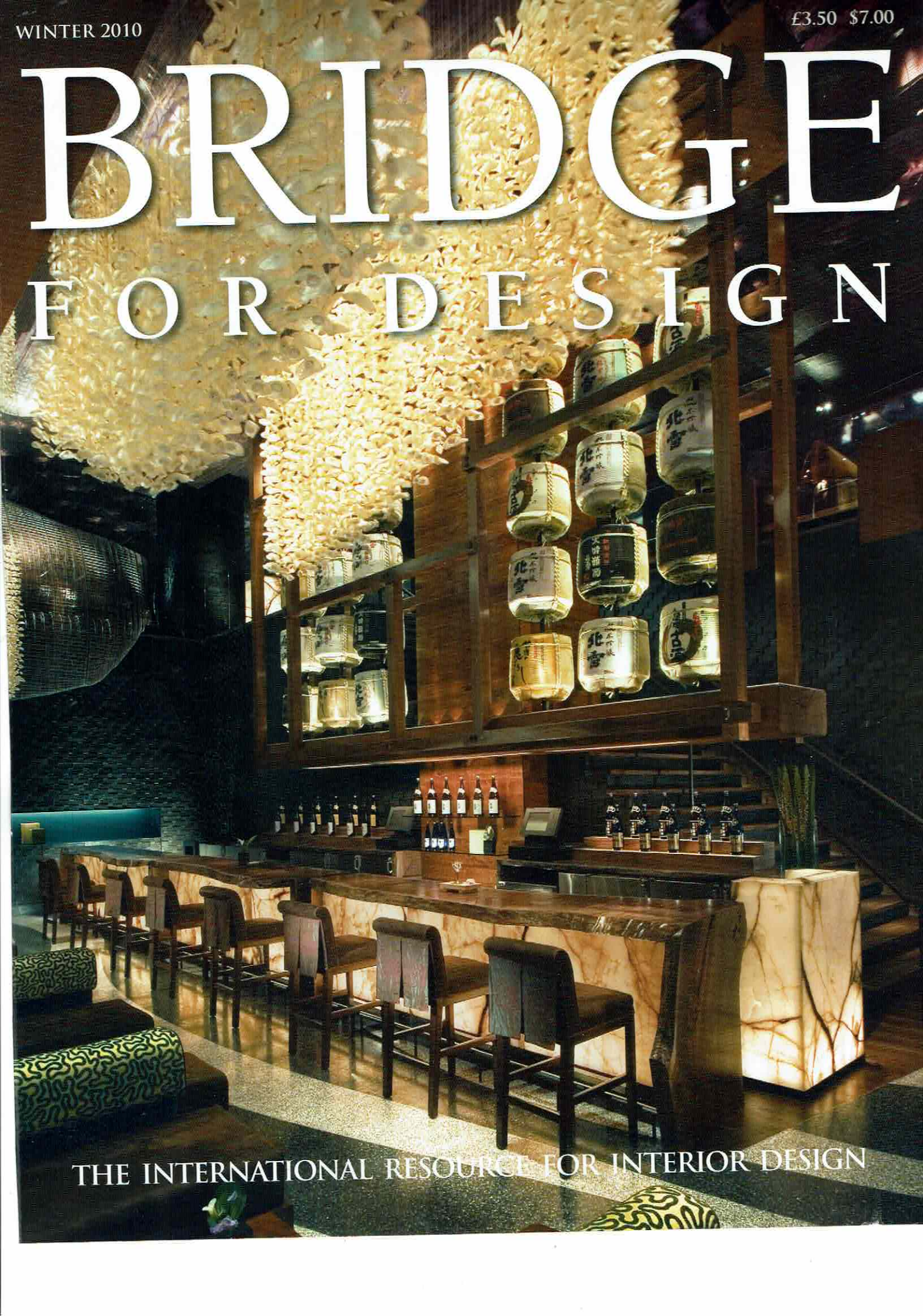


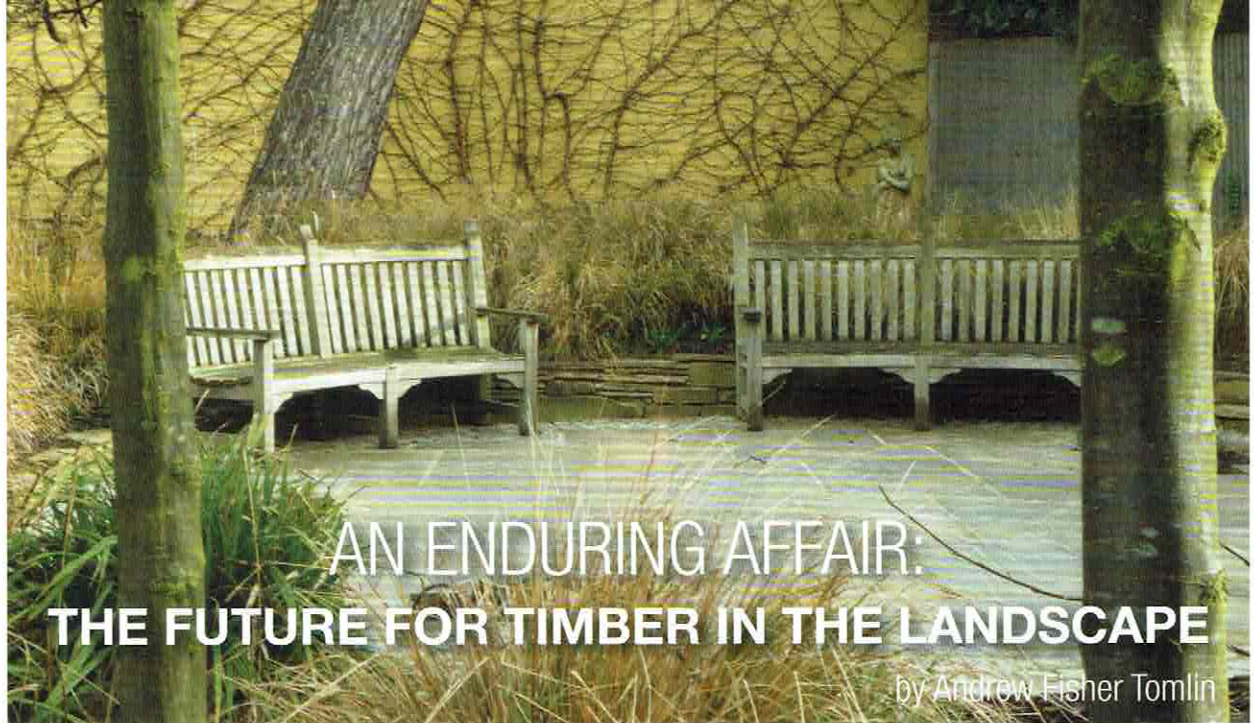
WINTER 2010

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AN ENDURING AFFAIR: THE FUTURE FOR TIMBER IN THE LANDSCAPE

by Andrew Fisher Tomlin

“MY LOVE AFFAIR WITH TREES STARTED AT an early age when a young playmate who refused to let me into his tree house on repeated occasions one day fell out, landing with a bump and in hospital. From that moment on I figured that trees generally, and this particular sweet chestnut, were on my side and, seeing what harm they could do, I quickly learnt to respect their strength.

Over the years I've come across many others who have devoted their lives to trees. There is the teacher that taught me how to seed trees whilst no-one was looking. Then there are the explorers who only quite recently have discovered and climbed to the tops of the Californian giant redwoods where they found a biodiversity of plants and wildlife that we could never have dreamed of. And I fell in love with the woodblocks of Claire Leighton who in the 1920s and 1930s produced a body of work that glories in the grandeur of nature, and particularly trees.



To Thompson

There is a great mystery to trees and woodlands. Champion trees and ancient forests take the limelight but simple natives form a community focus wherever you travel. Much has been written on the significance of trees to the development of civilisations, and no other plant species has been so close to humanity. And that's probably why I also love trees for what they produce for us – timber.

The use of timber in construction, particularly from those trees that we have fond memories of, is misunderstood. We are happy to use imported cedar grown overseas or in places with which we have no connection, but give someone the choice of using a timber such as oak and it is not uncommon for someone to throw their hands up in horror. We tend towards understanding the significance of logging tropical hardwoods, but do not necessarily understand the importance of sustainable forestry. More of that later for there is also a value of trees over and above timber whether it is as landscape, for recreation or for the support of wildlife and plant life. But history shows us that the tree's importance to humanity has often been as a building material. As architecture writer Naomi Stungo says of timber architecture: "It is the perfect physical expression of our intimate connection with the world in which we live, at a time when this world appears to be becoming increasingly virtual in character." (*The New Wood Architecture*, Laurence King Publishing 1998).

In the late 20th century it seemed as if timber was overlooked in architecture but not so in its use in the landscape. Gardeners use a lot of timber in the garden; they always have and always will do because of its ready supply and its unique ability to blend with the landscape. Garden designers have had brief flings with concrete, with varying degrees of success, but often return to timber for its unique qualities and resonance with the landscape. Garden buildings, boundary treatments such as fencing, trellis and hurdles, tools and furniture... all encompass timber in their production. To cover every aspect would be a monumental task but there are new trends in timber that are transforming its use and new ideas that are worthy of our attention.

The rise of the 'contemporary'

Garden design has been characterised, as has so much design, by the idea of a contemporary modern aesthetic that started with the use of manufactured materials such as concrete, but in the past few years has moved towards a softer approach. For this very reason timber has come back into favour with designers because of its ability to blend with a more planted landscape than ten years ago.

There has been a huge development away from the traditional shed used for storage towards 'shed-working' and the rise of the garden studio and workshop. The connection with timber has remained and these new contemporary buildings will often feature timber used in quite traditional ways such as shakes used for sidings, and increasingly the 'horizontal trellis'. This form of screening has developed over the past decade but is actually a throwback to a 1970s form of plank fencing seen in a more subtle light and given the architect's seal of approval. Its ability to come in whatever size you want as long as it's horizontal has led to an instant designer credibility where it is installed.

Craftsmanship and artistry

This trend towards a seemingly modern aesthetic for timber is also accompanied by an emphasis towards quality and craftsmanship. Garden joinery is now seen as a distinct craft. Of course for many the vernacular is important; timber can uniquely harmonise with its surroundings and this doesn't have to be at the expense of exciting design. Specialists such as English Garden Joinery are teaming with new graduate furniture designers like Michael Lonsdale, and Oxford Planters features its own designer range, both leading a new wave of craftsmen and designers.



Andrew Fisher Tomlin

This craftsmanship has spilled over into timber as art. The sculptor Jake Phipps creates love seats and other pieces that are as functional as they are sculptural and sawmills report an increased interest from students of art colleges looking for raw materials with which to experiment.

Nature versus nurture

These new designers are also playing with ideas of how far you take timber. There has been a renaissance in the use of green oak which will naturally split as it seasons in situ but at the other end of the scale precision-led, high quality oak buildings are being built using seasoned European oak, mainly sourced from France. In a move away from hardwoods such as iroko and I'pe we are looking closer to home for timber to use in our landscapes. There is a familiarity with cedar and oak whereas hardwoods, sourced from further afield, may produce a sleek look but they lack an authenticity that we are now striving for. And to counter the rusticity that is inherent in timber, garden designer Jo Thompson is now using ethically sourced timbers such as accoya, together with materials such as LG Hi-Macs acrylic stones to produce a unique but practical solution for gardens.

In the future we can look forward to a much wider use of new products like accoya and even beech in the garden as well as more flexible treatments such as instant bleaching and an increasing use of steaming, led by designers such as Charlie Whinney.

Plants and timber

The key to great landscape design is that a landscape or garden is always changing. As a building material, timber's ability to weather and change as it ages is greatly suited to the changing face of a garden. And whilst stone may change gradually, timber can transform within seasons. Its subdued colour will contrast well with foliage. Viewed up close it has a richness of detail that can stop you in your tracks, but from a distance it can dissolve into the background and allow plants to come to the forefront.



Ethical practices

One of the most critical environmental themes of the past few decades has been the destruction of forests for timber or clearance for agriculture, and whilst some countries have had large scale and long standing controls on re-planting, many have not. This has led to almost extinction of some species, the destruction of associated wildlife and challenges in fresh water supply. Most importantly there is also the destruction of untested plant life that has unknown medical and food potential. This is a wide debate with many different viewpoints and can be a minefield for the designer. So we must concentrate on what we can ask rather than try to make an in-depth study of sustainable forestry.



There are clear issues about illegal logging and clear-cut forest practices but we are fortunate that there are recognised schemes that cover sustainable methods and the management of woodlands to protect biodiversity. Organisations such as the National Trust insist on sustainable sourcing. The Royal Horticultural Society independently audits the use of timber in its shows such as the Chelsea Flower Show and they are a good source of information on the use of trees and timber products through their conservation and environment guidelines.

An enduring pattern

Timber may be a natural companion to planting but it also speaks to us about nature, authenticity and integrity. We enjoy the fruits of previous generations' largesse in planting woodlands and forests but we must also plant trees ourselves. Our love affair with timber in the landscape endures because in a time when we are trying to reconnect with nature, we strive for more sustainable futures and will plant a tree for another generation to enjoy when we are no longer here.

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