by Rodney D. Robinson

Design Principles

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In the exhibit above at Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, PA, the trellis moderates the light condition from one part of the garden to another. The curved trellis and bench shown below at Cheekwood Botanical Gardens in Nashville, TN, offer the visitor a shady, introspective space in which to rest.

Effective communication between the public garden administrator and the garden designer is an essential part of the design process. In working with the designer, the garden administrator must review proposed solutions and ultimately accept, reject or modify them. Part of that review requires an understanding of some basic design principles. This article offers a framework of design principles to help you judge the relative strengths and weaknesses of the proposed design and communicate your views to the designer.

Initially you will have to define your program and make clear your vision of the garden. The more specific you can be with the information you give to your designer, the sooner you will get what you want. As the designer responds with design solutions, look for some of the following principles at work.

Choreography of Experience

The way in which visitors will experience your garden should be well planned. Ask the designer to take you on an imaginary walk through the garden. Imagine what the visitors will see and how they will respond. How does the garden reveal

itself to the visitor? Does the garden unfold through a series of surprises or can the visitor gain an overall understanding of the layout right away? Either scenario can be successful. Decide what is appropriate for your garden.

Whether the garden is large with complex parts or small and simple, it is crucial that you understand how the pieces of the garden fit together. The interpretive success of the garden may rely very heavily on the arrangement of its parts. If your garden has a story to tell, determine whether the sequence of events complements the sequence of information you want to get across. For example, a garden with a story line about plant succession may require circulation that presents plant groupings in a strict sequence. If the garden has no story line, you might still want to make sure that the interpretive intent is clear. An example might be an herb garden in which plants are organized according to culinary, medicinal or industrial uses. In this instance the sequence through which the visitor views the plantings may be of little consequence, but the organization of plants into easily definable groupings is very important.

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To the left, this curved brick path flows from a larger, central path and prepares the visitor for a more intimate scale. Below, the fountain at Cheekwood Botanical Gardens in Nashville, TN, serves as a focal point and invites the visitor to enter the garden. At the bottom of the page, these stone walls and a massed planting of potentillas and lavender at Longwood Gardens, Kennett Square, PA, give structure to a diverse planting of herbs.

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Transitions

On your imaginary walk-through, look for areas of transition as the visitor moves through the garden. Transitions can be very subtle while at the same time adding richness to the overall garden experience. Typically described as a sense of entry, transitions need not be confined to the front gate. The most obvious transition is an opening in a wall or fence. But there are other more subtle yet equally effective techniques. Any element that signals a change can be utilized. For example, a trellis can change the light condition from bright to shady, steps can signal a change in grade. Placing a plant where one has to brush against, walk under or go around can serve the same purpose. The intent is to encourage visitors to pause and notice that they are moving from one part to another. Typically, there are many opportunities for transitions within a garden. In small gardens transitions can contribute to a sense that the garden is bigger than it really is.

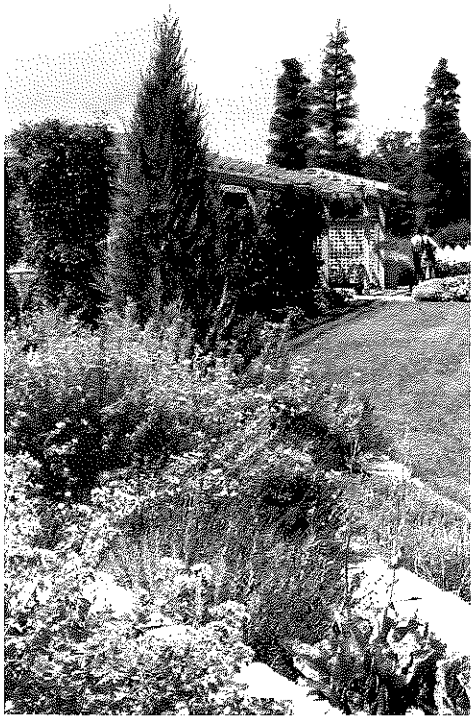
Movement

There are basically two types of movement within a garden. The first is the actual physical passage through the garden. The designer should follow a certain practicality and purpose in allowing the visitors to move easily. The second kind of movement involves a journey of the eye. Look for elements that will lead the eye from one part of the garden to another. These could include the repetition of colors, textures or forms. Repetition can sometimes be measured as in an allee of trees, or it can be random such as clumps of yellow iris following the shoreline of a pond. In either case, the eye will move from one similar element to another thereby leading the visitor visually through the garden.

Focus

As you imagine walking through the garden, look for elements that hold your attention. Referred to as focal points, these elements usually occupy a position of focus toward which much of the garden space is oriented. They provide a point of reference from which visitors can determine their location within the garden composition. Focal points can be specimen plantings, a distant view, a fountain, sculpture or other garden furnishings. It is the location within the composition as much as the element itself that determines its success as a focal point.

Focal points often work together to physically lead the visitor through the garden. For example, imagine climbing several steps and seeing at the end of a linear walk a very beautiful fruit tree espaliered against a wall. After proceeding along the walk you find a garden



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bench turned to face the entrance to a sunken yard that is bordered on all sides by a mixed planting of perennial flowers backed with evergreens. In the middle of the sunken yard is a circular pool with a single jet of water inviting the visitor to enter. Each of the focal points described above leads you to the next part of the garden and provides a reference for your movements through the garden. Remember that a strong spatial orientation will often create anticipation for some kind of visual reward, so avoid allees with no ending, paths that lead nowhere and spaces that appear empty.

Sense of Space

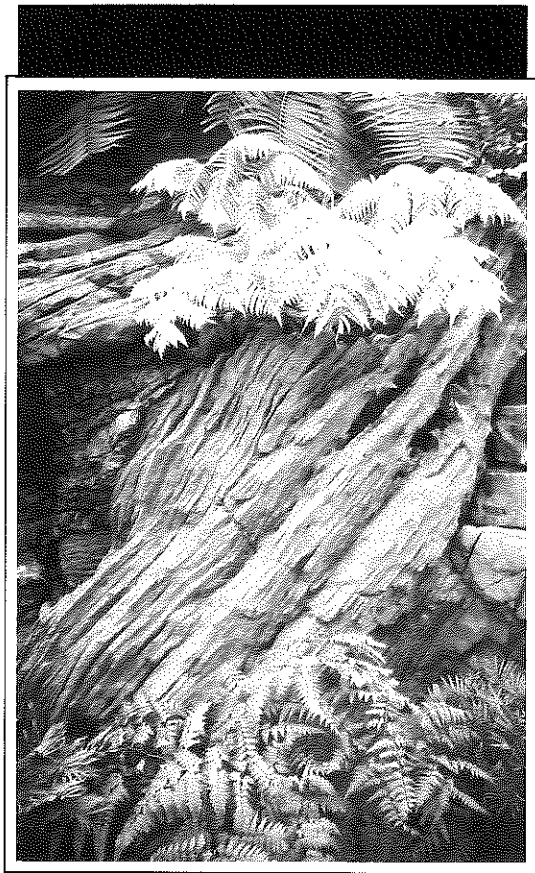
When designers talk about a sense of space they refer to the quality of space and how it is perceived. A strong sense of space is usually well defined by buildings, walls, fences and massed plantings, although not necessarily on all sides. A weak sense of space is one with poor definition and with an unclear sense of where it begins and ends. Some spaces are introspective and orient attention to the center. Others direct attention outward, sometimes toward a far away view.

Another consideration is spatial scale. If the space seems expansive, you may feel dwarfed by comparison and impressed with a grand scale. Alternatively, if the space is small, you may feel a sense of intimacy. Ask the designer to describe the spatial quality of the design in terms of its scale, orientation and definition. If the garden consists of more than one space, discuss how the spaces differ from one another and what elements make the transitions from space to space flow better.

Most people feel more comfortable when they have some notion of the size of the space and where they are in relation to it. A large lawn or field is often much more satisfying to look at if there are some large trees placed where the viewer can ascertain the expanse of the space. While viewing a garden it is often useful to convey a sense of foreground and background or a feeling of here and there. Transitional elements, as described earlier, can contribute to a distinction between this space and that. Another device is to create a filtered view. Plants with an open branch structure are particularly well suited for this effect. A space can also appear larger if the viewer is not able to see all of its limits from any single vantage point. As an example, by allowing an area of lawn to bend around and beyond a building or massed planting, the lawn, and therefore the space, appears to continue on indefinitely. This technique can be particularly useful in small gardens where you may want to suggest that the garden is larger than it really is.

Composition

Music is a good analogy to use when describing garden composition. Just as a musical score is not a random collection of notes, a garden is not a random collection of plants. In a musical score there is a very deliberate organization of notes, sequence of notes and repetition of notes. The result is a collection of sounds that conveys meaning because the listener can recognize and remember their order. The successful garden composition works similarly in that it establishes an order to the



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colors, textures and forms of the plants. Just as a musical score conveys a theme, so can a garden. The theme is no more than a hierarchy that governs the organization of garden elements wherein some plants assume dominance over others either through repetition, color, size or placement within the composition.

A sensitivity to composition is particularly crucial when planning a collection. Public gardens are often faced with the difficulty of displaying a large, perhaps diverse, collection in an orderly well composed setting. Adding to the trouble is the indefinite changes and substitutions in plants that are sure to occur, sometimes within a single growing season. Select a limited number of plants and either by planting them in large quantities or selecting noticeable specimens allow them to create a dominant theme. Like plants, gardens evolve and naturally change over time. Rely on built elements like walls, paths, fences and trellises to give permanent structure to the composition. Review the design in terms of compositional structure and identify those elements that will consistently give form and definition to the garden.

Start Big—End Small

Finally, the design process must begin with general concepts and work toward the details. Avoid jumping too early into specifics. An easy trap is to become enamored with a particular detail or plant (we all have our favorites) and spend too much design time searching for ways to fit it in. You might have to hold your designer back as well. Ask the designer to develop alternative solutions. The conceptual stage is a good time to begin deciding garden style, selecting a palette of building materials and planning the organization and display of plants and opportunities for interpretive themes.

Rodney D. Robinson is a practicing Landscape Architect and Partner in the firm of Coe Lee Robinson Roesch, Philadelphia and New York. He received his Master of L.A. from the University of Pennsylvania and frequently lectures on garden design. His firm has recently completed the Terry Shane Teaching Garden at The Scott Arboretum.

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