

THE PROGRESSIVE GUIDE TO GARDENS, PLANTS, FLOWERS

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WITHOUT WALLS

Miria Harris used to work for Damien Hirst - now she's breaking taboos in the garden. Step one, let the neighbours in...

Words – Kate Jacobs Photographs – Ben Harries

GARDEN DESIGNER MIRIA HARRIS is sitting at her clients' kitchen table, telling me about the role that walls, fences and boundaries play in urban gardens. So many people want their home to be their castle, apparently. Neither of us misses the irony as our conversation is punctuated by the ruminations of a neighbour who has wandered in for coffee and a chat, and by a rabble of children. The kids charge around, a cartoonish dust cloud in their wake; first here, then out front, next – a text from another neighbour confirms that they are three doors down. All this is exactly what Harris loves about this project. 'It was the perfect start for me,' she says. 'The big ideas that are at play here resonate with the thought processes that I bring to all my garden designs.'

We're revisiting Harris's first solo project (created for architects Gemma White and Julian de Metz) here at St Anne's Close in north London, a residential enclave designed by architect Walter Segal, who championed self-build housing communities. Segal moved to London from Berlin in 1936 and designed this development for himself and some like-minded friends in the early 1950s. The simple brick homes are built around a communal green, which residents have to walk across after they've parked their cars on the far side. What might seem like a hassle when bringing home the shopping is actually a great way of kick-starting conversations and building communities, interaction and a strong sense of communality are central to the experience of living here; neighbours chat and kids play out in the shared space in a way that feels quite rare in London.

Certainly, this place is bucking the trend. Elsewhere, homeowners are increasingly obsessed with defining their territory, and there are more and more issues around boundaries. 'A lot of people prioritise privacy,' Harris explains. 'They want to know how high the fence can go and would rather keep a big tree that blocks out all their sunlight than be overlooked. But I always make the case for gardens as shared experiences, pointing out that it can be really lovely to chat over the fence with neighbours and to get the benefit of plants growing through from other people's gardens.'

However, boundaries remain a fact of life, particularly in smaller urban gardens. 'While I'd love to magic them away,

I realise that fences and walls are part of the fabric of city living,' Harris says. 'I've reconciled myself to factoring them in, but I try to soften and blur them wherever I can.' She does this in a number of simple ways, such as including a strong vertical element in her designs with lots of climbers. 'In the city, where space is limited, plants need to travel upwards as well as across the plot.' In addition to greening up boundaries, she often encourages clients to opt for fences with generous gaps. 'For me, shadow-play is key to the experience of a garden. To see sunlight leaking through fences or trellis and filtered by planting is part of what brings it to life.' And where relationships with neighbours are good she likes to suggest a gate, or a gap in a hedge, to link back gardens 'so spaces can be more fluid, especially where children are involved. For kids, three gardens will always be better than one,' she says. Given Harris's thoughtful approach, it's no surprise to learn that she took a sideways route into garden design after a career in the art world. Her first job was with Damien Hirst, running his studio and producing his installations. She then went on to become a curator, specialising in projects that place public art within the landscape. 'One of the artists that I worked with back then was Richard Wentworth. I love the way his art explores our relationship to landscape and the built environment.'

In her teens, Harris had planned to become a landscape architect and eventually the pull of this idea became too strong to resist. 'The romance of the natural world drew me back in,' she says. 'But it's not such a career leap. Gardens and plants are a bit like artists in that they don't always conform to what you want and you have to work with that!' She retrained at Capel Manor, before working under RHS Chelsea gold medal-winning designer Jinny Blom. 'Jinny comes from a psychology background and spoke a lot about the therapeutic side of what we do, the ways that plants can change how people feel about where they live.'

All this has come into play in creating a back garden here that blurs the boundaries between house and garden, and the garden and the wider landscape. Many of the houses on the close, including this one, added a rear extension a few years back, having collectively agreed on a single shared design that's sympathetic to the original buildings – an impressive



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indication that community spirit still burns brightly here. Harris wanted to subsume this extension into the garden so that it is all but invisible. 'Buildings sometimes become part of the garden in my designs,' she says. The new walls are covered by climbers including a *Holboellia latifolia*, a vigorous evergreen that intertwines with clematises and merges into the green of the sedum roof above.

When it comes to planting, Harris looks for movement and animation to bring a filmic quality to her gardens, 'to give a flickering glimpse through tall, waving grasses of a child at play'. On the slope that rises behind the Highgate home, she has ditched the traditional approach of small plants at the front and tall at the back, in favour of a diaphanous screening of *Molinia caerulea* 'Transparent' grass dotted throughout the

bed. 'It creates a lacy veil that is punctured by flowering perennials such as Japanese anemones, sanguisorbas, salvias and astrantias.' As with all Harris's designs, the view from house to garden is filtered through planting. 'If gardens lay their prospects bare, they're less tantalising,' she says. 'Even the smallest gardens should encourage you to come and explore.'

Some neighbours have given in to the all-too-human impulse to define their territory with fences and hedges, but life here still offers a blueprint for happier city living, and this urban garden was the perfect launchpad for Harris's design career. 'For me, it's not just about choosing the right planting and paving. It's about making spaces where people can enjoy shared experiences.' •



