



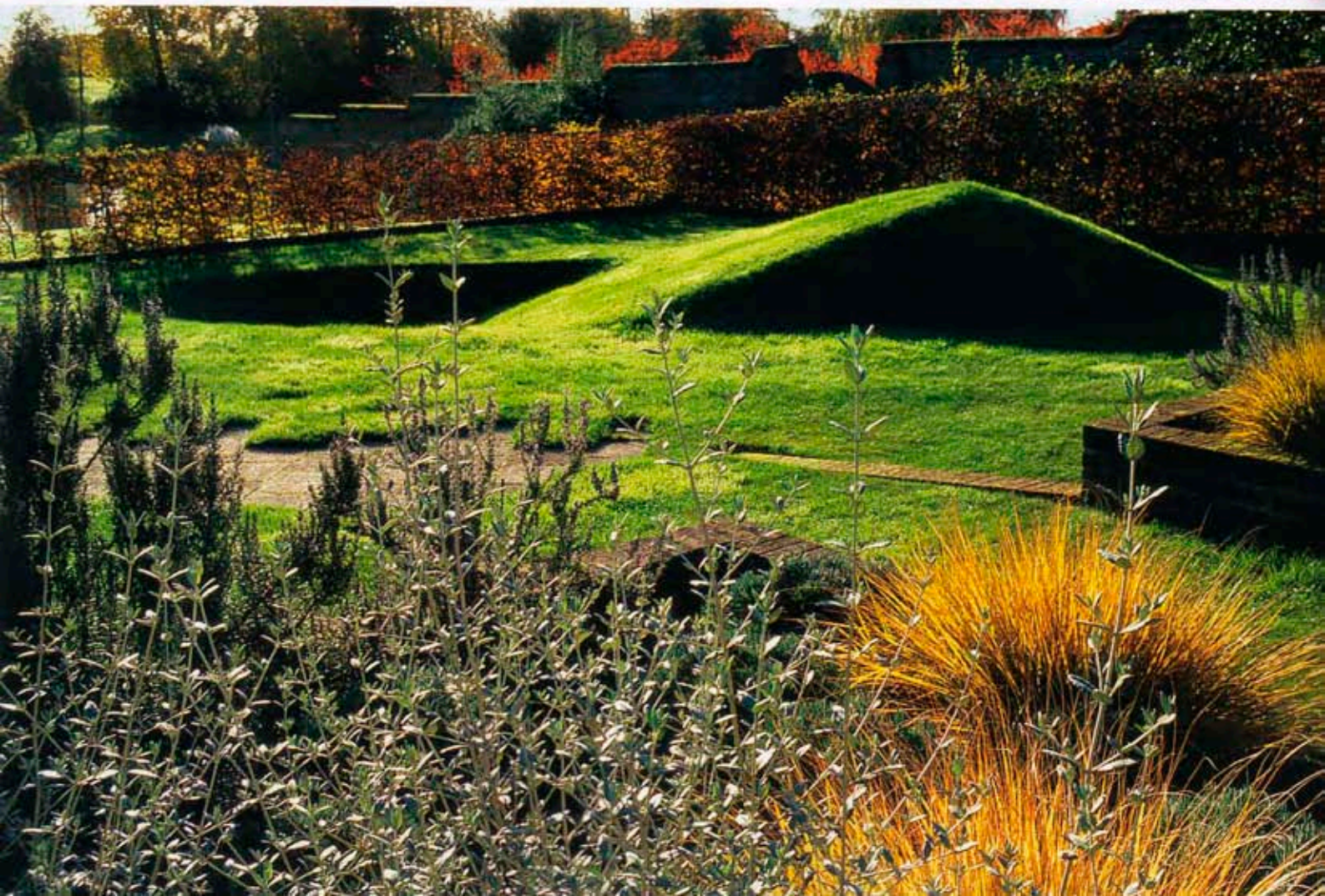
Line of vision

This Essex garden has been enhanced by a new design by Brita von Schoenaich, in which a 'thread' - formed variously by a path, hedge or wall - draws the visitor through five separate compartments

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Vivid autumn planting, including cornus, rubus, miscanthus and *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii*, draws the eye across the lake, seen here from the wide grassy slope that leads down from the new garden. The retention of a sense of space was a vital part of the brief for the new garden, which is contained within an eighteenth-century walled garden, enclosed, unusually, on only three sides, with the fourth side open to this view of the lake



Unlike most gardens and estates open to the public, Marks Hall in Essex has no stately home to provide a focus for visitors. The 200-acre arboretum and neighbouring agricultural estate were bequeathed to the nation in 1966, but the old mansion, requisitioned during the Second World War, had fallen into such poor condition that it was pulled down in 1950. Established in 1971, the Thomas Phillips Price Trust, named after the estate's benefactor, sought to address this lack of a focal point as it set about restoring the then-derelict grounds and gardens. The central walled garden – a grassy slope leading down to a lake, unusually with eighteenth-century brick walls on three sides – was earmarked as a suitable space for redevelopment, and an inspired choice was made in selecting Brita von Schoenaich to design it.

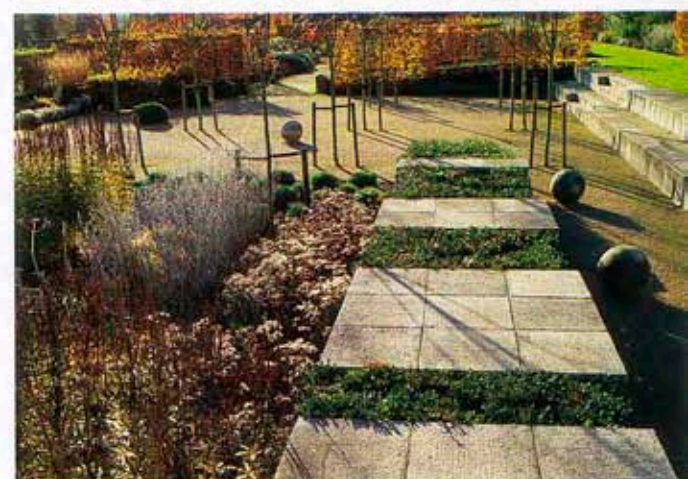
Brita was born in Germany but has practised in the UK since the Eighties. She has built her reputation on bold, modern design coupled with a colourful and strongly graphic style of 'matrix' planting in which linear bands of tall plants emerge from an ever-changing carpet of lower species, including bulbs, perennials and grasses. While she is best known for the gardens outside Tate Britain, her recent projects range from a historic castle in Sweden to an airport in sub-Saharan Africa, and private clients include Cath Kidston and Anish Kapoor. The project at Marks Hall, begun in 2001, appealed to Brita because the members of the trust were so committed to modernity. 'They wanted a truly twenty-first-century garden,' she enthuses. 'But not something self-consciously wacky, using plastic and other such materials. The planting had to be the key element.'

The only brief was that the new garden should not compromise the existing calm, open dignity of the space, so Brita decided to create a new area in a 30-metre-wide section at the top of the sloping lawn, separated from the rest of the walled garden by a screening hornbeam hedge. This works incredibly well. As you approach through the woodland walks, you see, on the opposite side of the lake, the wide grassy slope leading up from it, the strip of ancient brick wall and the backdrop of towering

conifers silhouetted against the sky. The only sign of the new garden is a tantalising glimpse of some of the taller trees, shrubs and grasses that rise above the hornbeam hedge. When you get to the garden side of the lake, your sense of anticipation builds as you climb the grassy bank between high, screening borders and turn the corner into the first of a series of five connecting and contrasting compartments.

Glimpsed over banks of rosemary, silvery *Teucrium fruticans* and luminous *Pennisetum orientale* is an earth sculpture that is stunning in its simplicity. A low pyramidal mound rises from the grass, its mirror image excavated from the earth beside it; the whole structure is clothed in turf. An irregular, paved path leads through a gap between hedges into the next garden, enticing visitors to follow. 'I conceived of the gardens as a series of movements, beginning and ending with a quiet green space,' explains Brita. 'While keeping the calmness of the longer view, I was keen for a more dynamic and exuberant feeling within the garden, that would carry the visitor forwards from one space to another. The earth sculpture is like a giant footstep that kicks off the movement, which continues, like a thread, through all the other gardens, until it disappears.'

In the second space (the summer garden), the wavy line of the path is taken up by a pittosporum hedge that snakes between swathes of summer perennials, including feathery purple fennel, aromatic herbs and *Achillea* 'Moonshine', interwoven with blue agapanthus, bright-pink *Lychnis coronaria* and the woolly lemon spires of verbascum. As the hedge dives into the third and central garden, the 'thread' leaps across a formal paved area in a string of spheres – first clipped box and then stone. Nine *Amelanchier x grandiflora* 'Robin Hill' shade long stone steps along the upper side, while a 'table' of bands of stone and clipped box is bordered by graphic stripes of *Lavandula x intermedia* 'Grosso' and *Iris* 'Deep Black'. By the fourth space (the autumn garden), the thread has become an undulating wall of rendered brick with grey slate coping that swoops between late-flowering perennials such as asters, sedums,



OPPOSITE Across the lake (above), opposite the new garden, planting includes crimson-leaved amelanchier and white-stemmed birch. In the first section of the garden a pyramidal mound (below) rises from the grass beside its excavated mirror image. **THIS PAGE FROM TOP** An irregular, paved path leads into the second part of the garden. A view to the lake is revealed between two garden areas. The third, central area is more formal, with stone spheres and blocks of alternating stone and box. The adjoining border is planted in broad stripes



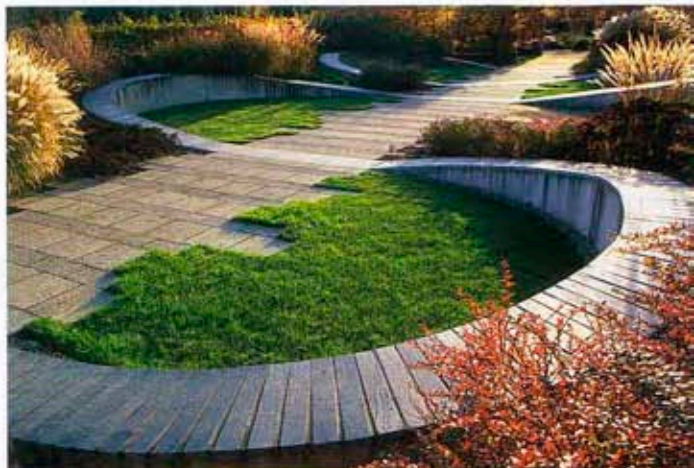
echinaceas, perovskia, *Persicaria polymorpha* and ornamental grasses that persist well into autumn. Finally, in the last garden, the linking thread disappears back into the earth, through a 'pool' of slate tiles in grass that marks the end of the cycle.

'On one level it is a deeply conceptual garden,' muses Brita, 'but you don't have to know or understand the design process in order to enjoy it. The last thing we wanted was signs telling everyone what they should be seeing or thinking as they walk around.' She is happy with the way in which the thread both leads people forward and slows them down as they move from space to space. Indeed, in the fourth garden, one often sees adults walking slowly through the middle of the space, admiring the borders on each side, while their children choose the snaking slate wall, all arriving at the same time. 'The design may be formal, but it's an informal space,' confirms Marks Hall's curator, Jonathan Jukes, who was largely

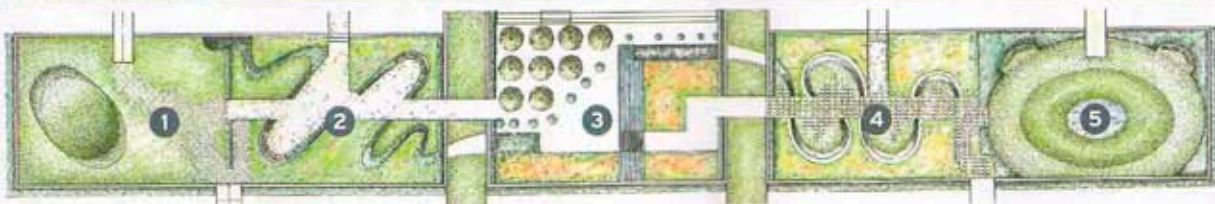
responsible for implementing Brita's design on site. 'We love it when people lounge on the grass banks in the sunshine, or children weave the walls and other elements into their games.'

The garden is designed to have two peak flowering periods – in autumn and summer – and perennials are selected to look good through the winter. As the colours in the flower gardens die down, the focus shifts across the lake, where swathes of cornus, rubus and miscanthus are planted beneath white-stemmed *Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii*, their fiery colours reflected throughout the winter in the still surface of the water □

Marks Hall, Essex (tel: 01376-563796; www.markshall.org.uk), just north of Coggeshall, is open to the public from November to March, Friday–Sunday, 10am–4pm, and from April to October, Tuesday–Sunday, 10.30am–5pm; entrance, £3
 ● Schoenaich Landscape Architects (tel: 020-8948 4445; www.schoenaich.co.uk)



OPPOSITE In the central garden (above), long stone steps are backed by the original garden wall; seed heads and grasses are left uncut throughout autumn and winter to give structure to the planting. The fourth space (below) is dominated by a serpentine wall and abundant grasses. THIS PAGE FROM TOP The slate-and-rendered-brick wall meanders across a central path; hummocks of grasses and other late perennials complement the wall's curves. The progression culminates with a slate 'pool' in a raised grassy area



Grassed earth sculpture (1). Summer garden with pittosporum hedge (2). Central garden (3). Autumn garden with serpentine wall (4). Slate 'pool' (5)