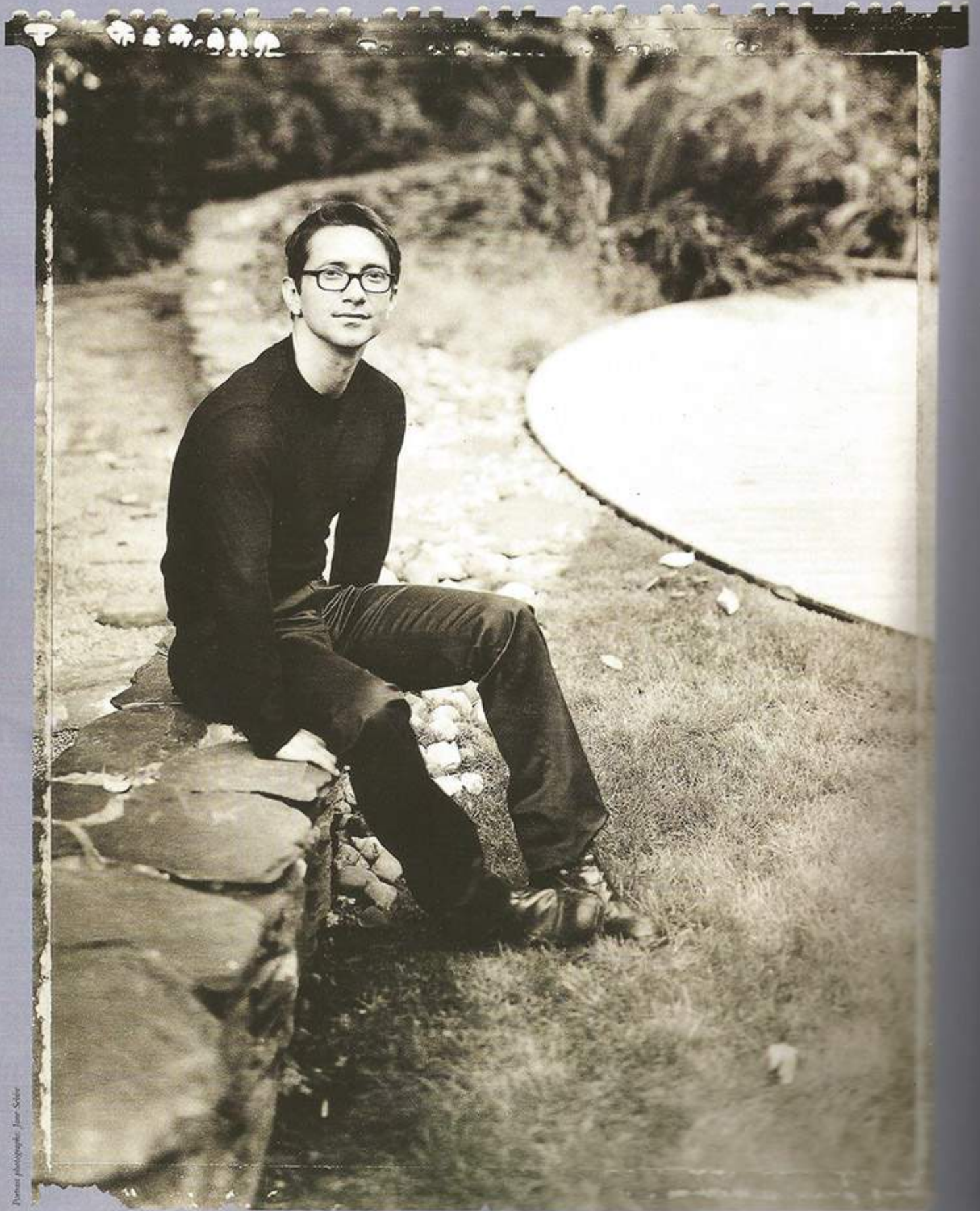


# Designer Profile



Designer photography: Jean Seiler

## ROBERTO SILVA

Robert Silva has spent a good many of his 37 years studying, but is now carving a name for himself as one of London's brightest young designers.

Born in Pernambuco in northern Brazil, Roberto spent his childhood weekends on his father's farm. "I was surrounded by nature, and learned to love plants from an early age," he says. This led to his decision to study agronomy when he left school, and he spent the next five years learning about crops and soil science. At the end of the course, however, Roberto decided that farming wasn't for him – "I wanted to be more creative" – and he took himself off to São Paulo to do a year's specialisation in landscape architecture. During the year, he discovered the work of Roberto Burle Marx, and became fixated with it, visiting every garden he'd designed in the area. Subsequently, he remained in São Paulo to work for a company specialising in garden restoration, but had to go back home when his father became ill. This was when his career took an unexpected turn. "I wanted to be near my parents during my father's illness, so I opened a cosmetic shop with my mother," he says. He juggled this with being a farm manager. Two years later, in 1992, he was on his way to Britain, with the intention of becoming a garden designer set firmly in his mind. But first he had some more studying to do. Learning English was a priority, and Roberto also wanted to develop his knowledge of plants and garden design. Between 1995 and 1996 he studied horticulture and landscape design at Capel Manor, working part-time in the Fulham Palace Garden Centre. As if he hadn't taken enough exams already, in 1997 he started a three-year MA course in Landscape Design at the University of Greenwich, managing to find time in between to start his own design company. Today Roberto's business is thriving. Most of his commissions are in London, but he hopes to expand his business by designing gardens in Brazil. "Working in two countries would be exciting. I'd be working with completely different palettes of plants and completely different sensibilities. Because there isn't a strong garden tradition in Brazil, they are more open to design-led gardens, especially in cities like São Paulo." Roberto works from home, a basement flat in Wandsworth. "I'm more relaxed at home, so my ideas flow better. My designs would be too rigid if I was in an office!"

## design philosophy

"I think garden design should be a cross-fertilisation of all the other arts and media, like painting, sculpture, theatre, architecture and graphic design," says Roberto. One of the most distinctive aspects of his work is that he approaches design from an artistic stance – like Roberto Burle Marx, who designed his gardens as if they were paintings. You won't find Roberto Silva working out measurements on his first visit to a garden – he's more likely to be soaking up the atmosphere. "I think I'm quite intuitive in the way I work," he says. "I don't want to be restricted." He presents his first ideas to the client in the form of a fluid, abstract sketch, usually coloured with felt-tip pens. "I always draw a design first. I never use a computer – I was brought up to use my hands." He favours a bold approach, with strong simple lines and architectural foliage plants. Colour is used in a painterly way with dabs and splashes of intense colour rather than large blocks, and colour schemes are planned carefully for each season.

## fact file

Roberto Silva

Age: 37

Born: Pernambuco, Brazil

Lives: basement flat, Wandsworth, in southwest London

Studio: a corner of his flat

Studied: BA Agronomy, University of Pernambuco, and MA Landscape Design, University of Greenwich

Transport: Jeep

Essential kit: Pantone double-ended felt-tip pens for sketches; Berol Carismacolor coloured pencils for masterplans

Won't leave home without: notebook and umbrella – "essential in this country"

## influences

- Landscape designer Roberto Burle Marx (1909-1994). "I like the way that he approached gardens in a free form way. He used lots of bold shapes and bold lines, and was really the first at that time to think like that."
- The artist Jackson Pollock. "I like the spontaneity in his paintings. He was an artist completely in touch with his involuntary memory. I think to create something completely new we have to learn how to forget."
- The architect Zaha Hadid. "Her work is very powerful, with shapes that could easily be adapted in gardens."
- Different media: everything from theatre to graphic design. He collects photographs and cuttings of architecture, sculpture, paintings and objects: "Sometimes it's just the shape of a cup that inspires me."
- Books and magazines: Roberto has a bookcase devoted to garden books that he uses frequently.

## trademarks

- Long lines: "I like to work with long lines. It's a simple idea, but the line can become lots of different things. It may become a seat, or it could turn into a flight of steps. The line could be anything from the edge of the lawn to a long, low wall."
- Bold architectural foliage and interesting textures. "Plants can work as sculpture."
- Traditional materials used in modern ways. "Things like brick and York stone can be used in contemporary ways."

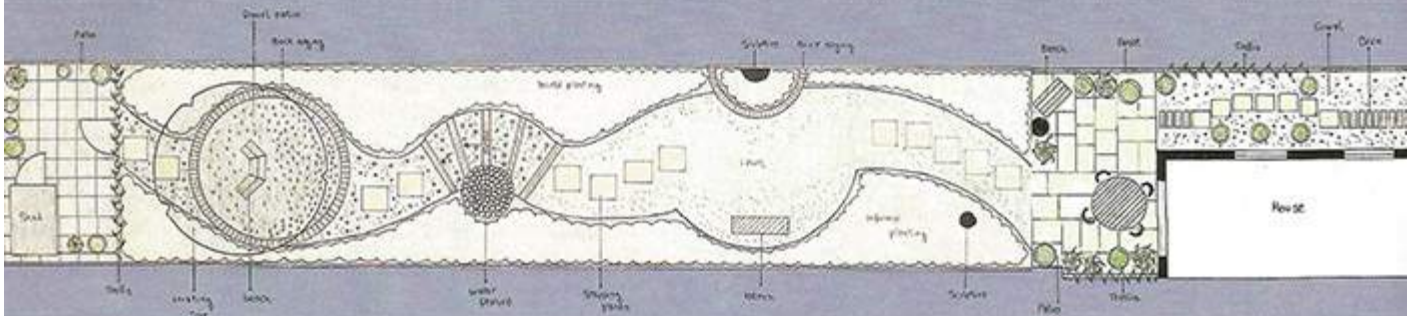
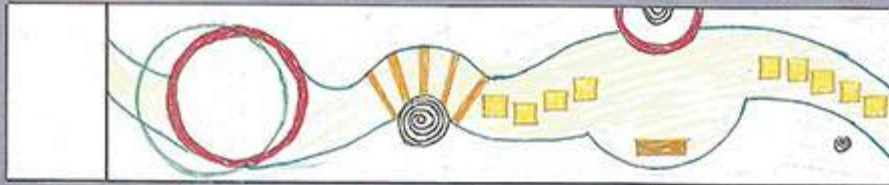
# On-going projects

## Queen's Park garden

One of Roberto's on-going projects (still in its very early stages) is the design for a garden in northwest London. The site is typical of many city gardens in that it is long and narrow (60x20m). "You find that most gardens like this are divided up into three sections by trellis work or fencing," says Roberto, "but I like the idea of using long lines. You will be able to see up the length of this garden, although the view will be broken up with large plants like amelanchier to create surprises." The limestone seating area by the house will look out onto a narrow grass path with stepping stones, which have wide borders either side. The perspective widens and narrows along the length of the garden, creating curves to offset the shape of the site. Where the lawn widens, Roberto envisages a simple oak seat opposite a sculpture, water feature or plant to create a focal point.

Beyond this, the lawn ends, and a gravel path curves round another water feature – "probably a millstone feature, or something low" – and culminating in a circular seating area under an apple tree. A paved working area with a shed at the far end of the garden will be screened with trellising, which will eventually be covered with climbers.

RIGHT: THE QUEEN'S PARK GARDEN AS IT IS TODAY. BELOW: THE ORIGINAL CONCEPT DRAWING AND MASTERPLAN FOR THE LONG, NARROW GARDEN.



## visual references



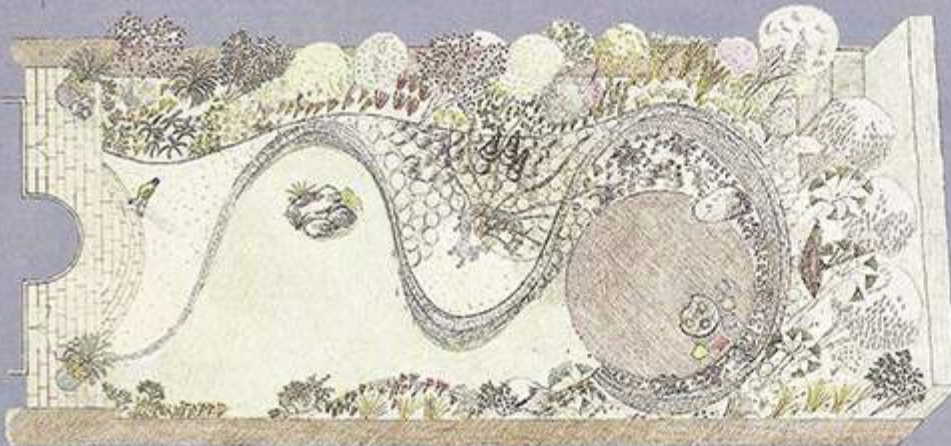
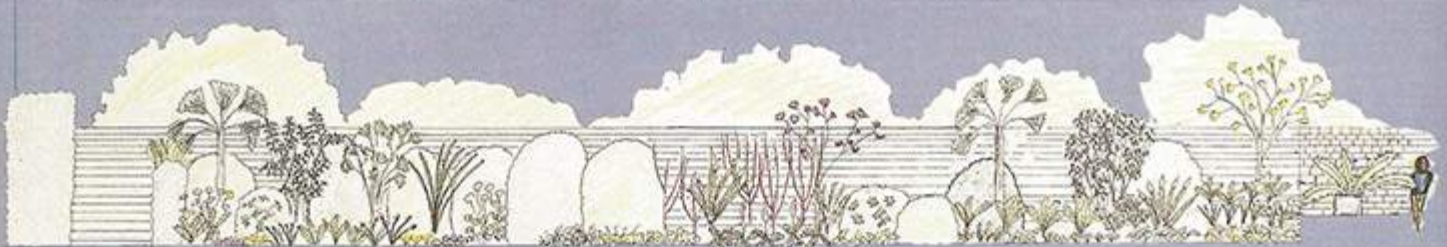
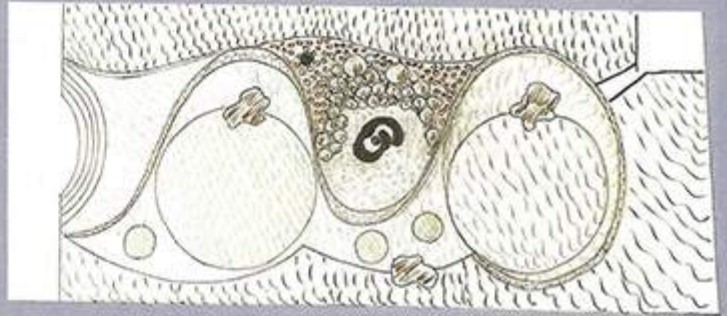
LEFT: A DESIGN BY BRAZILIAN LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT ROBERTO BURLE MARX. HIS INFLUENCE CAN BE SEEN IN MUCH OF ROBERTO SILVA'S WORK. ABOVE: COLLAGES BY THE FRENCH LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT YVES BRUNIER.

## Putney Garden

In 1999, while still studying landscape design at the University of Greenwich, Roberto was commissioned to design a large family garden in Putney, London. The south-facing site is approximately 40x30m, with neighbouring gardens either side, and a railway running along the bottom boundary. Roberto's solution was to divide up the space with a long, sinuous line of grey Welsh slate, which eventually snakes round to enclose a circle of iroko wood decking. The slate 'wall' undulates in height to give the impression of movement along its length. In the middle of the garden an existing cherry tree was kept to form a central focal point, giving different views from season to season – in spring the ground is carpeted with pink cherry blossom, while in autumn, it is dotted with gold, emphasising the curving lines of the design. With lawn on one side and gravel or stone on the other, the look is balanced and simple. Several large boulders act as natural sculptures, while a series of three stone water features sit by the tree. The garden is bounded on both sides by wooden fences; near the house, the fence is painted grey-blue to mirror the colour of the conservatory. Planting is confined to the edges of the garden, and is kept reasonably minimal. The emphasis is on texture and foliage, with splashes of colour here and there. *Phyllostachys nigra* and spiky phormiums mix with *Acer japonicum* and *Dicksonia antarctica*, while a large clump of brilliant red *Crocsmia 'Lucifer'* provides a daub of colour. The only part of the garden that Roberto prefers to forget is the leylandii hedge that screens the railway line at the bottom – he wanted to put a eucalyptus hedge there, but the clients decided against this



as they thought it would take too long to grow to the desired height. "I was able to express myself in this garden," concludes Roberto, "and was lucky enough to be able to do most of the things I wanted. It was hard work at times to convince the client, but showing them a 3-D axonometric plan and a cross section of how I imagined the planting helped to tip the balance."



TOP: THE GARDEN AS IT WAS. ABOVE: THE ORIGINAL CONCEPT SKETCH AND A CROSS-SECTION DRAWING OF THE PLANTING, SHOWING DIFFERENT HEIGHTS AND TEXTURES. LEFT: THE AXONOMETRIC PLAN THAT HELPED TO CONVINCHE THE CLIENT.