



The green team

Harris Bugg Studio, a new partnership between landscape designers Hugo Bugg and Charlotte Harris, is leading the duo to create ever more challenging garden vistas. Words by *Fiona McGowan*.

Jordan, lying immediately to the west of Israel, is a fascinating nation. An ancient kingdom, it's one of only two Arab states to have made peace with its neighbour – after 46 years of war. On its eastern border is Syria, across which many hundreds of refugees have flooded from the devastation in their country. King Abdullah II is Head of State and Commander in Chief, with the power to appoint – and sack – governments. Like Israel, the country has few natural resources, its power in the region being purely strategic in terms of its pivotal location. Although Islamic radicals threaten to destabilise the nation, it is a very safe country. It is rich in ancient history and the seat of much Arab learning in the Golden Age, attracting thousands of visitors to its monuments every year.

It might seem incongruous to be talking about this Middle Eastern nation with a reputation for aridity while sitting in a big warehouse office in East London, but I'm

with Hugo Bugg, an Exeter-based landscape architect, and his new business partner, Charlotte Harris, talking about their ongoing four-year project to create the Royal Botanic Garden of Jordan. They wouldn't have seemed the obvious choice for a huge social project like this, but the moment they both start talking about the garden, it's clear why these two designers have wowed the organisation's founder, Princess Basma bint Ali.

It hasn't been a straightforward process. "The Royal Garden of Jordan is 400 acres," says Hugo. "It's massive and everything is grown pretty much from seed. It's all native – funding is limited, so we had to go through periods of stop and start with fundraising." Unlike other Middle Eastern nations, Jordan is not oil-rich, and the gardens have not been gifted by the royal family. The idea of a national botanic garden is to preserve and showcase the diverse flora of an entire country – a challenge in itself when only 1% of the natural woodland

remains after deforestation during the Ottoman era, and uncontrolled grazing over the centuries. Both Hugo and Charlotte have an encyclopaedic knowledge of the region, chiming in with each other like a particularly cohesive married couple to explain the range and depth of this project.

The Princess, they say, is as passionate about the Islamic cultural heritage of her country as she is about the plants of the garden. Huge terraces will be built into a hillside on the edge of a wide swathe of a river in between the capital Amman and the city of Jerash to the north. It has to represent not only the five distinct habitats (the north of the country is a fertile Mediterranean environment, while the south is pretty much a desert, while in some wetter parts, the climate is almost tropical), but also the rich history of the country. Charlotte explains: "It's very crispy in summer, but in spring – February..." Hugo chips in, "...it's lush and green," and Charlotte continues, seamlessly, "...very lush, full of wild flowers, tulips, wild irises. Very beautiful." The Princess, they say, is all about intellectual rigour, and they both read up on the symbiosis of geometry, astronomy and design: "Hugo looked at the sacred Islamic sciences and the Islamic Golden Age," explains Charlotte, "so there's a layer of conceptual interpretation where the layout of the space is along certain sacred geometries, aligned to astrology. You may not see it on the ground, but you navigate through it."

It has been an exceptional project and an amazing counterpoint to the other gardens the duo have been working on over the years. Both had been running their own businesses, but their collaboration started four years ago, when Hugo began to pull together a team for the Jordan Botanic Garden. Since then, Hugo says, they've worked on projects that range from a "tiny five by five-metre waterside garden in Newton Ferrers, South Devon, right up to..." Charlotte finishes, "...London gardens of all sizes and country gardens; and cliffside gardens in Cornwall. We've got a 220-acre estate that we're master-planning in the Highlands. We're hoping to get a couple of projects in Ibiza."

It's genuinely rare to see two individuals segueing so easily in conversation, and, they tell me, they also have complementary skills. Both grew up gardening: Charlotte, a self-confessed tomboy, spent her childhood climbing trees and planting with her green-fingered mother and grandmother; Hugo's parents took on a three-acre garden in Devon that was just wilderness and brambles, and many of his early memories are of clearing the land with his dad, hoeing and making bonfires. Their backgrounds, however, are also varied. Charlotte studied History at university "because I couldn't think what else to do. And I loved it." After graduating, she joined an ad agency. "It was exciting and it was a great life, and it was brilliant project-management training," she says. "I was really good at understanding briefs. It also makes



Conceptual images of the Royal Botanic Garden of Jordan

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Gardens are about being lost, and not having everything revealed at once. You do that in the design, in the construction, but the magical reveal is in the planting.

you unafraid to pitch for work. On a marketing side, that's helped a lot." It was only when her parents both died when she was in her late 20s that she "had a wobble" and realised that it wasn't the life she wanted. Quitting the ad agency, she enrolled in landscape design at Merrist Wood College, and then did a construction course "with a load of 16-year-old boys," to learn how it's done. "I think being a woman on site, I had that sense that I don't want to be one of those people who walks in, flounces around and puts a plant in. I wanted to make really robust gardens."

Soon, Charlotte had the good luck to train under renowned garden architect Tom Stuart-Smith – "his planting is sublime" – and it was partly this experience that drew Hugo to work with Charlotte. Her particular skills are her in-depth plant knowledge, project management, pitching for new business, as well as a laser-like analytical mind: "she will always find things I've missed," admits Hugo. "I'm a fault-finder," she says in return, grinning. Hugo, in turn, has complementary skills. He followed a more traditional path into garden design, studying it at Falmouth University, and spending his holidays getting work experience with landscape gardeners. However, his vision is anything but traditional: he was the youngest-ever winner of a Gold Award at Chelsea Flower Show, thanks to his determination to break the mould. His family background is in the arts, and it shows in his imagination, particularly with the use of materials. He invented a new kind of concrete for his 2014 Chelsea Garden, in an effort to recreate a dried-out, cracked earth. He used wide pyramids covered with stretched goatskin, bedouin-style, in his Jordan-inspired garden from 2016, and makes use of unexpected material such as copper, sliced-up boulders and burned wood.

Chelsea, they both agree, is a shopfront. Having both won Golds, they're no strangers to the full-on nature of the show. "Chelsea's a really exposing place – it's the greatest flower show on earth," says Charlotte. "You have 170,000 visitors and it's on TV." With this kind of pressure, it would be easy to go for something safe, but they both saw it as an opportunity to showcase fresh thinking, fresh design. Their Chelsea gardens all have water as a central theme – but not just in a decorative sense. Like many young creatives, protecting



Hugo Bugg and Charlotte Harris

PHOTO: ALLAN FOLLOK MORRIS



Gold winning garden at Chelsea in 2014...



...and winning gold again in 2017

PHOTO: MARINNE MAJERS

the environment is a central tenet of their work. Conceptually, the cracked-earth concrete was supposed to remind us that two-thirds of the world doesn't have enough water, and this year's Chelsea entry was focused on the storage and reuse of water, especially preserving it after storms. They're especially keen to use plants that are of the local vernacular – those that require the least human intervention, especially in drier regions such as the Mediterranean and the Middle East. While most plants will need irrigation for the first couple of years, their aim is always to create self-sustaining gardens.

Charlotte and Hugo are self-confessed workaholics, thanks to their passion and engagement with the entire process of garden design. No matter where they're working or for whom, they are engaged intensely on the project from the first drawings through the construction and the planting to the final snagging and maintenance over the first few years. Hugo explains: "A good designer understands how you will build this thing, and a bad one just gives you some plans, thinking it will look nice – but often it doesn't even work." As for Charlotte, her construction course was key to her ability to get her hands dirty on a job. She says that building the 'skeleton' is as vital as the plants and decorative elements of the garden. Joining forces to form their merger company, Harris Bugg Studio, has given them the chance to have

a bit of a break – knowing that the other can take over with equal dedication means they can actually switch off when they go on holiday, and travel to overseas projects and pitches without worrying about a crisis back home.

With six full-time employees – mostly based in Exeter, although Charlotte maintains her Bethnal Green studio – the company is still small and agile. They are currently at various stages on a total of ten projects, from a roof garden in London to various acreages in the West Country and around the UK. Not to mention the gargantuan task of the Royal Botanic Garden of Jordan. One minute, they might be planning a medicinal garden with a basis in ancient Arab scientific discovery, the next, they might be scrambling about on a cliff in Cornwall. With two such dedicated, talented and passionate individuals, Harris Bugg Studio looks set to grow with the speed of a bamboo forest. But they don't want to grow so big that they lose touch with the physical and emotional side of garden creation, as Charlotte explains: "Gardens are there to transport you somewhere. They're about being lost, and not having everything revealed at once. You do that in the design, in the construction, but the magical reveal is in the planting." ■

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