

The Green Guy

A man with short dark hair, wearing a green patterned short-sleeved shirt and dark trousers, is sitting on a large, moss-covered tree root in a lush forest. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. The background is filled with dense green foliage and sunlight filtering through the trees.

New Zealander Ross Palmer has designed everything from roof gardens in New York to a 60-hectare market garden on Cape Cod for a fabulously wealthy American, to the grounds for an eco-school near Mumbai in India. But these days Phuket is his base, and although he still has a couple of commissions in his native country, Thailand is very much the focus of his business, to which he brings a strong dose of his own philosophy.



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What brought you first to Phuket?

In 1998 I started work on the movie *The Beach* – I helped design and then orchestrate a whole series of sets...

***The Beach* was embroiled in an environmental row because of changes made in a national park. You were the infamous fellow who “ruined Maya Bay”?**

That was me. I took 60 coconuts out to Phi Phi Lay and we changed dune systems temporarily – there was never any question that we would leave it like that, and we didn't. We put it all back the way it was. In fact, we had to do an environmental impact assessment that satisfied the Thai government before we could even start.

Partly because of their agreement with the Thai government and partly because of the pressure [from environmental protesters] the studio renewed my contract for another 18 months after shooting ended, and I came back to report and to do any necessary remedial work. I was here for three years on and off. They kept on paying me to come back – it was a great lark. Later on, the Thai government flew me out from Britain to deliver a speech on dune system rehabilitation.

Of course, movie work's not really design. I wouldn't do it again. Everything is for the camera. The camera and the director are God.

I decided I could set up a practice here. When I first came here in 1998, no one would even

consider hiring a landscape architect, apart from 5-star resorts – and then the architect would come with a nominated landscape consultant. There was almost no property development. No one wanted any design per se. So at first it was incremental, like everything.

Why would anyone need a landscape architect? Many developers and private owners seem to manage without.

A lot of people are very confused as to what landscape architecture is. It is literally architecture in and of the landscape. It is how a building sits in the landscape and this is often achieved by structures, plants and so on. It's a more holistic discipline than architecture.

Most architects don't look at land form – they alter the landscape to fit the buildings. Part of the services I offer [is to mitigate problems from this]. It's amazing to me that anyone should want to make the landscape conform to the architecture rather than the architecture being responsive to the land form. But still few architects bring in the landscape architect at the early stages.

How did you get started?

My parents pushed me into a science degree – as my mother said, “There's no money in art, dear.” I got a degree in horticulture and worked in a landscape outfit with an eccentric New Zealander, a company that did all these crazy

things. And after I moved to London I designed a couple of gardens.

But at 27 I started a degree in landscape architecture at the University of Greenwich. It was one of the most wonderful things. It was a fantastic luxury. They even gave me an extra grant for being a mature student.

What is your style?

I don't really have one. I suppose my style is quite eclectic. I try to pare down and minimise the amount of plants that I use. I like to see strong pattern, with plants and hard materials working together in a certain way, and so I've never got my on just what the plants are doing but also on what the hard materials are doing and the cues that are coming off the architecture.

Every site you respond differently to, and every brief you respond differently to. The needs of a resort are quite different from the needs of a private home, for example. The way things get organised spacially is part and parcel of the route to the design.

What constraints irritate you?

Constraints are never really an issue for me. In fact, if anything, constraints can be used as something to hang a design from. Design is so much about problem solving. That's certainly my approach and it's allowed me to work in so many places. You have various constraints – regulatory, climatic and the client – and that all goes into the brew and then you see what comes out of it at the end.

Are owners a problem? Presumably some have very different ideas from yours.

I'm happy to talk people through the process and most people will accept that. Because I have this approach, it's very rare that people try to put me in this kind of strait jacket. With some clients I have to say, "No, we're not going to work together. It's not going to work." You need to be heading in the same direction, the same ideas.

I don't like conflict. I don't want to bash my head against a wall – it's deeply uncomfortable. So with some clients, politely, no, it's not going to work.



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I'm not an artist. I'm not trying to make a point. Damien Hirst is making a point about the human condition, and he's lucky to be hugely talented. A real artist will come from a position of an intellectual point that they are making.

But landscape architecture is more akin to [building] architecture – it should fulfill the client brief and respond to its situation. In terms of stylistic issues that you might have with a client, when you begin to design it's the battle you come across most often until people start to recognise [your abilities]. In the early days you are at the whim of people who say, "That's what I want and you make it happen."

At my stage in my career, if people don't know what I'm doing, they work it out when they begin to talk to me and if it's not going to work it's not going to work, so I tend not to have those kinds of battles now.

But there is, nonetheless, an large intellectual element to garden design, isn't there?

People tend to see themselves – mankind – as separate from nature. There's this twin-track world we're supposed to live in. But it's just *so* not true. This understanding informs everything I do. I'll look at the system that exists on the land. In my head there is no split between man and nature, and so I never worry about seeing the hand of man in any of my designs. The act of gardening is an act of control.

Garden design is four-dimensional because you have the element of time – gardens are not static.

It's pretty much about light and space. Enclosed space, open space. What's the intent? Why are you manipulating it in that particular way?

I went to an art installation in London many years ago and the artist was playing with the information we receive. There were doors and you'd walk through them into these big dark patches and there was a pinpoint of light at the end, so you would walk towards that. What he did was change the surfaces you walked on. You couldn't see what the surface was. He did one area in peat, which is completely soft. And everyone stopped and went, "Ooh! that's weird. What *is* that?"

On a flat street, you can walk along looking at your friend and chatting with him. But if you're walking through a forest you spend most of your time looking down because of the tree roots. You can't rely on the walking surface.

I'm very interested in this, forcing people sometimes to break their step. In a garden in London I placed three rills across the path, out of step. I wanted to make people aware that they were crossing something. I don't believe life must always be comfortable, so why must gardens always be comfortable?

There's a balance, though, isn't there?

Oh yes. You're still on the brief. You don't want to be teaching people lessons every five minutes. It's got to be practical. But you can still do it.

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metaphors, so it becomes a journey. All landscape for me is about journeying.

Japanese gardens are based on life's journey. In some Japanese gardens the cues are cultural – you have to be Japanese to understand them. It's all allegory. Anyone skilled in Japanese thought can walk through Kyoto and get a message about life. Those Japanese bridges – those crazy little half-moon bridges – they're hard to climb. They're to remind you that life is not linear and every so often there are difficulties, though you can get across them. It's those kinds of elements that excite me. That's my fun.



'Japanese gardens are based on life's journey.' – Photo by Kamui

And you can do the same thing with light.

Exactly. If you have a big space, you can close things right down to a tunnel so that the vegetation and foliage come right around you. If you curve it, all you can see is leaves. You're not necessarily going to see where you're going. Or there may be a pinpoint of light at the other end to draw you on.

It's a device. A garden is not necessarily a place that is all comfortable. For example, the light in Phuket can be very harsh, so making someone cross an open space will make them appreciate the shade all

the more.

Design's not all about style and aesthetic – there are many other factors that come into play. Juxtapositions and harsh things are not necessarily bad. It's the same as changing your step, to make you aware that life is not easy for everybody all the time.

Do you get clients who don't like that?

I don't necessarily tell them, and most people don't work on that kind of level. But I'm highly collaborative. I like to work with people who can park their egos and feel comfortable with who they are and not feel they are being subsumed; that their voices are being listened to.

Life's just a bit of a game really, isn't it? If you're going to enjoy it properly and not do a disservice to the world, design's a positive place to put your brain.

This interview appeared in Property Report Thailand and, in abridged form, in Urbis Landscape magazine in New Zealand.