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Urban Gardener: Cleve West

Outside the box

By Cleve West

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When the topiary specialist James Crebbin-Bailey (www.topiaryarts.com) showed me some pictures of a small front garden in Hampton, Middlesex, I could have kissed him. Fortunately for him, we were at an RHS event and someone had just started to make a speech, so puckering up and embracing in the middle of the Westminster Hall just wouldn't have been appropriate.

To explain, I must take you back to 1999 when a couple sought a contemporary design for the front garden and drive of their 1960s, Span-designed semi. It was the pre-digital age, so my portfolio consisted of 35mm slides and an antiquated but charming rosewood viewing-box that had to be held up to the light to see the picture properly.



Box hedges shaped into doughnuts, inspired by one of Cleve's designs

The client, a vision mixer by trade, seized the opportunity to up the ante by digging out a slide projector and large screen and soon images of show gardens and some of the more innovative projects I'd built to date were gracing the darkened living room, the only notable absence being a tub of popcorn and pre-show Wurlitzer recital. This impromptu slideshow allowed us both to understand each other's preferences and soon I was happy with the brief, to create a contemporary garden and drive that was both visually arresting and easy to maintain.

The design played on a couple of motifs I was drawn to at the time, namely doughnut-shaped box balls and oblique stripes of bricks and exposed aggregate for

the drive pattern. Whether the doughnuts were subconsciously influenced by Martha Schwartz's Boston Bagel Garden I can't say. A plan was drawn up and everyone was pleased. At the time I was at a transition stage, giving up building my own gardens to concentrate more on design. On submitting a quotation from my contractor, I looked forward to treating my hands-on habit to one last fix. But things suddenly went quiet. On enquiring, we were told we were simply too expensive and, being unable to drop our price, "Hampton Doughnuts" slipped quietly down the "live" column on the project board.

Occasionally I would come across a copy of the plan, and would wonder what might have been. I even thought of using the idea for a show garden, but no one I knew could supply box doughnuts at a moment's notice. The garden, with its whimsical lilt, was destined to become another paper landscape, a garden of the mind – that is until James began scrolling through the pictures on his camera where strange box rings like giant green inner tubes, nay doughnuts, began to appear. The garden had been built after all and James, who hadn't banked on my reaction and was looking a bit nervous, had been asked to maintain it.

Feeling that I'd just been given news of a long-lost relative I contacted the client to arrange a visit. As I approached the garden I laughed thinking I'd asked for the house number. You can spot it a mile off. It turns out that the drive and steps had been built by a local contractor who was fired after he failed to grasp exactly how the sculptural planting should work. The clients took this on and did a fine job, even heeding my advice to encourage a tree-aspiring cotoneaster and to make sure that the doughnuts weren't uniform or level. More recently, when the odd gap in the box hedging began to appear, they decided to employ James's skills as a topiary specialist, which brings us up to date. I'm still taking it all in. I was so pleased to see it I didn't ask the crucial question: "Why didn't you let me know it had been built?" But who cares?

There's still room for improvement. A tweak here and there to animate the doughnuts even more. James will be applying fertiliser this season to encourage new growth to fill some bare patches in both topiary and lily turf (*Ophiopogon planiscapus* 'Nigrescens'). As I made ready to leave, the clients also pointed out that armoured-cable was in position and ready for the blue lights I had specified in my original design. "Blue lights? Oh my God!" I cried, "That's so 1990s!" I bet they're wishing James had kept the pictures to himself now.