

garden making

the 'ahh' factor

by maria von brincken

No matter how sophisticated you may be, a large granite mountain cannot be denied – it speaks in silence to the very core of your being.

— Ansel Adams



The man considered by many to be the father of American landscape architecture often referred to himself as a “garden maker,” a self-description by Fletcher Steele that influenced me greatly when I first saw it in a book about him in 1990.

When I think of the word “making” on its own, I see images of human hands crafting cherished artifacts or offerings, while the word “garden” conjures a host of images from Eden to Shangri-La. Taken together, however, the words evoke even more powerful images of the deliberate shaping of places of great beauty and serene repose – an apt definition for any landscape professional.

When I borrowed those two words as the title for this column in *LandShapes*, they seemed to me to define an ambition to master garden making at a level that rises to our best potential for creativity and speaks to our capacity to meet or surpass our clients’ desires and expectations.

As we seek that mastery, we’ll explore fundamental concepts, values and techniques used in making landscapes and in developing designs that engage all five senses while linking the unique character of the existing landscape (its *genius loci*) to a design strategy that responds to site and client alike.

the right space

Designing with this high-flying intention involves us in weav-

ing the elements of space, hardscape, plants, color, water and the all-encompassing variety of garden accessories to produce a wondrous place. Over the months and years to come, we’ll explore aspects of those elements in a continuous quest to inspire true beauty.

At the same time, we must recognize that we can deploy fabulous plant combinations, melodic watershapes, wonderful garden accessories, sensual stonework, great vistas and subtle interior/exterior connections and *still* produce a garden that, as a whole, simply doesn’t work. The problem here often has to do with a failure to control spatial relationships and how walls, fences, posts, plants, trellises, light, earth forms (such as hillsides or rock formations) and buildings combine to shape the space.

In metaphysical terms, you might say that space is the volume between forms. Without mastery of space, the beauty of forms in a garden can’t add up to success on its own. By contrast, a well-shaped space creates energy and dynamism we can sense: If you get the space right and let the magic between spaces and forms take place while attending to details of texture, melody, fragrance and color, chances are you’ve created an awesomely magnificent garden.

Those who think long and hard about systematizing approaches to that sort of success have defined three interdependent ways

to create these spatial relationships: First is the well-established concept of the outdoor room; second is the classic notion of employing geometric shapes (squares, circles, rectangles, octagons) and their corresponding volumes (cubes, spheres, cylinders); third is the idea of archetypal spaces advanced by Julie Messervy.

Let's look at each of these approaches in turn to set our foundation for what's to come in this column in particular – and, I believe, for *LandShapes* in general.

making rooms

Much has been written in recent times about how walls, ceilings, floors, windows and doors function as components of both interior and exterior rooms. Indoors, rooms provide structure and shape the spaces in which furniture and keepsakes are displayed. Outdoors, the same principles apply, with a garden space formed around the spatial concept of showing off plant combinations and collections in their best light.

Outdoor rooms also bear burdens endured by few indoor rooms. They may, for example, screen or protect a garden from desiccating winds, undesirable views or other objectionable elements, all the while providing a sense of spatial continuity.

These outdoor rooms are made up of the sides of existing buildings, series of posts or containers, fieldstone or brick walls, hedges, trees arranged in rows, lattice panels, fences and the odd erratic ledge mass – all of which form visual barriers.

In some cases, structural plantings unify a garden to conjure sensations of beauty in tidy, well-maintained ways. In others in which the plantings are arranged in masses, drifts or lines and include combinations that provide abundant displays of foliage and flowers, the beauty emerges in subtler, more evocative ways. And if the spaces are planted randomly with no set pattern, the gardens verge on chaos in which a single weed can tip the visual balance.

(Michael Pollard discusses this continuum of order and chaos in his book, *Botany of Desire*, into which I will delve in future columns.)

Wherever they are on the spectrum of possibilities, outdoor rooms set the stage for drama. Consider, for example, the expressive role played by a lone burgundy Japanese maple – or by a craggy stone nestled in a sea of ground-hugging blue hosta – all of it framed by a room lined with evergreens.

Within that setting, the room's ceiling is the sky. It is dauntingly high, however, so bringing it down to human scale creates intimacy – that is, the lower the ceiling and the closer the walls, the more intimate the space. Tree canopies serve this purpose, decreasing the height of the sky and linking the scale of surrounding structures to

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both the garden and us. Pergolas, arbors and bowers do much the same thing, offering even more intimacy while adding the bonus of flowers at eye level.

all-encompassing

Although we tend to see rooms as walls and ceilings, floors are also part of our rooms – and those of exterior rooms are subject to wonderful variety. They can be constructed of earth, pebbles or stones, for example, or of concrete or granite. They can be inter-planted with shade-loving moss or sun-loving woolly thyme. They can also be made up of wooden decking, carpets of stone (and even fabric) or expanses of lawn.

And the walls – the room's vertical planes, windows or openings – are infinitely varied outdoors. They can be hedges, fences or stone walls with openings that expose views beyond the garden room. The low walls in Villa Gamberaia, for instance, provide ready access to stunning views of Florence, while the openings in tailored hedges frame particularly spectacular scenes of the house or the horizon.

For generations and across the world, this capacity to draw the

eye of the occupant of outdoor rooms to designed or borrowed views has effectively connected gardens to the world beyond and to oceans, mountains, deserts, forests and cityscapes. These windows on a distant world can be as simple as a cut-out in a gate or hedge or just a low hedge wall flanked by trees.

The doorways represented by arbors, gates, arches, posts, containers, piers and shrubs serve the same framing function. (Beatrice Farrand, for example, used shrubs and stone piers at Dumbarton Oaks to achieve this effect.) The allée offers another option to establish grand entries.

My point is simple: Designing outdoor rooms is like designing indoor rooms, but with a palette of options that goes far beyond the wildest imaginings of the average interior designer.

extra dimensions

Another way in which exterior rooms offer greater potential than their interior counterparts is through a distinct role outdoors for movement through the space. As an example, consider the way Asian gardens slow your pace with steppingstones that focus your attention – and then, in a riveting moment, lure



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— Julie Messervy

your gaze to a breathtaking vista.

Primary garden paths and corridors provide visual barriers and links while offering an invitation to travel through a space and explore further. Secondary paths provide mystery by meandering and curving just beyond sight and tempting the visitor to venture upon an unexpected garden sculpture or something similarly fun or sublime.

There's also the opportunity to create walkways that become part of the architecture shaping and surrounding the space. A path that mimics and reinforces the shapes and undulations of walls, plantings, hillsides or distant mountains are all within reach when our minds are open to the possibilities and opportunities.

Within these rooms, we can exploit centuries of space-shaping practice by incorporating the second of the philosophies that rule landscaping through an examination of the ancient structures and spaces of Greece, Italy, France, England and elsewhere. These are all places where we see the magnificence of using perfect squares, circles and golden rectangles to form spaces.

While in a courtyard garden with a friend in Pisa, Italy, I decided to conduct an impromptu experiment by asking my non-designer companion to walk into the center of the rectangular space within eyeshot of the famous leaning tower. I asked him to "feel" the space at the center and at the sides. It came as no surprise to me when he said the center felt "different" – more soothing perhaps.

I had learned to feel spatial relationships while a student at the University of California at Santa Cruz in a Japanese culture class. While studying Aikido, we were asked to walk blindfolded in the woods and let our senses guide us and tell us where the trees were so we wouldn't bump into them. This experience spoke eloquently of how a body senses space.

What I observed in the woods and in that Italian courtyard

is that geometry changes the energy of a place (another idea I will explore in future columns).

eternal verities

The third governing philosophy of garden design was defined in a book, *The Inward Garden: Creating a Place of Beauty and Meaning*. Written by Julie Messervy to introduce the concept of archetypal spaces, it describes key spatial forms – sea, cave, harbor, promontory, island, mountain and sky – and defines them as clear and ancient emotional experiences, each with its own purpose.

The *cave* or sanctuary, for example, is an enclosed space with a small opening, while the *harbor* is an enclosure surrounded on three sides with an expansive outward view on the fourth. The *promontory* is the edge of the landscape (a cliff or balcony, perhaps) where one feels perched over the world, while the *island* is a piece of land encircled by water or a meadow with a 360-degree view. For its part, the *mountain* offers towering vantage points and a feeling of grounded stability.

I find that employing Messervy's ideas in my designs helps me construct definite, fully intended spaces rather than vague, uncomfortable, indefinable ones. I also like the way she acknowledges the importance of emotional memory and psychology in shaped spaces: I think we all have days when we need a cave – and not just for the coolness it can provide in the heat of summer.

As she puts it, "Space is like air: it flows all around us without definition. A space becomes a place only when we find a spot within it to inhabit. The archetypes suggest seven habitable vantage points that give us a place to be within otherwise boundless space."

To create awesome spaces, you need to master all three of these concepts – the room, spatial geometry and cultural archetypes. In all likelihood, you are in some measure applying these principles unconsciously, and it is the intention of this column to bring these issues forward and give you greater confidence that your designs fit within a cultural and artistic heritage that stretches back to the roots of human awareness.

When you find yourself sketching spaces and shapes, for example, you might be rendering golden rectangles without even knowing it – or coming so close that, with greater awareness, you can take the project to another level. You may have created a space that has all the earmarks of a harbor, and all it will take is knowledge of some key principles to make it a strong, clearly defined, emotionally effective one.

Through awareness, these concepts become a living set of working tools that you can use throughout the design process, from first conversations with clients through to completing a project of which you can justly be proud. In issues of *LandShapes* to come, I hope you'll find that these ideas are helping you create "ahh-some" gardens. **LS**