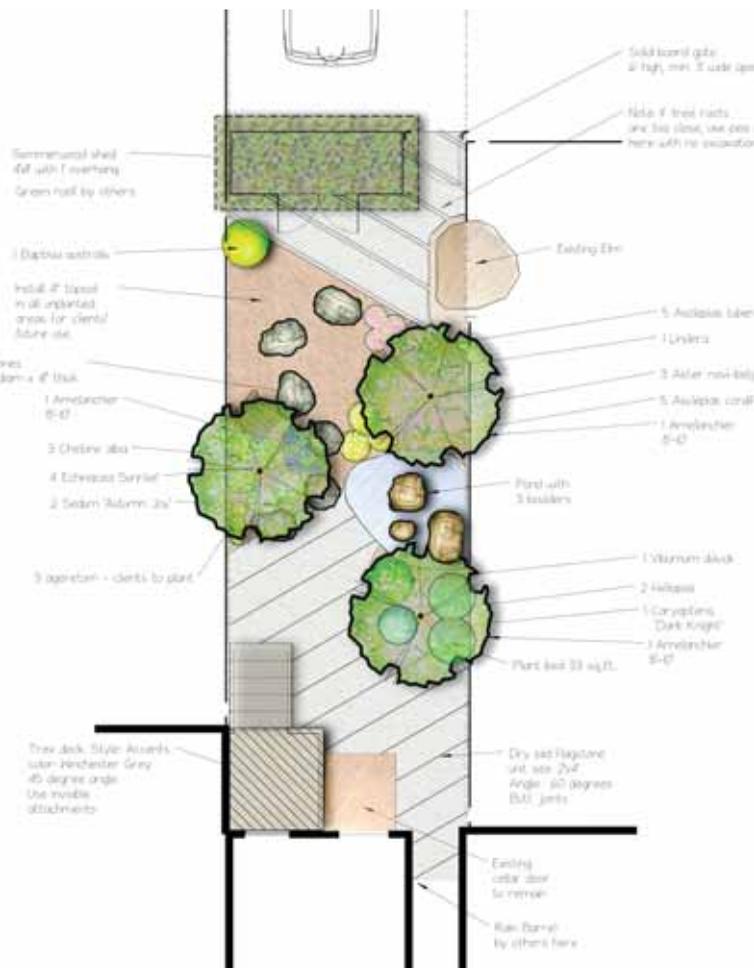


Let's Dance (in Your Garden!)

BY CHERYL CORSON



Various diagonals in deck and stone paving extend spatial perception. Photo: Cheryl Corson

Since designing my first Capitol Hill garden in 1998, I've revisited this design problem over 200 times and still find it interesting. In spatial contrast to the even rhythm of historic orthogonal buildings and prominent lot lines, an empty rectangle is full of possibilities. In social contrast to increasingly vibrant public spaces – parks, school and community gardens, and commercial corridors – Capitol Hill backyards have become predominantly private, with typically opaque enclosure above eye level.

These garden spaces are more or less exaggerated rectangles, with or without garages, public alleys, or mature trees in or near one's property. The ground level is close to or significantly below the rear door to the house. Lots vary in their soils, moisture, air flow, light and topography. Pre-design, they may look and feel like boxes, but they are re-

ally empty stages upon which complex dance moves may be choreographed.

In fact, some choreography tips apply: use the entire stage; consider entrances and exits; and break up lines of direction, including the vertical. But this is not what most people do. The most natural and usually least successful design move is to create garden beds and seating areas that outline and reinforce the property line, which is also the fence line in these cases. We learned to color inside the lines in kindergarten and it's a hard habit to break.

We usually arrange furniture this way too. But what if we put the couch perpendicular to a wall, or on a diagonal? We may find that by "using up" more space we also create the perception of more space in the room. It's counter-intuitive, but now there is visual and spatial complexity, something to see around, something else partially

revealed that piques the curiosity. This is why unfurnished rooms look smaller than furnished ones, as your real estate agent will eagerly tell you.

A Modernist Take on an Old Problem

It's useful to know that other landscape architects have worked through these problems in the past, often early in their careers. Two examples are Dan Kiley (1912-2004) and Garrett Eckbo (1910-2000). Kiley was based on the East Coast, and Eckbo in California. Both were classmates at the Harvard Graduate School of Design in the late 1930s. They, and others in their generation, taught my teachers at Harvard, who then taught me decades later. And they were the first generation to embrace a Modernist aesthetic and philosophy, greatly influenced by Walter Gropius, Dean of the legendary Bauhaus School in Germany, who came to Harvard in 1937 and stayed on.

In Washington, Kiley is known for the landscape designs of Dulles Airport and the East Wing of the National Gallery. But some also know him for residential design work he did for the post-WWII development called Hollin Hills across the river outside Alexandria, Va. Now a wooded refuge of modernist houses, original owners were obliged to purchase landscape plans from the developer. Most were never installed, but between 1953 and

1955, Dan Kiley designed nearly 100 of them. Many of these design drawings are in the Harvard Design School library today.

Eckbo took on the task of studying multiple solutions to urban row houses on narrow lots. While at Harvard he designed a project with eighteen gardens on a single urban block. In 1937, this project was published in the journal *Pencil Points* (later renamed, *Progressive Architecture*). These designs considered space and volume, but also functional connections between home and garden, and the social interactions in the neighborhood beyond individual lot lines.

By repeatedly taking on the same problem, designers develop a vocabulary of form which may then be applied to projects of different scales and levels of complexity. This is what happened for Kiley and Eckbo, and what I am starting to observe in my own practice now.

The Stage and the Frame

If we attended a dance performance and the dancers only moved around the stage's perimeter, it would look strange to us. So would a painting that merely traced bands of color in increasingly smaller parallel lines relative to the picture frame. Kiley, Eckbo and others took inspiration from the modern painters of their day – Kandinsky, Miro, Mondrian and others. These art-



Even the stones in the pond form a landscape composition of their own. Photo: Cheryl Corson



It may look and feel like a box...
Photo: Cheryl Corson

ists' forms can be found in landscape designs of that time.

Piet Mondrian arranged orthogonal shapes in bold primary colors with black bands on the picture plane in such a way as to challenge the actual boundary of the painting. One could imagine Mondrian's various geometric forms extending outward beyond the canvas. This can be done orthogonally, i.e., using right angles, or in a curvilinear fashion. It doesn't matter. The strategy is the same.

In painting, these forms are not arbitrary, nor are they in garden design. Lines on paper translate into spaces on the ground that facilitate the flow of water, enhance desirable views or screen unwanted ones. The dance between plan drawing and spatial reality is one of the most exciting things to witness as a project is built. Designing within a small rectangle can be as free and exuberant as designing anything.

Cheryl Corson (www.cherylcorsor.com) enjoys landscape design challenges of all kinds, yet remains partial to those on Capitol Hill. ★

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