

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

Wirtz International's Gardens of Earthly Delight

AT THE EMINENT BELGIAN LANDSCAPE-DESIGN FIRM WIRTZ INTERNATIONAL, SHAPES ARE AS IMPORTANT AS PLANTS. HEDGES ARE SHORN INTO CURVING COILS THAT WANDER DREAMILY ACROSS PRISTINE LAWNS, WHILE SHRUBS ARE TRIMMED INTO CLOUDLIKE FORMATIONS THAT SEEM TO BILLOW. ARTIFICIAL HILLS ARE CAREFULLY GRADED, THEIR GENTLE SWELLINGS ADDING MOVEMENT TO PARKS AND GARDENS. THE EFFECTS ARE BOTH STATELY AND SLIGHTLY SURREAL. TAKE A WALK THROUGH SOME OF THE GREATEST WORK IN THE FIRM'S SIX-DECADE-PLUS HISTORY IN AD'S EXCLUSIVE SLIDE SHOW.

Text by Mitchell Owens/Photos Courtesy of Wirtz International



Like a network of green walls, towering beech hedges and lower stretches of clipped boxwood create zones of privacy for an elegant redbrick manor house located between Brussels and Antwerp, Belgium. Breaking up the boxwoods' severity are weeping trees whose branches tumble over the crisp geometric shrubbery. A vast oval of imposing English oaks encircles the property, diffusing neighboring rooflines.



Jubilee Park occupies some six acres in the Canary Wharf area of London. The garden's celebratory name has a prosaic reality—beneath it is a retail mall and subway station for the Jubilee line, whose entrances are glass canopies at two corners of the property. The plantings installed by Jacques and Peter Wirtz evoke a prehistoric forest, with towering dawn redwoods dotting the undulating lawns and ornamental grass in raised beds. Winding through the center of the garden are 22 individual waist-high pools, paved in blue limestone and interspersed with splashing fountains. The series resembles a meandering stream. The park's artful curves and hillocks contrast with the towering glass office buildings around its margins.



Infelicitous dimensions—narrow width, great length—frequently challenge town-house gardens. To give one such property in Brussels an unexpected sense of grandeur, the firm planted a sculptural boxwood parterre whose crisscrossing gravel paths give it a mazelike character. This is sheltered on three sides by hornbeam trees, tightly spaced and formally clipped, their upper branches screening out adjacent houses and their trunks providing rhythm and structure.



Wirtz International's garden for a guesthouse at the Creuzburg, Germany, headquarters of beech-wood exporter Pollmeier incorporates rectangular reflecting pools that resemble narrow canals. In addition to providing structure, the pools bring the aesthetic pleasures of the neighboring Itha river even closer. Their linearity is relieved by clumps of feathery grasses and spreading masses of water lilies.



In the gardens of a country estate in eastern Belgium, the firm softened a modern swimming pool by planting perpendicular beds of ornamental grasses, some of which spill over onto the gray-white coping. A tall hedge maintains privacy and segregates the pool from the property's orchards of espaliered fruit trees.



Boxwood hedges surround the geometric parterre at Het Pand, a small city garden in Ghent, Belgium, located on the grounds of a cloister. Meticulously clipped squares, crosses, and triangles hark back to medieval times, while the hip-high silhouettes add modern panache. The rejection of colorful flowers condenses the garden's palette to shades of green that offset the gray-stone walks and the redbrick buildings along its perimeter.



For clients in Hakone, Japan, Wirtz International combined its hallmark undulating clipped greenery with a subtle serpentine earthwork. Seemingly scratched into the ground, the shallow, pebble-lined rill follows the hedges for a distance before whiplashing away as it advances toward a circular pool. The hedges are cunningly designed as well, their rounded silhouettes marching in parallel lines down the hill from the clients' house, skirting bushes and clumps of trees as they make their descent.



Like giant cushions, artificial hillocks of ornamental grasses transform the Coesfeld-Lette, Germany, campus of Ernsting's family, a clothing retailer, into a living sculpture garden for its employees. Walkways follow the softly contoured wedges of greenery, which oppose the stern, modern buildings designed by David Chipperfield Architects, Santiago Calatrava, and Schilling Architekten.



For homeowners in Brussels, Wirtz International used its signature rounded hedges to soften a contemporary stucco house. The shapeliness of the clipped boxwood is a counterpoint to the building's crisp profile, while the lush color enlivens its spare gray walls. The ribbons of shrubbery stretch from the back of the house to the rear of the property, separating the swimming pool from a free-form greensward planted with trees.



A parade of clipped hornbeam trees intersects with the reflecting pool of a house between Antwerp and Ghent, to create a giant cross. The trunks of the trees act as a screen that divides the property without blocking sight-lines; indeed, the spacing of the hornbeams offers shifting viewpoints as they frame various parts of the garden.



One of Wirtz International's best-known projects is its revitalization of Paris's Jardin du Carrousel. Among the firm's improvements to the garden—built atop underground parking and exposition halls—are grassy circles surrounded by hedges. Punctuated by statues by Aristide Maillol, the spaces serve as green rooms. There are also a dozen extravagantly long yew hedges planted in a ray formation that recall the nickname of Louis XIV, the Sun King.



Outside the Antwerp Law Courts in Belgium, the company oversaw the creation of four gardens slotted in and around the modernist complex by British architect Richard Rogers. The most striking garden marches along the main façade, adjacent to Bolivarplaats, a high-traffic square. Here, 98 London plane trees are planted in grid formation, the tops trimmed and trained to give them an umbrellalike shape that casts splintered shade onto the pavement.



Wirtz International's revamping of the median of Albert II Boulevard—the Brussels roadway named for Belgium's king and edged with modern glass buildings—transformed the area into an urban forest. A border of deciduous trees (oaks and honey locusts) provides shifting seasonal colors, while the center of the four-section park is given over to crisscrossing paths bordered with evergreens whose deep tone and flamelike shapes are revealed in winter.



Though the centerpiece of the gardens for England's Alnwick Castle, home of the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland, is an astounding 260-foot-long serpentine water cascade offering computerized fountain displays, Wirtz incorporated small, quieter features as well, such as this fountain pool fed by a pebble-lined rill and surrounded by fastigate oaks.