

David Hicks at Riversfield Farm – the closing of a chapter

Piet Vosloo

Department of Architecture, University of Pretoria

E-mail: piet.vosloo@up.ac.za

David Hicks, internationally renowned British interior designer, author and garden designer, designed only three gardens in South Africa of which Riversfield Farm in the KZN Midlands was his last and uncompleted by the time of his death in 1998. In 2005 the owners, with the assistance of prominent South African landscaper Jan Blok, commenced with the construction of the *potager* at Riversfield Farm; the only unbuilt part of Hicks's design. In the article the interpretation of the Hicks sketch plan design by South African landscaper Jan Blok, construction constraints and the completed project are described and illustrated. This project, which can be considered significant in the South African landscape architecture context, is discussed from the perspective of Hicks's own published design approach.

Key words: David Hicks, kitchen garden, *potager*, garden design, Jan Blok, landscape architecture

David Hicks by Riversfield Farm – die afsluiting van 'n hoofstuk

David Hicks, internasionaal erkende Britse binne-ontwerper, skrywer en tuinontwerper het slegs drie tuine in Suid-Afrika ontwerp, waarvan Riversfield Farm in die KwaZulu-Natalse Middellande sy laaste en onvoltooide projek was ten tye van sy afsterwe in 1998. In 2005 het die eienaars, met die hulp van bekroonde Suid-Afrikaanse landskappeerder Jan Blok, begin met die konstruksie van die *potager* (kombuistuin) by Riversfield Farm, die enigste onvoltooide deel van Hicks se ontwerp. In die artikel word die interpretasie van Hicks se ontwerp, konstruksiebeperkings, en die voltooide projek beskryf en illustreer. Hierdie projek, wat beskou kan word as van beduidende belang in die Suid-Afrikaanse landskapargitekturekonteks, word bespreek uit die perspektief van Hicks se eie gepubliseerde ontwerpbenadering.

Slutelwoorde: David Hicks, kombuistuin, *potager*, tuinontwerp, Jan Blok, landskapargitektuur

David Hicks (1929–1998), internationally renowned British interior designer and author, was described by Janet Ramin (2008: 1) as the “superstar designer of the 1960s and 1970s – sought after by royalty and the privileged”. He was also one of the best known and prolific contemporary garden designers who designed gardens all over the world; South Africa can boast three: the gardens at Stellenberg in Cape Town, House Gordon in Johannesburg and the Riversfield Farm in the Kwa-Zulu Natal Midlands. In his foreword to Hicks' *My Kind of Garden* (1999), H.R.H. the Prince of Wales states: “...Hicks' international reputation was built on his talents as an interior designer but ... gardening had always been an underlying passion. In the latter part of his life he devoted his attention more and more to gardens, designing both for himself and for others around the world”

The article gives the historical background to the Riversfield Farm project; discusses the interpretation and implementation of the Hicks designed *potager* (a *potager* can be described as a kitchen or vegetable garden often arranged in beds separated by pathways), based on limited drawings and specifications and from examples of other Hicks designs and the precedent set at Riversfield Farm to motivate the implementation decisions that had to be taken.

The objective therefore is to give a historical perspective of this South African landscaping project by arguably one of the most prominent garden designers of the 20th century and to complete the record of his South African *oeuvre*.

Background

David Hicks was appointed by the owners of Riversfield Farm in 1996 to redesign the garden of the historic farmstead. He prepared a design that included a brick pool pavilion with gothic arched windows, a hipped corrugated iron roof and a swimming pool enclosed by clipped viburnum hedges south of the main house. *Parterre* gardens and smaller pavilions are situated east and north-east, a *potager* to the north and a dove cote in a forested area close by. Shantall (2009: 145) describes the Hicks designed garden as “A sprawling Midlands garden... brought into order and given architectural rigour...”

The work, except for the *potager*, was completed in 2005, seven years after his death, by various plantsmen, including Keith Kirsten, well known South African landscaper and author of gardening books. The Hicks design for the *potager* is shown in figure 1. From the annotations on this drawing it is clear that he intended the garden to be more of a *potager fleurie* (flowering *potager*) than purely a garden for growing vegetables for the kitchen that originated in 17th century Europe. It is not clear if Hicks intended the garden to be a *potager aromatique* (a *potager* with aromatic herb filled borders) as well, since there are no indications on the drawing or from discussions with the owners.

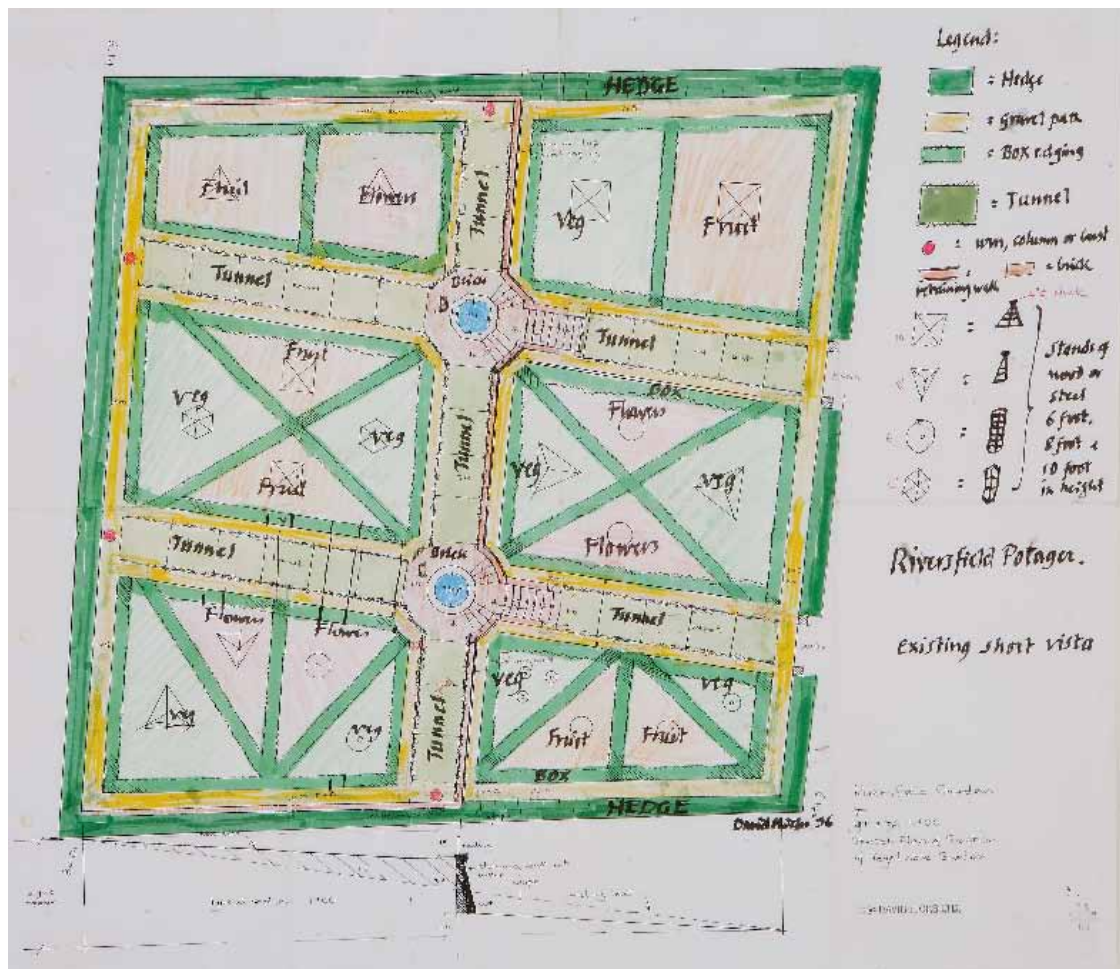


Figure 1
Plan of the Riversfield *potager* by David Hicks 1996
(reproduced with the permission of the David Hicks Estate).

In 2005 the owners commissioned Jan Blok, an acclaimed South African landscaper, to complete the *potager* in accordance with the original Hicks design. The plan by Hicks was not specific about the plant species to be used, merely describing the planting as “flowers, veg and fruit” (refer to figure 1), nor of the details for retaining walls, pergolas and planting stands. Blok interpreted the Hicks drawing with the intention to construct it as closely as possible to the original design. By that time David Hicks had already died (on 29 March 1998). No additional information or drawings were available. However, the design shows that Hicks could well have intended to create a garden of “...mixed beds of vegetables and flowers...so full they border on the cacophonous; gravel paths and precise squared hedges impart calm and order” (Heyman, 2001: 71, describing the *potager* design of John Scharffenberger in Philo, North California).

David Hicks considered the renaissance gardens at the Château de Villandry (circa 1536) near Tours in France as one of the “seven wonders of the world” (1999: 19). He was impressed by the reconstructed (started in 1906) 16th century ornamental vegetable, flower and medicinal garden with its metal framed rose arbours, contrasting with the symmetrical planting beds. In commenting on the Villandry gardens Hobhouse & Taylor (1990: 99) find that “Although this is a garden of great complexity it is never overwhelming. Despite the grave formality of its design, there is about it much vivacity and variety” Jan Blok echoes this description in his own comments on Hicks’s Riversfield Farm *potager* design when he said “I am an ardent admirer of the man’s work, especially its formality, symmetry and the slightly ‘off-beat’ approach that set him apart from other designers” (quoted in Gray & Thunder, 2009: 68).

Hicks (1999: 12) referred admiringly to other prominent garden designers such as Geoffrey Jellicoe, Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll who interpreted formal garden designs with their own very original styles. In this regard he states: “I am so passionate about design, formality, straight lines, symmetry, that I find almost tragic the work of Capability Brown who destroyed so many fine avenues and marvelous English gardens...in order to make the idyllic parkland look of the ‘classic English garden’” He in fact describes the popularity of the picturesque garden design approach as “a vulgar decay” (1999: 12)

At Riversfield the partly walled *potager*, with pergolas or planted tunnels over the two entrance axes and the single east-west axis, was perhaps inspired by the Old Rectory in Sudborough England, which Hicks described (1999: 14) as reminding him of an early monastery garden, consisting of compartments of herbs and flowers divided by brick paths and water. The Riversfield trelliswork forming the tunnels and the geometric metal trellis stands, such as pyramids and cylinders, are perhaps inspired by his designs for the gardens at Stellenberg in Cape Town and the Vila Verde on the Algarve in Portugal; the latter which he considered (1999: 208) his *chef d’oeuvre*. Hicks described his design for the Riversfield gardens to be “in the manner of the 18th century English garden” (1999: 220).

Another aspect of Hicks’s designs for Riversfield Farm, and about which very little has been published, is the beautifully detailed dovecote in a clearing in a dense forest, immediately north-west of the *potager* (see figure 2). The richly detailed metalwork, in the Chinese Chippendale style, combined with the roof reminiscent of Chinese pagodas and Gothic-style arches between the columns at ground level, all reminiscent of the designs for his own house and garden called The Grove in Oxfordshire, make this building one of the most delightful landscape structures that Hicks ever designed. He however died before it was completed; his friend and colleague Krynauw Nel oversaw the completion thereof.



Figure 2
The Hicks designed dove cote in a clearing in the forest next to the *potager*
(photograph by author 2008).

The *potager*: design and construction

At Riversfield the nature of the *potager* project is primarily functional, i.e. a garden for growing vegetables, fruit and cut flowers for the homestead, as opposed to the primarily aesthetical design considerations of his other South African works namely the Stellenberg Estate in Cape Town and House Gordon in Hyde Park Johannesburg. Despite these functional differences, the formal, geometrical and mostly symmetrical design approach of Hicks remains apparent. In the design of the *potager* one could have expected a purely functional layout determined by the conventional, but in this case the eccentricity of Hicks comes out in the form of the slight off-set from the expected parallel and the perpendicular lines and in the asymmetry of the two water features and the *Buxus* dividing hedges. His approach to most of his garden designs was based on the classical formal gardens but Hicks' trademark "stamp" of juxtapositioning some elements in contrast to the symmetry of the rest is clearly apparent in the detail design.

Along its western boundary the *potager* is enclosed by a 700mm high brick wall, plastered and painted white, whereas the southern and eastern boundaries are hedged with *Viburnum odoratissimum*. A dense stand of pin oaks along the eastern boundary forms a backdrop to the *potager*. The southern boundary contains the two entrances, each flanked with white-painted brick columns supporting simple "Indian red" painted steel Chinese Chippendale pierced gates (figure 3). "Indian red" is the colour specified by Hicks for all the metalwork at Riversfield, including the roof of the pool pavilion. These gates offer a partial view of the *potager* to the visitor approaching from the south. The *potager's* northern edge is not walled; a cut-off berm and swale divert storm water runoff from the hill.



Figure 3
View of the entrance to the eastern south to north axis
(photograph by J. Blok 2008).



Figure 4
Approach from the south to the higher terrace
(photograph by author 2008).

The *potager* is laid out in the shape of an equal-sided (32m in length) parallelogram (figure 1). The main south to north axes are not perpendicular to the south boundary (they are off-set by 4°) and the east-west axis intersects the south to north axes with an off-set of 5.7°. These off-sets resulted in the two upper flights of each staircase not being symmetrical; prompting Jan Blok to comment (pers.com., 2008) that to set out and construct the steps and to make the varying steel balustrades, were some of the more challenging aspects of the project. This asymmetry is not immediately noticeable. Hicks's motivation for these off-sets remains debatable. Shantall (2009: 147) ascribes this asymmetry to Hicks's tendency towards the idiosyncratic and for the express purpose of adding more character. She however adds (2009: 147) "yet character is the one thing that that this special garden does not lack, despite being neither too smart, nor too manicured"

The vistas along the two main south-north axes and the east-west axis (refer to figure 6) were intended to terminate in focal points; a column or a bust, but these had not been installed at the time of the author's visit.

The two water features at the intersections of the south-north axes and the east west axis are symmetrical in positioning but dissimilar in form; the western pond is circular with eight small jets spouting water inwards to a larger central spout (figure 5), whereas the eastern pond is octagonal with only a central spout (figure 7). Both water features form a visual barrier to someone approaching from the southern main entrance axes, and the north-looking vistas along the tunnels are only re-established once the visitor has ascended the staircase and went around the ponds.



Figure 5
View from the circular fountain southwards towards the entrance
(photograph by author 2008).



Figure 6
View along the west to east axis on the upper terrace
(photograph by J. Blok 2008).



Figure 7
Octagonal water feature at the eastern end of the west-east axis
(photograph by author 2008).

In 2005 Jan Blok, after re-interpreting Hicks's design and suggesting some changes to accommodate the terrain's gradient (which was steeper than what was shown on the Hicks drawings), commenced with construction work and completed the hard landscaping elements in 2006.

The retaining wall dividing the *potager* into an upper and lower terrace was constructed with steel reinforced brickwork. The wall was plastered with wide recessed horizontal joints every fourth brick courses and finished in white paint. Steel wires are strung along the face of the wall to support planting (refer to figure 8), in this case espaliered apple trees.



Figure 8
The espaliered apple trees against the retaining wall
(photograph by author 2008).

The steel portal frames forming the tunnels along the two south-north axes and the single east-west axis were manufactured off-site and erected on site using mobile cranes. The portals were made of steel square tubing and the arches pointed. Horizontal steel wires were strung between the portals to support the *Wisteria sinensis*. The steelwork, although galvanised, was painted in the same “Indian red” colour as the other buildings' roofs and the steelwork in Hicks's original constructions. Planting for the pergolas commenced in 2006 and when the author visited Riversfield Farm in March 2008, the wisteria had established well, almost fully covering the pergolas as can be seen in figure 9.



Figure 9
Wisteria covered trellis archway over the red brick pathways
(photograph by J. Blok 2008).

The pyramid, trihedron, hexahedron and cylinder shaped stands were specified by Hicks to be of wood or steel, with heights varying between 3.05 m for the pyramids, 2.44 m for the trihedrons and 1.83 m the cylinders and hexahedrons. Blok decided to use steel square tubing with flat steel bar for the curved components - all finished in the same “Indian red” as the other steelwork (figure 10). These steel stands are intended to support planting and are placed in the centre of each pocket created by the dividing box hedges.

The Hicks design indicates most of the shrub beds edged and diagonally or perpendicularly divided by boxed hedges. Blok used *Buxus sempervirens* for these, but they were not yet of a size to be boxed when the author visited the site. The lines created by the diagonal and perpendicular boxed hedges, edged pathways, the pointed arch pergolas and the planting stands are the typical Hicks trademark that Anne Massey (cited in Matthew & Harrison, 2004: 26), when describing Hicks’ interior designs, refers to as “his use of bold, geometrically patterned carpets and textiles” Hicks (quoted in the foreword to *My kind of garden*, 1999) himself describes his “ approach and appreciation of gardening with straight lines, rather than cultivated informality” as “very personal”

Hicks' selection of plant species for his other work at Riversfield, typically the square cut *Viburnum* hedges around the pool area and the rose filled *parterre* garden next to the homestead are typical of his European background and one would have expected that trend to continue had Hicks been able to oversee the *potager's* completion. In this regard Jan Blok's choices of plants follow the trend. This should be appreciated in the context of the time (the 1990s) when South African landscape designers were to a large extent moving towards using only indigenous plants for reasons such as drought resistance, better commercial availability and ecological sustainability and planting those in a more natural setting, as opposed to the classical, formal and geometrical layout traditionally used in Hicks' garden designs.

Since the plant species were not specified by Hicks on his drawing, Blok and his team undertook a detailed research into plants that Hicks had used on similar projects elsewhere and selected context and site appropriate species from the wide variety that Hicks would typically have used in his *potager* design. For flowering species the focus was on cut flowers for the manor, and species that Blok planted include delphiniums, Iceland poppies and irises. Vegetables include spinach, peas, beans and rocket. Fruit for the house come from pomegranate, quince and the apple trees, mostly in the beds or espaliered against the retaining wall. The owners have however been forced to reconsider some of the fruit and vegetable species planted since a local troop of vervet monkeys discovered this delightful source of food!

The Hicks drawing was also not clear on the type of paving to be used under the pergolas along the three main axes, Blok decided to stay with the red brick paving used in the earlier parts of the Riversfield Farm landscape. The bricks were laid in a herringbone pattern with header course edges. The rest of the pathways were finished with a gravel layer, with a 110mm wide red brick surround.

Conclusions

The Hicks design for the *potager* has been successfully implemented by Jan Blok. The decisions that Blok had to make in the absence of more detailed specifications or prescriptions by Hicks are well founded and ensure that the original design intention could be met. Examples of similar landscape designs that Hicks had visited in his life and which he commented on in his book *My Kind of Garden* acted as inspiration and guide to Jan Blok. The completion of the *potager* also brings to a visible conclusion the vision that Hicks had for the Riversfield Farm.

Although the *potager* is still relatively young, one can already experience the sense of enclosure and shade imparted by the pergola tunnels; the play of shadows under them, with glimpses of the sun-bathed fruit, vegetable and flower gardens. Moving through the pergolas opens up vistas of the espaliered apple trees on the retaining wall, of the grassy hill to the north and of the dense pin oak forest to the east.



Figure 10
View in a north-easterly direction to the retaining wall and planting stands
(photograph by J. Blok 2008).

The rich and varied palette of flowering plants selected by Jan Blok will ensure that there is always an abundance of cut flowers for the homestead throughout the year. The contrasting setting of the colourfully planted *potager* with the white walls and “Indian red” painted steelwork, in an area of the farm characterised by verdant undulating grassy hills, punctuated by clusters of cedars and oaks, heightens the visitor’s appreciation of the garden designs for which David Hicks achieved international acclaim.

Acknowledgements

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Piet Vosloo is an Associate Professor in the Department of Architecture of the University of Pretoria. He holds BSc (Building Science), BArch, ML and PhD (Landscape Architecture) degrees from UP and practices as an architect and landscape architect.