Elements and Principles of Landscape Design

The Visual Appeal of the Landscape

Outside The Not So Big House 2006
Kit of Parts
(with instructions)

Elements - the separate “parts” that interact and work with each other to create a cohesive design

Principles – the instructions or guidelines for putting together the parts (elements) to create the design

From Concept to Form in Landscape Design, 1993, Reid, pg 103

From Concept to Form in Landscape Design, 1993, Reid, pg 104
Elements of Design

- **Line** - the outline that creates all forms and patterns in the landscape
- **Form** - the silhouette or shape of a plant or other features in the landscape
- **Texture** - how course or fine a plant or surface feels or looks
- **Color** - design element that adds interest and variety
- **Visual Weight** – the emphasis or force of an individual feature in relation to other features in composition
Line

• Lines define form and creates patterns. They direct eye movement, and control physical movement. They are real or perceived.

Straight lines are structural and forceful, curved lines are relaxed and natural, implying movement.

Lines are found in:
• Plant bedlines
• Hardscape lines
• Plant outlines
Plant Bedlines - connect plant material, house and hardscape. Defines spaces.

Bedlines delineate the perimeter of a space and create a shape.
Hardscape lines - define spaces and create forms and patterns

Lines creates a grid pattern and wavy form

Lines define the pool edge and create the form of the pool
Plant lines - define space through the plant shape and height

Vertical trees create an implied wall
Form

- Three-dimensional – a series of lines that define a shape or space, and provides scale

Form is the most enduring quality of a plant or a mass of plants although it can be manipulated through pruning or shearing.

Form is found in:
- plants
- hardscape
- voids (open spaces)
Form in Plants - Plants have a variety of forms - round, columnar, vase-shape, pyramidal, upright, weeping, prostrate, spreading, and oval.

The greater the contrast in comparison to other forms the greater the prominence - use for emphasis.

Neutral forms should establish the bulk of the composition.
Form in Hardscape - the shape of structures and garden ornaments. The shape of structures often determines the overall form theme of the garden - such as geometric or naturalistic.
Form in Voids - the spaces left over between structures and plant material

Provides a space for activities and for viewing plant material
Forms for themes - both plant and hardscape forms can reinforce a theme

Natural, formal and contemporary themes in plants and hardscape
Texture

- Surface quality – tactile and perceptual. Provides variety, interest, and contrast. Affects perceived size.

Texture is referred to as coarse, medium, or fine

Texture occurs in:
- Plant material
- Hardscape material
Plant Texture - the texture of plants differ with the size of the leaves, twigs, branches and trunk

Fine texture compliments and reinforces color and form - lets more prominent features dominate

Rough texture is more dominant

Garden Design, Feb/Mar, 2005, pg 180

Garden Design, Sept/Oct, 2005, pg 93
Hardscape Texture -
texture of buildings, patios, decks, walls,
and water features is related to the type and
size of materials

Landscaping, Better Homes and Gardens, 2002, pg 55

Landscaping, Better Homes and Gardens, 2002, pg 78
Texture and Scale - texture affects perception of distance and scale

Fine texture recedes in the landscape- exaggerates distance and makes a space feel larger

Rough textured plants appear closer- minimizes distances and makes a space feel smaller

Fine Gardening, Nov/Dec, pg 41

Landscaping, Better Homes and Gardens, 2002, pg 64
The hue of the plants and hardscape material provides variety, interest, and contrast. Affects human emotion and perceived distances.

Color schemes in planting are color combinations based on the color wheel.

Color appears in:
- Plants
- Hardscape
- Water
Plant Color - Color is found in flowers, foliage, fruit, and bark, and changes with the seasons

Use color to highlight other characteristics such as form and texture

A small amount of bright color has as much visual impact as a large amount of a dull color
Hardscape Color - Color is found in buildings, stone, rocks, pavers, wood, and furniture.

Color in hardscape can be the focal point or blend with the landscape.
Basic Color Schemes -
monochromatic, analogous, and complementary

Warm hues - red, orange, yellow - appear closer and feel lively and energetic.

Cool hues - blue, violet, green - recede in the landscape and feel calm and serene.
Visual Weight

• The force of expression of each of the elements

Sometimes called visual strength – it is the characteristics of the elements that attracts our attention

Elements can have:
• high visual weight
• low visual weight
High Visual Weight - upright forms, bold textures, bright colors

Garden Design, April, 2008, pg 50
The Tropical Garden, 1997, Warren, pg 75
Low Visual Weight - horizontal

lines, prostrate forms, fine texture, dull colors
Principles of Design

- **Scale and Proportion** – actual size and relative size of an object
- **Balance** – equal visual weight and attraction. Symmetrical or asymmetrical
- **Rhythm** – movement of the eye across repeated features (sequenced repetition)
- **Unity** – linkage through the use of line, materials, plants. All the parts are consistent in character
- **Emphasis** – a prominent feature that attracts attention and invites further viewing
Scale and Proportion

- **Scale**- size or physical dimensions, creates and defines space
- **Proportion**- size relative to adjacent objects

The most important scale is relative to the human body

Scale and proportion in found in:
- plants
- hardscape
- voids (open areas)
Scale/Proportion of Plants -
the size/scale of individual plants or a mass of plants can vary greatly

Use like sizes to achieve repetition and unity

Use markedly different sizes to achieve contrast
Scale/Proportion of Hardscape - should relate closely to the human body for function and psychological comfort.
Scale/Proportion of Voids -
size and scale of the open areas between plants and structures is determined primarily by function and the overall size of the yard.

In planted areas with masses and voids the proportion is the spatial relationship between the open space and the planted area.
Balance

- Balance – an equal mass - actual or visual - about a central axis

Shape, color, size and texture all affect visual mass and balance

Balance is either:
- Symmetrical - mirror image
- Asymmetrical - equal visual mass
- Perspective - relates to depth
Symmetrical Balance - mirror image is more formal, easiest to achieve.

The mind naturally assumes a central axis and seeks even distribution of objects or visual mass.
Asymmetrical Balance - considered informal - balance by visual mass of non-equivalent forms, size, color, and texture

A small mass (grouping) of large sizes, dense forms, bright colors, or coarse textures (high visual weight) - Can be balanced by a large mass of small sizes, sparse forms, grayed colors, or fine textures (low visual weight)
Perspective Balance -
includes the foreground, midground, and background

Foreground and background elements have equal visual weight through massing and color
Rhythm

- Repetition - repeated use of features to create pattern or sequence (sets up a rhythm)
- Alternation - alternating the sequence of features for more interest
- Gradation - gradual transition from one quality to another

Too much repetition creates monotony, too little creates confusion

Rhythm occurs in:
- plant material
- hardscape material
Rhythm in Plants - repetition, alternation, or gradation of type of plant, size, texture, or color

Repetition - of same type of plant

Alternation - produces a regular and anticipated sequence

Gradation - slow or gradual change from one quality to the next
Rhythm in Hardscape - repetition, alternation, or gradation of form, material, size, texture, and/or color

Repeated use of square and spiral forms
Unity

- Unity- a consistent organizational theme, style or character where all features blend for connection and harmony

Results from similar characteristics (pattern, form, texture), an overall balance, and proper scale. Some variety is needed for interest.

Unity can be found in:
- Plant material
- Hardscape material
Unity with Plants -
aesthetic characteristics of plants are used to create unity

- analogous colors
- similar shapes
- related textures
- common plant groupings - tropical, woodland, grasses, aquatic, desert
Unity with Hardscape -
organizational framework for the garden, connects and defines spaces

Materials have similar characteristics

Garden Design, Nov/Dec 2003, pg 71

Continuation- a line, edge or surface treatment connects features in a composition

Landscaping Your Home, Fine Gardening 2001, pg 150
Unity and Variety-
unity must tie the composition together but also incorporate variety to prevent monotony

In a monochromatic color scheme use light to dark shades for variation

Repeat plants with similar shapes for unity, but use different colors for variety

Garden Design, June/July 2000, pg 53
Emphasis

• Focal Point- a dominant feature that draws attention, used to guide views and circulation. Use sparingly to create interest

Contrast with other features in size, color, form, or texture

Emphasis occurs with:
• Specimen plants
• Garden ornaments

Small Garden, 2006, pg 163
Specimen Plants - attract attention through contrast

Isolate individual plants - draw the eye by purposeful placement of plants

Draw attention to entrances, steps or statuary

Dramatically contrast form, color, texture, or size
Garden Ornaments - attract attention through contrast

Draw the eye by purposeful contrast to the soft plant material

Dramatically contrast form, color, texture, or size

Small Garden, 2006, pg 234

Garden Design, Aug/Sept 2007, pg 55
Summary

• Elements of design (parts)
  Include: Line, Form, Texture, Color, Visual Weight

• Principles of Design (instructions)
  Include: Scale/Proportion, Balance, Repetition, Emphasis, and Unity
Recommended Resources:


Thomas, H. & Wooster, S. 2008. The Complete Planting Design Course


Austin, R. 2002. Elements of Planting Design

Messervy, J. & Susanka, S. 2006. Outside the Not So Big House