

# NO COMMON-OR-GARDEN DESIGNER

Bill Bensley's passion for creating unique landscapes has made him the region's master of tropical gardens. Julie Miller talks to the talented architect who imitates paradise



**T**HE TORCH-LINED path snakes through a riot of greenery, a secret garden where every nook conceals a surprise – a spirit house, cloaked in marigolds and a cloud of incense; a lush swimming hole, filled with water cascading from a vine-draped cliff.

These are the tropical fantasies of American architect and landscape designer Bill Bensley, whose resplendent gardens grace some of the world's most beautiful resorts and private residences. Based in Bangkok, Bensley Design Studios has a staggering portfolio of over 100 high-profile properties in 27 countries, with recent projects including the Four Seasons at Hangzhou in China, and properties in India like Yoo Six Senses Spa, Pune (designed in collaboration



with Philippe Starck), and the Leela Palace at Udaipur. He is also working on an ambitious 59-room palace for Tuanku Mizan Zainal Abidin, the king of Malaysia – a job that employs over 300 workers a day and is still two years away from completion.

In Thailand Bensley's designs have raised the bar in resort extravagance. His love affair with his adopted homeland began in 1984, when his Harvard University classmate, Thai

architect Lek Bunnag, suggested he join him in Asia after graduation. "First we went to Singapore for three years, then to Hong Kong for two," Bensley recalls. "During those five years I was travelling back and forth to Thailand, working on resorts like the Shangri-La in Bangkok and lots of projects for [hospitality company] Dusit Thani. Then



LEFT: Four Seasons Chiang Mai  
BELOW: The pool at Shangri-La, Boracay



Chanin Donavanik, the owner of Dusit Thani, helped me set up my own office in Bangkok.”

Bensley’s designs in the country include the Four Seasons at Chiang Mai, sculpted around a working rice paddy; the Four Seasons Tented Camp, a luxury jungle lodge nestled in the Golden Triangle – voted “Best Resort in the World” three years running by *Condé Nast Traveler* (US) readers; several properties of the Anantara group and the much-lauded Indigo Pearl in Phuket, whose industrial landscape harks back to the island’s tin-mining past. Each property is distinctly Bensley – flamboyant, quirky and provocative – yet every one is unique, following his only philosophy on

to match.” In practical terms, this means allowing a location to create its own canvas, based on its geography, history and culture. For instance at the Tented Camp, Chiang Rai’s natural environment dominates, from verdant stands of bamboo to the elephants wandering its muddy paths. “The gardens are natural, with minimal amount of intervention,” Bensley says. “When faced with a site of such natural beauty, I consider how I can do the least amount of damage. Because we can never make Mother Nature look better.”

It is no wonder then that Bensley considers himself a “designer of environments”. He’s particularly zealous about saving trees – the Four Seasons at Koh Samui retained its

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LEFT: Four Seasons Chiang Mai  
BELOW: Another Bensley project, The Leela Palace in Udaipur



854 coconut trees on the property and incorporated them into the landscape. “I designed a series of architectural modules with small footprints, enabling us to set the buildings in a dense forest with minimal disturbance,” he explains. “Even still, we have over 100 trees penetrating the pools, decks, living rooms, writing desks and sun lounges. It was a lot of work, but worth it!”

Bensley is also passionate about recycling, a belief clearly reflected in the rusting sculptures scattered throughout the Indigo Pearl resort.

“I love junk yards – I find beauty in garbage,” he says. “My Aussie mate [and co-artist of the Indigo Pearl] John Underwood and I had mountains of fun sorting through the old mines and mine-related homes of Phuket in search of just the right piece of garbage for the job. Is this a philosophy? No, I never repeat.”

A highly anticipated Bensley project due to open in mid-2011 is The Siam, Bangkok. Inspired by turn-of-the-century Thai colonial grandeur, it incorporates more than 3,000 antiques from the private collection of the owner, famous actor and musician Krissada Sukosol

Clapp. “A lot of established architects are very strict with their design, but Bill was very open to work with my vision,” Clapp says. “And unlike many well-known designers who like to maintain their signature style on each and every project, Bill was keen to do something different from his popular resorts. In fact, I’m confident that Bill will surprise everyone with The Siam.”

Bensley’s approach to his projects is simple. “Just look at everything upside down and with an open mind,” he suggests. “Don’t be afraid. Go for it. There are no rules to break, and like any other art form, there is no correct language of design. If you dream of a garden of aubergine bromeliads and spruce-green inner tubes on a plane of broken mauve safety glass...then try it!”

**BILL’S TOP FIVE TIPS FOR YOUR GARDEN:**

- Add fire, in any form. Torches, candles and tea lights add romance to the night-time ambience.
- Use ancient, oversized pottery – one enormous pot is far more powerful than many little ones.
- Incorporate light sources in your garden, but don’t let the source of light be seen.
- Redesign the smallest and most visible part of your garden so it can easily change every three months.
- Add colourful fabrics to benches and chairs that complement your plants.