

# Make a spectacle of the unspectacular

Internal courtyards, light wells and basement gardens can be transformed to bring in a welcome flash of nature

Alex Mitchell



**O**UTDOOR space in London often comes in tiny packages. We're used to the narrow strips outside Victorian basements that allow light into the lower floor, but internal light wells and courtyards are becoming increasingly common as architects look for new ways to bring precious light into the heart of buildings.

Not all of these spaces are tiny but, in the hands of the right designer, even the minuscule can pack a mighty punch. Visible from some rooms in the house, they are a great opportunity to introduce a flash of nature into a built-up environment.

Designers tend to go for a few carefully placed large statement pots planted with trees or shrubs that bring a sense of the natural world without overcrowding the space. Go for those with strong form: coloured stems, such as yellow bamboo (*phyllostachys aurea*), lush, arching shapes such as tree ferns (*dicksonia antarctica*), willow-leaf podocarp or Japanese maples. Alternatively, bring a naturalistic woodland feel into the city with a containerised silver birch. These grow tall fast so, if you have a multi-storey light well, you could be admiring the branches from the basement and the canopy from the upstairs living room.

Japanese maples make excellent light well trees, great in containers

and very slow growing. A narrow space in Marylebone designed by Jo Fenton of Fenton Roberts Garden Design ([fentonrobertsgardendesign.co.uk](http://fentonrobertsgardendesign.co.uk)) is a showcase in simple, effective planting, with three potted coral-bark maples (*acer palmatum* "Sango-kaku") providing seasonal fireworks – fresh green spring leaves that turn butter yellow in autumn and then fall to reveal blood-red stems.

Japanese forest grass, ferns and spring bulbs underplant the trees. A laser-cut metal panel on the wall by Grace & Webb ([graceandwebb.com](http://graceandwebb.com)) is lit from behind and spotlights within the pots throw shadows across the white brick walls. It's watered automatically so the clients only have to gaze at it appreciatively from their bedroom. So you will need to get electricity points outside.

In another narrow light well accessed by a sliding door designer Marie Clarke ([clarkeassociates.cc](http://clarkeassociates.cc)) uses yellow-stemmed bamboo in square metal containers to bring jungly lushness and strong architectural form. A simple underplanting of the creeping groundcover mind-your-own-business (*soleirolia soleirolia*) spilling over the edges looks wonderfully fresh.

Climbers are another obvious choice to add greenery to light well walls. Chinese Virginia creeper (*parthenocissus henryana*) and climbing hydrangea will both scramble quickly up a wall, neither needing support once they have got going. More expensive but spectacular are living walls that won't block any of the light coming down but will clothe the entire vertical surface in green. Light wells and internal courtyards are best treated as

installations, styled for maximum visual drama. Most tend to have white walls, but a dark or bold colour on the walls can create a more dramatic backdrop. Charlotte Rowe ([charlotterowe.com](http://charlotterowe.com)) turned a tiny space surrounded by high walls into a cosy outdoor room by teaming black walls with potted mind-your-own-business, star jasmine and a bench strewn with cushions. Or make the wall itself the star turn with graphic black-and-white tiles (at [bertandmay.com](http://bertandmay.com)) as designer Miria Harris ([miriaharris.com](http://miriaharris.com)) did in a small internal space viewed from the main living areas of the house.

In the light well of a factory conversion in Kensal Rise designer Adolfo Harrison ([adolfoharrison.com](http://adolfoharrison.com)) painted the walls gold to bring warmth to the space. Against them, two giant tree ferns in round-bottomed rusted metal pots give the appearance of being just about to topple over. "These spaces give us a licence to create something more dramatic than you'd normally get away with," says Harrison. Lighting, he explains, is key. "Use a warm light with a couple of angle spots to create multiple shadows."

Harrison looks to Japan for inspiration where, even in small urban spaces, they recreate an illusion of natural landscape on a mini scale. These glimpses of green in places you wouldn't expect are precious and we respond to them strongly. "On a subconscious level, the appeal of these planted light wells in the city is that, somehow, in an urban environment, a crack has appeared and a shard of light has come down and created life. Nature thrives despite all the odds."



**Lush and jungly:** Marie Clarke's design for this basement light well with sliding glass doors has metal tubs with yellow-stemmed bamboo and mind-your-own-business



MICHA HALLER

**Warmth:** giant tree ferns against a gold wall in a factory conversion basement well in Kensal Rise, by Adolfo Harrison



MARIANNE MAJERUS

**Growing low and slow:** willow-leaf podocarp and climbing Japanese hydrangea in a basement garden



MARIANNE MAJERUS

**Outside in:** a spectacular living wall clothes an internal atrium in green, with hardy begonia and evergreen Iris japonica



ALAMY

**Send in the fronds:** light is often scarce in basement wells, so choose plants that might be found in a naturally shaded setting such as under a forest canopy or in a deeply cut ravine. A monumental fern in this Edinburgh basement is a scene stealer