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By playing with depth and perspective using mirrors and vertical planting, Tabi Jackson Gee has made the most of this small space.

Out of THE BOX

For designer Tabi Jackson Gee, some very creative thinking was required to free a tiny, square, high-walled London courtyard, making it into an engaging but robustly low-maintenance outdoor living space for its young owner.

WORDS VIVIENNE HAMBLY PHOTOGRAPHS MIMI CONNOLLY

An essential first step in designing any garden is to establish its attributes: soil type, the direction of the prevailing wind, where water flows or collects and how the sun will cross the space throughout the day. It's important, too, to assess the garden's surrounds. Perhaps there is a tree or climber that might be shared, or views that can draw the eye up or out and so provide a sense of there being more space than there actually is.

The small courtyard that was presented to designer Tabi Jackson Gee for some TLC had little to recommend it, let alone a view to borrow. It was surrounded by bare, high walls, accessed via a narrow, characterless passage, and two lanky olive trees in pots were its only real feature. This being central London, where space is at a premium, its neglect seemed an especial loss.

Below Thyme softens the edges of the porcelain stepping stones, while potted plants like *Hydrangea serrata* 'Preziosa' add structure.

Bottom Sumptuous pink *Rosa* 'Gertrude Jekyll'.

"The space was so depressing when I first came to see it," Tabi recalls. "There was artificial grass on the ground and the furniture was broken. It hadn't been enjoyed or used as a garden at all."

The client was in her twenties and had owned the property for a couple of years before she and her father approached Tabi with an open brief and a modest budget. Although the owner's father is a keen plantsman, the owner requested a garden requiring minimal intervention. Tabi realised it needed to be engaging as well as robust: the courtyard should be enticing enough to be used but contain planting that would take care of itself for much of the year. She did propose a garden service from the outset, however, to ensure the courtyard would continue to look its best in years to come.

"We started with colour," explains Tabi, who soon saw how the enclosed space might be put to better use. She painted the walls in Mali's Green from Francesca's Paints, a shade strong enough to have presence without absorbing the light entering the courtyard. It's also a limewash, which provides coverage while retaining the texture of the bricks in the walls for interest. Some areas of brickwork have been left unpainted for contrast and to communicate the garden's urban surrounds. One of Tabi's most satisfying early jobs was to roll up the artificial turf. Fortunately, the ground beneath was workable, and the levels almost correct. The floor was soon tiled with 900 x 600 porcelain slabs: the large surface area of each tile helps to create an illusion of space.

There was no view to speak of, so Tabi sought to add one, and she used the access side return from the kitchen door to the courtyard to develop a sense of journey. Three arches are positioned here, now scaled by David Austin roses; in June, 'Gertrude Jekyll' and 'Strawberry Hill' turn this drab portion of the garden into a fragrant cloud of enchanting





shades of pink. Nearby, ‘Lady of Shallot’ is underplanted with *Salvia nemorosa* ‘Amethyst’. “The arches help to create a sense of grandeur. Slowing down and having plants brush against you as you move into a garden is such a lovely feeling,” Tabi explains. “We’re all so busy and to have this feeling of being transported somewhere is so important, especially in terms of the mental health benefits of being in nature.”

Garden spaces in close proximity to a house tend often to echo the interior, both in colour and mood, whether formal or casual, bright or cool, to create the sense of the garden being an extension of those interior rooms. Such is the case here, and to introduce light, interest and the illusion of space, Tabi and her client installed two mirrors on a wall that is taller than the rest. In their design, they reflect the pattern of the French doors that open onto the courtyard, as well as two mirrors the owner has mounted in her sitting room.

Part of the mirrors’ function is to capture the deep, shifting shades of an *Acer palmatum* ‘Ô-Kagami’, which is visible from the rose arches as you walk

Top left Poppy the dachshund explores London Stone’s Slab Khaki Porcelain path.

Top right Mirrors increase the feeling of space and light and reflect the pattern of the French doors.

Middle right *Salvia patens* ‘Beyond Blue’ tones with a wall painted in Mali’s Green.

Above Designer Tabi Jackson Gee.

through them. The acer is a key plant in this courtyard. It is important in creating a sense of journey and is essential to Tabi’s colour palette – in shades of cherry, plum and ochre, depending on the season, it steers it away from hackneyed pink and blue. “We bought the acer at 1.8m, so it was one of the big investment pieces, but it earns its keep throughout the year,” Tabi observes. It will grow in partial shade or full sun, and would ordinarily reach a height of 5m after ten years, although in a container in a courtyard it will be smaller.

Texture and colour are combined here to make a distinctive grown-up space, albeit one that has an appropriately youthful mood. “It was tempting to do something very simple, like an all-white garden,” Tabi says. “But it was good to be able to go with something that changes through the year and

leads the eye around the garden by using a range of different planting combinations.”

It was important to make the most of the imposing vertical space, so Tabi introduced three clematis: ‘Rouge Cardinal’, ‘Frances Rivis’ and ‘Barbara Jackman’. Deep crimson ‘Rouge Cardinal’ in particular looks electric against the blue shades on the walls. “I chose these clematis for their different flower colours and shapes, but also because they bloom at different times, so the period of interest is prolonged,” she explains. At their feet are wild strawberries, tough little plants with a neat, serrated leaf. The flowers are pretty and their sweet fruits are much enjoyed by the owner. These combine with the thymes ‘Pink Chintz’ and ‘Caborn Wine and Rose’.

Then come the glamorous stars of the planting: *Sanguisorba* ‘Pink Tanna’ and *S. menziesii*, *Penstemon* ‘Blackbird’, *Thalictrum rochebruneanum* and *T. aquilegifolium* ‘Thundercloud’, plus *Anemone hupehensis* ‘September Charm’. Combined, their pink, lilac and plum tones and airy mien bring an elegance to Tabi’s scheme. Salvias offer

such a range of choice and the designer has used three: ‘Amistad’, ‘Beyond Blue’ and *S. officinalis*. Between these, *Stipa tenuissima* introduces a soft, feathery element to the beds.

Pittosporum abounds in London, especially central London where the warmer climate means it won’t succumb to frost. Tabi has planted two here: *Pittosporum tobira* ‘Nanum’ and *P. tenuifolium* ‘Pompom’. While this is mainly a summer garden, these robust evergreen shrubs need minimal care and they help to maintain interest throughout the year.

“Small gardens are lovely but they’re often so much harder to design,” Tabi observes. “Everything is visible, and there obviously isn’t much space so you can’t usually include mature trees, for example. If you have a client who’s not really all that interested in gardening, you have to persuade them to engage. And for that, planting has to be really well thought through and it has to make an impact.” There is certainly impact to this tiny space, where Tabi’s care and creativity have paid off. ■

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Bottom right Potted olives and a cosy bench reflected in the mirrors.

Bottom left *Acer palmatum* ‘Ô-Kagami’ is a specimen tree with foliage that ranges through green, cherry, plum and ochre.

Below Rosy-pink *Anemone hupehensis* ‘September Charm’.

