

Architects are juxtaposing water with homes in exciting new ways. These modern moats bring light, tranquillity and reflection – in both senses of the word, says Helen Chislett.



Think of the word “moat” and the image that comes to mind is one of austere stone castles made more impregnable by the water that surrounds them. Think of the Taj Mahal and a quite different impression comes to mind: the mausoleum built by Shah Jahan in memory of his favourite wife Mumtaz Mahal appears to float on the surface of a long, reflecting pool that gives the Mughal architecture an even more serene and tranquil character. It is this quality that has inspired contemporary architects to turn once again to juxtaposing water with buildings in a new interpretation of the traditional moat.

Alfred Munkenbeck of Munkenbeck+Marshall has designed several houses with moats: “Water doubles the pleasure of the building by in effect doubling the elevation – you have the building appearing to float on water and the reflection of the building upside down in that water. Moats also give a feeling of detachment, which makes them extra special in the context of a busy city – it is why Venice has such an extraordinary feeling. When you are in a house

of water not only for its peaceful effect, but also to visually separate two areas (pictured overleaf). “The owner has a large listed Georgian house and we designed a studio that adjoins the house. Because it is in a conservation area, I had to choose a certain brick for the exterior that would not be my first choice. By designing a water feature that is very straight and architectural, lined with clean stone, I could underline the fact that this is a new and contemporary addition without crossing swords with the planners. Bridges take you from one side to the other, so water has also added a separating element between work and home,” he explains.

To Rensch, water is another building material, like stone or wood, and part of the architectural language of today: “Minimalist architecture requires that a building becomes more and more refined in its detail, but less and less expressive in terms of decoration or ornamentation. An element such as water helps to counteract the starkness of this minimalist language because it is a fantastic way to introduce expression.” He cites the work of the

surrounded by water it feels as though you are floating on an island, cut adrift from the frenzy of modern life.” Nico Rensch of Architeam agrees: “Water is an additional architectural element used to express the philosophy of something calm and Zen-like. Our lives are increasingly mad and crazy – the motion, sound and look of water have the effect of tranquillity.”

Not that the modern moat is a direct copy of its historic ancestor. Architects such as Munkenbeck+Marshall and Rensch design uncompromisingly modern buildings, so when they introduce water it is through shallow, straight-edged canals or rills (see picture above left), not the wide, deep curves of yesteryear. In one central London site, Rensch has used a rill

acclaimed 20th century Mexican architect Luis Barragán and his Folke Egerstrom house and stables built around a brightly coloured and sculptural sequence of highly practical horse pools.

However, what must be stressed is that the success of any water feature relies on expert construction. Munkenbeck compares it to seeing swans gliding serenely on the surface and not being aware of the effort going on unseen beneath: “If you are introducing water close to the foundations of a house, then, of course, the structure must be completely waterproof – and that can be trickier to achieve than you may imagine. You also have to consider water circulation, filtration, chlorination – the same kind of things you would with

GETTING MOTIVATED



Main picture: The Wilderness in Suffolk by Paul+O Architects is a new country house surrounded by water. Above left: water flows continuously through and around a north London residence by Munkenbeck+Marshall.

a swimming pool. Otherwise your beautiful new moat will soon be green with algae."

As common sense would dictate, it is easier to incorporate a moat into the design of a new build than to introduce one to an existing property, where unintended water leakage could damage the fabric of a building. Landscape architect Randle Siddeley designed the garden of one of Munkenbeck+Marshall's signature houses in north London, where a slim moat has been used on three sides of a smoking room that projects from the rear of the building. "Rather than building a moat all around the house, you come across this one unexpectedly as you explore the garden, so it adds a note of surprise," explains Siddeley. "The water is also a punctuation point between the house and the client's office beyond." Stepping stones across the water add a fun element, and the water feeds into the moat from a cascade on an adjacent wall.

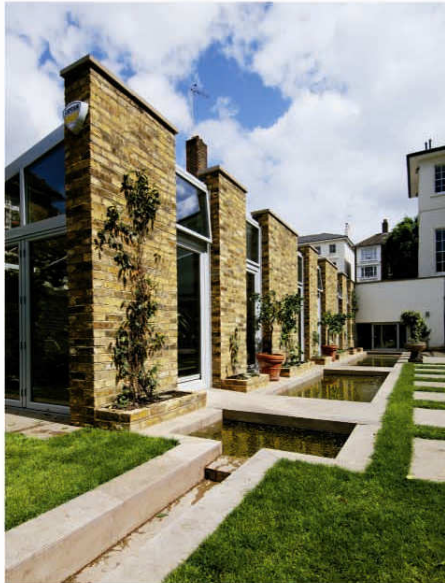
As Siddeley points out, using water in this way is a departure from the ubiquitous terrace usually found at the rear of the house: "These clients have a sophisticated palate and they wanted something very special. Not only does water allow you to enjoy the reflections of the building when you stand in the garden, but when you view the garden from inside the house, it adds an extra dimension."

A large chunk of the cost of a moat goes on excellent construction, as Siddeley explains: "It is not enough to come up with a spectacular design; the engineering also has to be spectacular. I always tell clients that they never skip on a proper filtration system."

While most architects and designers stress the need for chemical filtration systems to keep water clean, there is another movement that is encouraging clients down a more natural and sustainable route. The most ardent advocate of this is the landscape architect Kim Wilkie, who has been described by some as the Capability Brown of his generation. Wilkie has carried out many contemporary city projects, including the drainable pool in the garden of the V&A Museum, and has also turned his hand to renovating traditional moats. One notable historical project was Heveningham Hall in Suffolk.

On Capability Brown's original plans there was a lake in the parkland, but it had never been built because of Brown's death. Two hundred years later, Wilkie has installed the lake and Brown's design has finally been brought to fruition. In addition, Wilkie has added a contemporary slender canal of water to the rear of the house (pictured above).

Not surprisingly, Wilkie thinks water is an amazing material to use as a designer: "I particularly like still water, the quality of reflection and the way it brings light into a space. I also love it in terms of human contemplation: where land is rock solid, water changes all the time. Think of mist coming off its surface in early morning or the way it looks when lit at night." However,



he thinks clients need to ask themselves a few important questions before installing moats: "For example, is it sustainable? Last year, we had a summer of floods, but for two summers before that, we had droughts. You don't want to install a moat and then discover there is not enough water to put in it, so water conservation is also a priority. Safety is another important issue, particularly if you have young children – nothing looks worse than a wonderful water feature surrounded by ugly fencing. And finally, you must think about the quality of water you use – avoid chemicals if you can."

Environmental considerations are important to Wilkie because he is a firm advocate of the wildlife benefits inherent with water, and these are obviously greater if water can be kept natural. The secret is to use plants to clean water rather than chemicals. In a country setting where there is good depth of water, this is easier to achieve than within the shallow depth of city water features, but the latter is by no means impossible.

Water sustainability is the other challenge, with the shadow of global warming

Top: Architeam used a rill of water to separate a new studio from a listed Georgian house in central London. **Above:** Kim Wilkie's slender canal at Heveningham Hall in Suffolk.

partner Paul Acland likens The Wilderness to "a ship settled in the middle of the forest", with water forming much of the architectural language. "The formal pond continues the architecture of the building, making a transition between that and the wilder areas of the garden beyond."

The Wilderness is also an excellent example of the holistic, natural approach that Wilkie and others favour. There is a whole system of rills and ponds here that feed off each other. The roof of the house is a catchment area where rainwater is harvested and used to irrigate the ponds. Water is cleaned with plants, rather than chemicals – and, in fact, the moat is the perfect breeding ground for rare, native great crested newts. As Marro says: "Our whole approach is to be eco-friendly and as site sensitive as possible. We wanted to integrate the new house into the existing landscape. It is part of our strategy that you can't envisage one without the other."

When it comes to the construction of such ambitious features, choose your contractors carefully. One of the most respected firms – used by Wilkie, among others – is Miles Waterscapes, a fourth-generation family firm. As well as specialising in the construction and renovation of every conceivable type of water feature and in the conservation of water, Miles manufactures bridges, boat houses, jetties and pumping stations. Importantly, it

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now affecting every area of design. Wilkie's V&A pool is wide and shallow – perfect for paddling – but can be drained entirely within an hour to be used as a performance space (the water is drained to a tank and later reused). He believes that all water structures should have a certain amount of flexibility: "You have to understand that in summer, water may draw right down, but a sudden storm will replenish it. What you don't want to see is ugly marks at the sides when the water is shallow." On the same lines, Munkenbeck+Marshall designed a reflecting shallow pool beside a house near Salisbury which encompasses that sense of versatility: "It is completely natural: it fills up when it rains, then when the water evaporates, usually after a week or so, it transforms into a terrace."

When Paul+O Architects were commissioned to build The Wilderness Project, a new country house on a site in Suffolk (pictured on previous page), they determined that water should form an important part of the design, as Paulo Marro explains: "We wanted to make that link back to moats around old country houses and to use water as a natural way of defining different areas." As well as a moat, which flanks the drive to the house, forming a soft visual border against one elevation, there is a shallow pond set against another, which has a Japanese meditative quality. Surrounded as it is by water, The Wilderness looks particularly beautiful at night: "The reflections are wonderful. You have the hard architectural lines of the house itself, relaxed by water and trees." His

uses its own machinery and its own skilled team. Managing director Rob Orford says that if lakes, ponds, moats or any other structures are lined properly, the lining should have a lifetime of about 700 years: "Water is cheap, moving earth doesn't cost a lot and the skill to do the job doesn't cost a lot more. It is lining that is expensive and you can spend a fortune getting that right." Having said that, prospective clients are often pleasantly surprised by the prices Orford quotes: "You can spend £1m upwards with us, but the projects we take on start at about £10,000 and average out at about £40,000 to £50,000 – so it's not so much as people may imagine."

Although Miles Waterscapes has its own design department, Orford admits that it is working with visionaries such as Wilkie that gives him the most pleasure: "We take the idea from paper to reality. Sometimes I look at a design and think, 'This will never work' – but then I have to take it back because the result is absolutely stunning. A house that is surrounded by water looks weightless, as though it is floating on the surface. I always tell people that they are probably not planning on selling their house, but if they ever do, the estate agent will always choose a photograph that shows water in the foreground." *

REFLECTED GLORY

Architeam, 01424 775 211; www.architeam.co.uk. **Kim Wilkie Associates**, 020-8332 0304; www.kimwilkie.com. **Miles Waterscapes**, 01359-242 356; www.miles-water.com. **Munkenbeck+Marshall**, 020-7739 3300; www.mandm.co.uk. **Paul+O Architects**, 020-7604 3818; www.paul-o-architects.com. **Randle Siddeley Associates**, 020-7627 7270; www.randlesiddeley.com.

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