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PROFILE

WILL RAE-SMITH AND BEATRICE GREAVES — CREATORS OF SHADE STRUCTURES

JULIE ROBERTS MEETS A COUPLE PRODUCING PRACTICAL YET HIGHLY ELEGANT STRUCTURES TO KEEP OFF THE SUN. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW MONTGOMERY

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Living in a London flat with their young family, Will Rae-Smith and Beatrice Greaves dreamed of carving out a new life. "We went to Sri Lanka on holiday and slept outdoors with the buzz of nature all around us, and this reaffirmed our idea of living and working in a natural environment," says Will.

Will was working as a landscape architect and Bea was importing eco-nappies from Germany at the time, but they realised that to move out of London they needed to set up a business. "The idea of making shade structures appealed," says Will. "They could be practical, yet interesting looking." The couple found inspiration in old airplanes, which "celebrate the qualities of materials such as wood, canvas and rope," says Will.

Being a practical, work-minded couple, they sketched out some ideas and set to. "We contacted a marquee maker who told us our design wouldn't stand up," says Bea. Undeterred, they researched tensile structures, and a chance visit to a circus reassured them that if tightropes could hold up human beings then guide ropes could hold up their design.

Having hauled a second-hand industrial sewing machine up to their flat, along with thick cotton canvas, webbing and rope, they stitched an 8m x 8m square, cut curves into the edges and added huge rivets. Then, while on holiday at Will's parents' home in southern France, they cut down acacia poles in a nearby wood for supports. The

Papilio — as it became known — took to the air, its canvas wings stretched taut by ropes pegged into the ground.

"It was more sculptural and sturdier than we'd dreamed of, and we loved the instant sun protection," says Bea.

The first model was a rather belt-and-braces affair, with plenty of webbing for reinforcement and lots of poles, but subsequent models have become more minimal — a recent design, the Mosquito, is a simple square with four supports. "The low centre and the curve of the canvas help funnel hot air outward, so the structures stay wonderfully cool and airy," says Will. The size of the canvas dictates the number of poles. "The more poles, the smoother the curve. Too few and it begins to look like a dot-to-dot drawing," he adds.

"The success of the structure is very much dependent on tension," explains Will. "We've discovered pep, used in local vineyards, that have a metal plate and act like a corkscrew. They make incredibly strong fixings."

Seven years after creating their first shade structure, the couple now live in the Luberon valley — in a house they have ecologically restored with hemp and lime — and their business is developing steadily. They exhibit at European garden shows, such as Courson and Ayswiers, and alongside off-the-peg structures they create site-specific commissions.

Their biggest challenge has been for a grand party in Provence. "The structure covered a wooded area of 700 square metres and was highly



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: HAND-CRAFTING OF THE SHADE STRUCTURES TAKES PLACE IN THE SCENIC SETTING OF THE LUBERON VALLEY, WHERE THE PAPILIO CAN BE SEEN SPREADING ITS WINGS.



complex," says Will. "The client's PA kept ringing us and asking how 'our people were getting on'. They had no idea it was just us two working our socks off." As Bea had taught herself a 3D design programme, they designed it all on computer. "Once we've surveyed a site we can work out the structure's exact dimensions, as well as the amount of shadow cast at a particular time of day," says Bea.

Browsing through images on their website, it's clear that the many varied designs are all resolutely sculptural: a neat marriage of elegant simplicity with strong proportions.

As for the future, Will and Bea intend keeping the business small and incorporating more shade structures into Will's garden design work.

Nowadays the couple and their children spend all summer outdoors. "We like stringing a hammock up between the poles and floating about the flowers," says Bea. Their dream of living and working outdoors has pretty much come true. ■

A medium-sized Papilio (6m x 6m) costs 3,000 euros. Contact: Sunwing Products, La Fumeterre, 84400 Villars, France. Tel (00 33) 4 90 75 44 60; or visit www.sunwingproducts.com



THIS PAGE: USING NATURAL MATERIALS SUCH AS WOOD, ROPE AND CANVAS IS IMPORTANT TO WILL AND BEA. THE SHADE STRUCTURES PROVIDE BOTH SCULPTURAL IMPACT IN A GARDEN AS WELL AS AN INSTANT OUTDOOR 'ROOM'.

