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The garden rises by 5m between the lower and upper terraces

WORDS: Caroline Beck PHOTOGRAPHS: Joe Fletcher

THE HIGH LIFE

Designer Mary Barenfeld has taken terracing to the next level in this Californian hillside garden



ABOVE The board-form concrete walls were poured on site after consultation with an engineer
RIGHT A deckchair perched on the top terrace, which has views over San Francisco Bay



Mary Barenfeld

Mary Barenfeld runs Mary Barenfeld Architecture, based in San Francisco, and provides architecture and landscape design services, specialising in seamlessly joining inside and outside spaces.

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Influences for design work cuts across all continents, all ages. The skill lies in preventing them from resembling pastiches, or worse, clumsy amalgamations of different cultures and historical time frames. So on the face of it, Rousham, the large bucolic 18th-century garden in deepest rural Oxfordshire, might seem an unlikely influence for an ultra-modernist design for a small urban garden in the steep hills of northern California. But for architect Mary Barenfeld, this was to be her precise starting point. The genius of her award-winning Hilgard garden, which is just over 15m long by 7m wide, with a steep uphill gradient, is that you would never guess it.

Modernist aesthetic

Barenfeld, who practises in both the disciplines of architecture and landscape design, works mainly in the district of San Francisco. The townhouse in Berkeley for which she was given the design brief was built in the mid-1960s as part of a block of four homes, each having a private

backyard that pulls up steeply from the house. Her clients work in technology and graphic design, and have a keen interest in architecture, so wanted to incorporate the bold use of exposed concrete found in the local 1960s Brutalist architecture of the city.

The townhouses have clean lines, with a cedar-shingled roofline and outside walls in flat white planes with a natural wood border. "They had a Japanese aesthetic to them, so this influenced the way I tackled the garden in my choice of building materials and plant choices," Barenfeld explains. But first there was that 5m rise to consider.

On the neighbouring plots, the elevation issue was solved by conventional terracing with monolithic retaining walls in a single material, but Barenfeld felt that this obliterated any unique sense of this landscape, which is so dominated by its geography of hills, water and rock. She also didn't want the challenging gradient to be entirely taken up with vertically obtrusive steps, but instead

"I WANTED TO PULL THE GEOMETRY OF THE SITE GENTLY APART"

used a zig-zagging path upwards; a gentle meander rather than a stiff climb. "I wanted to pull the geometry of the site gently apart, to extend it visually," she explains. And this is where Rousham comes in.

Traditional inspiration

Rousham is an iconic garden created in the 1740s by William Kent, and on every designer's wish list of places from which to absorb and learn. It's all tilting plains, formal geometry in stone and clipped evergreens with tricks of the eye, which make the landscape appear to stretch away far beyond its boundaries. The route is gently directed by pathways and allées with distinctive visual features that catch the attention, yet the overall effect is of a calm, green contemplative space within a natural planting style. This →



“THE TILTING WALLS LOOK LIKE BOULDERS IN A JAPANESE SHINTO GARDEN”

was exactly what Barenfeld wanted for Hilgard.

She came up with the concept of a traversing walkway that links the lower and upper terrace, ascending through aromatic groundcover plants such as lemon thyme, bounded by bamboo and overarched by Japanese maples. It is a deliberately slow pathway from the lower terrace, just outside the house, to an upper seating area at the top of the garden.

At night, lights set within the Corten steel panels above the reflecting pond draw the attention up and outwards into the night, so even if you're on the lower white granite terrace, the garden feels boundless.

The upper terrace – which has spectacular views over San Francisco Bay – and lower terrace are linked by the Brazilian hardwood Ipe decking, with a green-and-yellow planting palette of low-growing plants visually pairing the two.

Creating the journey

The aesthetic is clear from the minute you step into the house. From the living room, you see straight through the glass doors out to the reflecting pool – irrigated and drained by a recycled grey water system linked to the house – with three sculptural Japanese maples giving distinct visual punctuation points. The ephemeral elements of the garden, such as the interplay of light and shadow, the reflection on the still surface of the water, and the dynamic weathering of the wood, concrete and metal, are as important to the design as materials and plants. The designer's use of three different varieties of Japanese maple – *Acer japonicum* 'Lovet', *Acer palmatum* 'Aureum' and *Acer buergerianum* 'Goshiki Shidare' – all



“AT EACH SHIFT IN VIEWPOINT, THE ANGLES OF THE GARDEN CHANGE ACCORDINGLY, LIKE A ROCK FACE”

give varying leaf patterns and seasonal colours that echo the materials used within the garden.

But it is the tilting walls that give the space its organic character, looking almost like boulders set within a Japanese Shinto garden. The board-form concrete structures sit on concrete piers that are drilled into the steep hillside (essential due to the seismic nature of the site). The triangular plates attached to the middle section of each wall, with LED lights behind, are panels made of Corten steel.

Barenfeld designed the walls using 3D modelling software. “It is the language that I find best allows me to express my design ideas, especially

LEFT LED lights are hidden behind the Corten steel plates that attach to the central sections of the concrete walls ABOVE Barenfeld used three different Japanese maples in her plans RIGHT She uses 3D modelling software to create her complex designs

those with spatial complexity. I came up with the design through a process of 3D modelling and hand sketching, and then worked with an engineer to coordinate the walls' structure, including how thick they are, where the piers needed to be, how large the grade beams are, and so on.”

Even within one surface, the use of concrete and steel confounds the eye, so at each small shift in viewpoint, the angles of the garden change accordingly, like a rock face. That effect is increased by the subtle planting of golden Creeping Jenny (*Lysimachia nummularia* 'Aurea') and fragrant flowering thyme, which tumble over the edges.

On the lower level, water-jet cut, patterned weathering-steel screens give privacy from neighbours, but also allow the light to filter through the gaps, so the space is confined but not cut off. Bamboos planted behind the screens give movement and texture to this lower terrace without being too visually intrusive, and provide further privacy.

It all seems like a long way from 18th-century Oxfordshire and the Enlightenment garden of Rousham – or so you might think. But there's something in the quiet stillness of Hilgard, combined with a considerable artistic and creative panache in the design, as well as a detailed knowledge of the way plants and materials play off one another, that firmly links a spirit of place across countries, centuries and cultures. ○



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