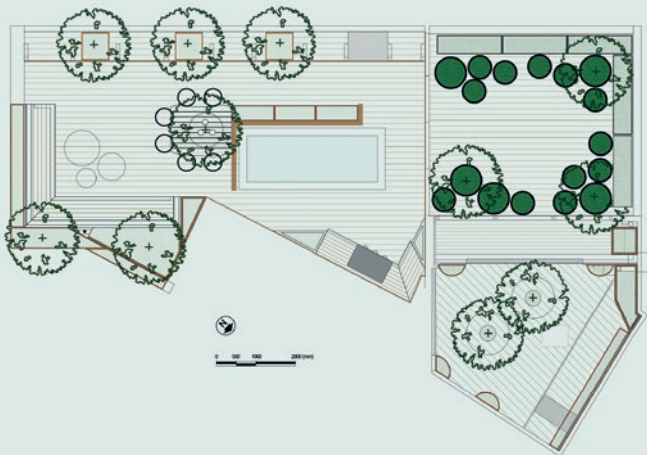
They also wanted Adolfo to consider how the art displayed inside the house would integrate with the views outside. 'There is only so much you can do in most small gardens; you often have to use every trick in the book to get a scheme to work, but this garden was odd, with four disparate spaces,' says Adolfo. 'That actually proved to be a gift; when a space is this unusual, it forces you to try something different.'

Understanding the space

The first and lowest area of the garden is a cool, shaded basement courtyard. Built on an existing concrete pad, it sits at the bottom of what is, in effect, a four-storey-high lightwell, a feature that Adolfo calls the 'core'. Originally this ground-floor space was simply decked, with a couple of raised beds that were planted up with bamboos, and the walls that rise up around it were painted stark white. Today, just one of the walls remains white, to catch the light, while the other solid wall is partly clad with narrow-slatted hardwood trellising to which metal planters have been attached so they lean out over the woodland-style-planted floor of the garden.

Although there is a door that leads into the courtyard, to access a narrow strip of decking for seating and for maintenance, the planting lies behind a glass balustrade. 'Effectively this is a space that needs to be enjoyed from →

The first-floor terrace has become like a platform set high up amid a forest canopy, with *Tetrapanax papyrifer* 'Rex', *Mahonia eurybracteata* subsp. *ganpinensis* 'Soft Caress', *Hakonechloa*, *Agapanthus africanus* and *Pittosporum* creating a refuge above the woodland floor of the courtyard, visible through the glass balustrade.



Above and left: the existing deck and stainless-steel built-in planters on the first-floor terrace that now stand behind the free-standing painted ones were all refurbished and reused. Opposite: the courtyard garden has been designed to be looked at rather than gone into, and rainwater run-off is directed from the first-floor and roof terraces into it, so it can be absorbed and attenuated by the green-roof-style planting that lines the floor, before flowing into the drain.

above, and from inside the house,' the designer explains. 'It is to be looked at rather than gone into.'

One of those viewing points is from the terrace of the main bedroom up on the first floor, which the owners wanted to be transformed from another decked and white-walled state into a relaxing, private space. Above that, and accessible through a large skylight, is the roof garden. Here, the existing decking and trellis was to be adapted and re-used to create seating, with built-in planters supplemented by freestanding stools, coffee tables, and variously sized pots that allow for plenty of planting. They also help to create a more circular feel within the linear structure formed by the built-in fittings.

Perhaps the most striking way in which Adolfo has managed to resolve the challenge of uniting the areas is through his use of coral red as an accent colour. The chosen hue was inspired by artworks in the house that contain similar colours. 'Red is an effective foil for planting and with this project I was fortunate to have clients who could readily see how colour can bring a garden together,' he says.

Getting the exact shade of red, however, took time and effort. 'We painted the insides and outsides of plant pots to see how the colour would look on curved and partially shaded surfaces,' says Adolfo, 'and took the most promising ones on site to be sure, before going ahead with the colour throughout.'



- (A) 20 x *Asplenium scolopendrium*
- (P) 7 x *Polystichum setiferum*
- (D) 6 x *Dryopteris filix-mas*
- (B) 7 x *Blechnum spicant*
- (T) 11 x *Tiarella* 'Pink Skyrocket'
- (V) 12 x *Polypodium vulgare*
- (DA) 1 x *Dicksonia antarctica*
- (HS) 1 x *Hydrangea seemanii*
- (H) 3 x *Hydrangea petiolaris*

Soleirolia soleirolii planted in random order

'I WAS FORTUNATE TO HAVE CLIENTS WHO COULD READILY SEE HOW COLOUR CAN BRING A GARDEN TOGETHER.'

pendula to be 'planted', with their rootballs anchored with wires. It sounds experimental, but birch are pioneer species and with an irrigation system in place, they have thrived; their canopies are growing up through the core space and provide plenty of shade for Adolfo's woodland floor of *Asplenium scolopendrium* and *Blechnum spicant* emerging through a verdant carpet of *Soleirolia soleirolii*.

The core's walls are now dressed with lightweight Western Red cedar cladding, which is hung with ferns and *Fatsia polycarpa* 'Green Fingers' in the wall planters, and the woodwork hides integrated lighting and drainage; this part of the build Adolfo feels was the most challenging, with scaffolding needed to get elements in place. Access to the plants now is possible with the inspired addition of a bespoke 'library' ladder, painted coral red, of course, which can be moved along a track. 'That's probably the only one of its kind, and essentially a sculpture, specifically designed to fit in this "landscape"; it's also very practical,' says Adolfo. ➔

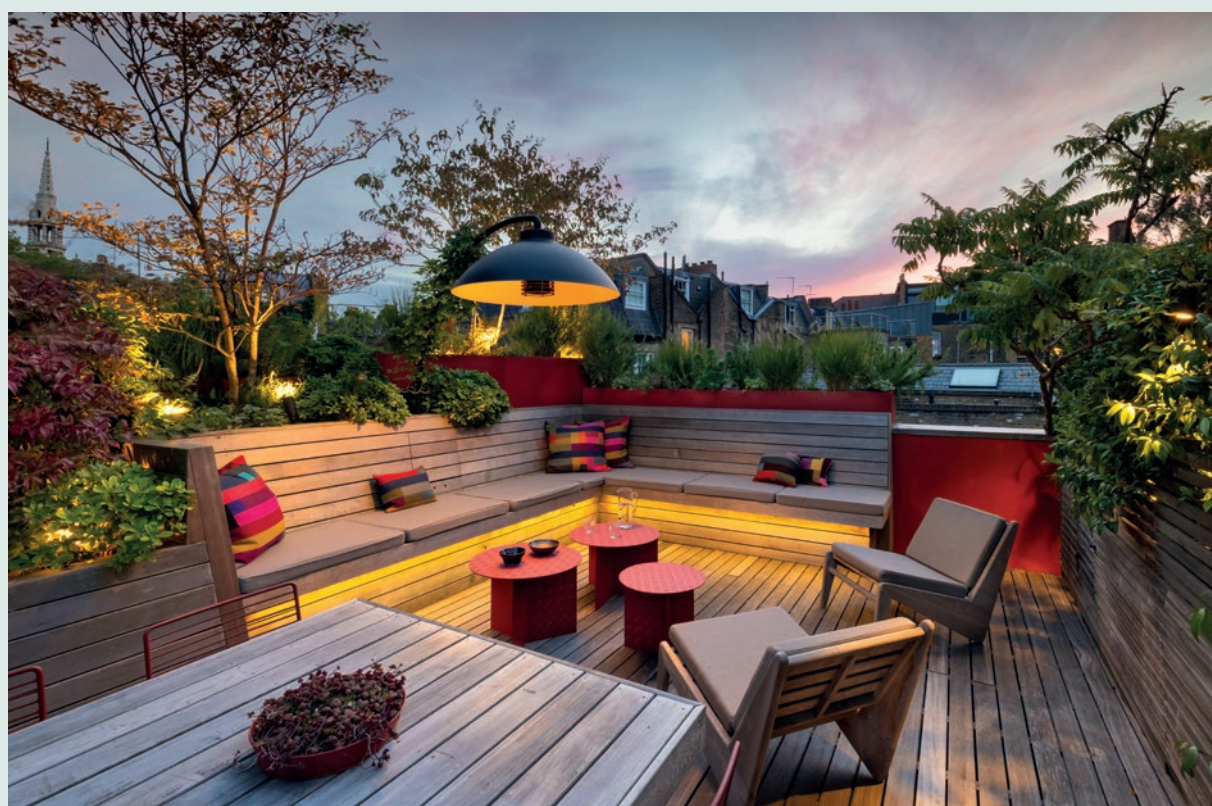
WHO'S WHO

Contractor, Town & Country Gardens, tandcg.co.uk

Nurseries, Palmstead Nurseries, palmstead.co.uk; Deepdale Trees, deepdale-trees.co.uk

Lighting, Garden Lighting London, gardenlightinglondon.co.uk

Metalwork, T Brown & Sons, tbrownandsons.co.uk



**ADOLFO
HARRISON
MSGLD**

began his career as an artist in London and Barcelona and having completed

a Masters in Fine Art, went on to study garden design and horticulture at the English Gardening School, including a year at The Chelsea Physic Garden. He set up his own studio in London and alongside his own design work (two of his gardens, to date, have won the SGLD Judges' Award), he teaches garden design at KLC and the Norfolk School of Gardening. He has sat on the selection panel for the RHS Chelsea Flower Show and he is also co-founder of Cityscapes, working alongside co-curator Darryl Moore, a pre-registered member of the SGLD, to encourage innovation and creativity in landscape and horticulture.

adolfoharrison.com

A large Corten steel planter and the dining table, which was made with timber carefully matched to the existing decking, form an L-shaped wall that hides and protects the skylight in the floor, which is the means of access to the roof garden. All the fittings on this terrace are temporary, so no planning permission was required.

Small changes on the first-floor terrace have provided visual impact. The red wall and furniture inject depth and contrast, while red pots have been deployed next to existing planters and decking, to help boost planting density and a new palette of plants has created the desired intimate feel.

The roof garden on the level above, meanwhile, has perhaps undergone rather more changes. For planning reasons, the existing wood screening had been positioned away from the terrace perimeter, resulting in wasted space. Here, Adolfo incorporated planters with the screening, to allow multi-stemmed *Rhus typhina* 'Dissectum' to be added, anchored so they not only provide a sense of structure in the space but offer shelter against the inevitably breezy roof-top conditions.

Other Mediterranean style plants used on the roof include sun-loving *Pittosporum* and *Salvia*, although there

is shade and shelter from a nearby tree canopy. 'Everything up here is actually temporary, from the planters to the furniture, so none of the changes needed planning, but we had to be careful about adding weight,' Adolfo explains.

Although the owners are not green-fingered, the garden, which won the Society of Garden + Landscape Designers' Roof, Podium or Raised Courtyard Garden Award in 2025, is in good hands. The landscaping team that planted it now maintains it, so they understand the different requirements and the desired look. Adolfo also enjoys returning to see it. 'When you enter the house at ground level, you're already one storey above the courtyard and the view through to the core, with its planters and of course the ladder, seen through the shimmering birch canopy, has immediate impact,' he confides. 'It's so surprising, and to me, really pleasing.' ●