



'DO YOU THINK this place is beautiful?' The question was directed to Fernando Caruncho, considered the greatest landscape gardener alive today by many. (The Society of Garden Designers recently gave him a lifetime achievement award.) The powerful, formal, minimalist gardens he has created over the past 37 years have been analysed and eulogised in magazines and books and by other designers, but Fides Baldesberger, the owner of this garden in Switzerland's Ticino canton, had never heard of him until she read about his work in her local Zurich newspaper. As she was thinking about buying the plot at the time, she contacted his office. The Spanish designer chanced to be on holiday in Switzerland with his wife and two sons, who all work with him, and agreed to take a look. The steep one-hectare site looks out over the treetops of a protected forest that stretches for 16km and ends at the margin of Lake Lugano. The view is framed by the peaks of seven distant mountains. Fernando said yes, and Fides decided to buy. At their next meeting, at Caruncho's studio near his house in Madrid, both of which he designed, Fides said she would go ahead only if he created the master plan of her house too.

Fernando Caruncho's career was launched when a Japanese garden he designed, aged 21, for his uncle's Richard Neutra house was featured in French *Vogue* and became a sensation. He was a philosophy student at Madrid University at the time, and he

often talks about the gardens he makes in philosophical terms. 'My obsession is with vibration of light, and this is the correspondence between light, water and the green part of the formula. When these proportions are right, in this moment the garden appears.' For him everything begins with the dome of the sky. The way light alters and reveals the textures of leaves and grass, how it shimmers and is reflected in the many stretches of water, is the essence of this extraordinary garden. 'Space changes the light continuously,' he says. 'Your perception of light changes continuously as you move through it.'

At the very top, wrapped around the house, are a swimming-pool, lily pond and, outside her bathroom, a pond for Fides's koi carp, many of which she has had for more than 15 years. The water is calm and unruffled, except when the koi get excited. Walk down two symmetrical staircases that lead from either end of the house and you arrive at a central platform with a semicircular pond that disappears mysteriously into a cave beneath the swimming-pool. Two further staircases continue down, past walls thickly covered in evergreen jasmine (*Trachelospermum jasminoides*), to the terrace below. Here a round pond, its surface constantly moving in concentric ripples, and a long rill that is always in motion too, reflect the light like kinetic sculptures. A further pond on this level, which is fed by a natural spring, is the control for all the water

Opaque film on the bottom half of Fides's bathroom windows protects her modesty until the yew hedges planted outside establish properly. The organic-shaped 'Essence' bathtub was hand-made in okoume wood by E-legno in Italy, while the vanity units were all designed by Caruncho's studio



on the site. Immensely complicated hydraulic engineering and earth-moving was needed to make what seems, at first glance, a simple and almost inevitable garden. Set into the hillside overlooking this terrace are the arched windows of two buildings: on the left a 'limonaia', or winter garden for orange and lemon trees, where concerts are sometimes held and, on the right, extra guest bedrooms.

From this terrace the 'dragon' begins: a curving pathway, surrounded on both sides by 40cm-high walls surmounted by copper lanterns. The pathway twists down, like the tail of the mythical beast, to a final terrace at the edge of the forest. The walls of the path are planted with small-leaved ivy (*Hedera helix*). 'You know ivy,' says Fernando, with a laugh. 'It does nothing the first year, very little the second year, then suddenly it takes off.' The plan is that the ivy will cover the walls of the dragon, and that the Caruncho-designed lanterns – which look like dancing fireflies when seen from the house at night – will attain a verdigris patina, softening the effect.

Caruncho's gardens are characterised by a minimal palette. His most famous, Mas de les Voltes in Catalonia, uses little more than olive trees, cypresses and a grid of grass paths, which bisect squares of golden wheat and dark or silvery water. 'If you look in nature,' he explains, 'its palette in any one place is very restricted.' The soil is acidic in this Lugano garden, so he has chosen plants accordingly. Camellias,

azaleas and rhododendrons are planted around the perimeter of the lower terrace, and on either side of the garden Caruncho has put stands of trees, including English oak (*Quercus robur*), pine and graceful black maple (*Acer nigrum*), whose leaves turn yellow in autumn. There are many beautiful Kobus magnolias, with their white, scented flowers, as well as 300 peonies in colours from palest pink to red.

You approach the house from the very top of the garden, through a tunnel of white willow (*Salix alba*) planted to provide nesting places for birds, but also to restrict your view until the moment of the big reveal. Walk into the elliptical hall round the ceiling from a hidden roof window swirls round the ceiling and ebbs down the walls of clay stucco and marble dust. The same material is used in the organically shaped corridors that lead off to left and right. Caruncho planned the house so that it divided into two sections: Fides's private domain and more public rooms for guests. Straight ahead is a pair of double doors made from two layers of non-reflective glass, while between them hangs a faint ink drawing on tea-stained silk; based on a Zen tale, it shows a monkey reaching down to catch the reflection of the moon in water. The doors open to reveal the breathtaking view of mountains, lake and forest, with the garden below. The interior has been left deliberately spare. Nothing is allowed to detract from the view. ■

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The surface of the lily pond at the front of the house reflects the thick carpet of treetops on an adjacent hill. The wisteria will eventually entwine the red columns, and the yew hedges, once fully established, as well as a heady scent in the blisteringly hot Ticino summers