

ARTICULATE FORM IN LANDSCAPE DESIGN

PEOPLE AND MATERIALS DEFEAT PRECONCEIVED PATTERN

BY JAMES C. ROSE

WORDS! Can we ever untangle them? We hear talk about symmetry and asymmetry, the poetry of a curved line, the client who can't tolerate a straight line, and the endless argument whether a garden should be formal or informal.

The point misunderstood, which therefore gives rise to endless argument, is that *form is a result* and not a pre-determined element of the problem. Symmetry might result from a thoroughly contemporary approach, as it does in the form of a motion picture auditorium. A curved or a straight line or the combination of both might conceivably result in any design. Something which could be labeled an axis might even develop. But when we begin with any preconceived notion of form — symmetry, straight lines, or an axis—we eliminate the possibility of developing a form which will articulate and express the activity to occur.

The objective world, rather than academic preconceptions, provides the basis (and limitations) for the development of form in landscape design. Circulation—not an opportunity for persons to find their way around within

an imposed pattern but circulation as a structural part of design—is the first consideration.

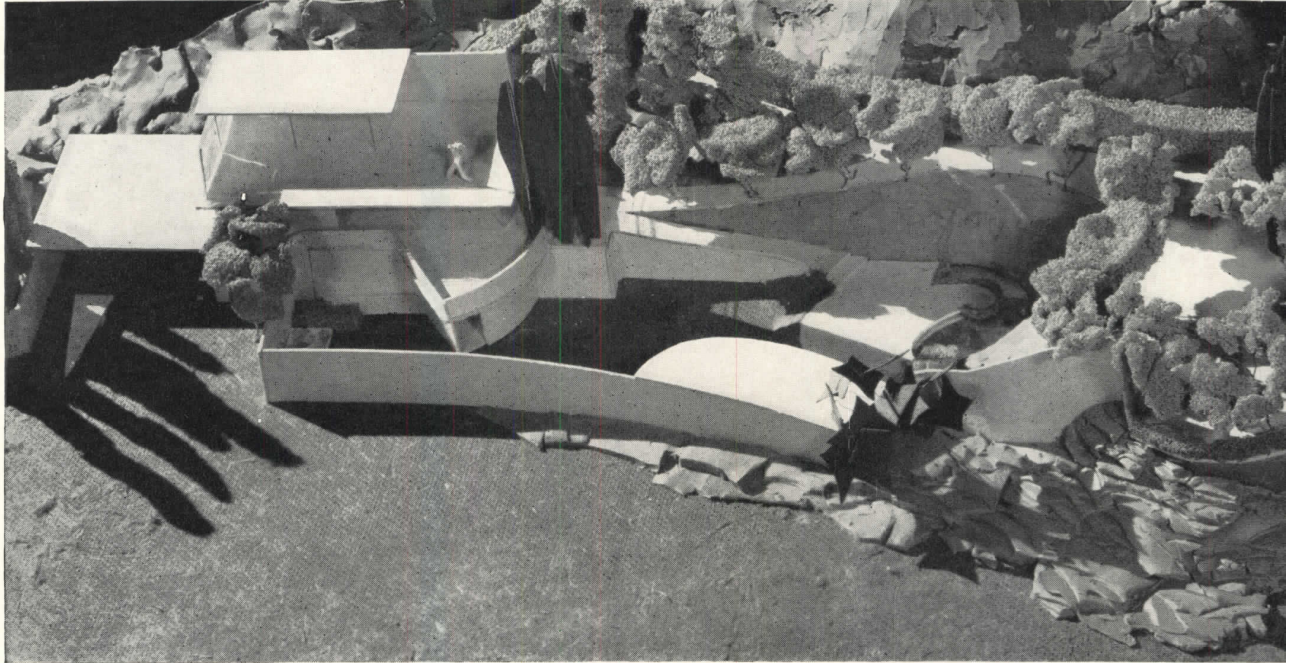
Wherever man goes, we find a reorganization of nature. This fact is the sole justification for the profession of landscape design, and our job is to provide a more skilful arrangement for greater utility and for the expression of contemporary living. Unfortunately, the profession has produced a lot of æsthetic ornament which has nothing to do with the problem. This is sold to the uninitiated, who have a pathetic and naïve faith in the moguls of eclecticism and who, having departed by a generation or two from the virtue of necessity, are now willing to pay for a trinket of no use for them nor they for it.

II

The materials of landscape are the second consideration opposed to any preconceived notion of form. The earth itself is a plastic

In this contemporary "hanging garden" the problem was to provide level areas for outdoor living, without destroying the charm of the hillside site. The topography determined the ground forms and the planting





Photos by Statler Photographing Co.

medium which holds an infinity of sculptural possibilities, but according to the "rules" the landscaper must iron the earth into a series of geometric shapes, based on classic precedent, until all the original virtue of earth as a material is lost. Then only eclecticism and the arrogance of man remain.

Rock materials are fundamental in both landscape and architecture. This should prove to the most skeptical the need for simultaneous development and consistency in their use. But the old school in landscape seems constitutionally incapable of breaking with tradition, while the new school in architecture seems to have practically no understanding or facility in landscape design. In this way, they can work side by side without fear of contamination or influence in form!

Plants, after all, are the saving grace of the landscaper. Because of the warm associations that are held for them, almost universally, the new movement in landscape need not suffer from the popular derision of modern as a cold, impersonal style; an opinion which the architects have not as yet succeeded in removing from the public mind. When we lift plants out of their little niches in an eclectic ground pattern and use them as organic, structural parts of the landscape, forms will appear which are expressive of plants as material.

Water is perhaps the only material in landscape which has no definite form as it depends entirely on the materials which surround it. Its fluidity permits an inexhaustible variety and fantasy in arrangement, and it becomes the interlocutor of all other outdoor forms.

Earth, plants, rocks, and water were utilized by the author to divide space in this garden for a summer dwelling, as the views of the working model reveal. The house faces east and is thus shaded from the afternoon sun, but the landscape was developed to the north. The detail below shows the sculptural quality of the earth forms carved along the general slope of the hillside. From the summer house the pool reflects flowering trees



III

No one with even a little insight can deny the influence of subjective preferences on the final form of a design. The greatest and most objective art always contains a symbolism in form which has no other basis than the psychology of the artist or the people who created it. This is true because we receive impressions only from the world outside ourselves, but for the reorganization of those impressions into an objective expression a period of subjective incubation is required. Who can deny that the development of form during this period of incubation is the real worth of a design? Only one thing is certain: the best designs of today will derive their subjective form from impressions of the Twentieth Century world in which we live, and not from academic archæology which, by itself, can produce nothing but eclectic imitation.

The fundamental fallacy of the old school is an archaic conception of space which originates from the segregation of ground area instead of division in volume. That is why the members can justify themselves with the same words, and yet have an entirely different meaning. That is why we can arrive at an entirely different expression without a change in

materials. And that is why we can produce Twentieth Century design while they continue in archæological distortion.

When we permit our minds to grasp the new conception of space, and learn to use materials for their own quality, we will develop an organic style. When we consider people and circulation first, instead of clinging to the imitation of classic ornament, we will develop an animated landscape expressive of contemporary life; and catch words like *symmetry*, *axis*, and *informal* will be known for their true significance . . . practically nothing.

But we have another point of view: it is expressed from the pages of the "Landscape Architecture Quarterly" of April, 1938. It is eloquent. It is authoritative. Read:

"It is perhaps to this very eclecticism—the borrowing of styles that are native to other countries and other times—that garden design in America is most obligated for its wealth of expression as an art; for in this country, there is hardly a climate or a geographical environment or an inherited American tradition to which some landscape architectural form based on European precedent cannot be appropriately adapted as a means of both utility and greater ornament." Exquisite, is it not?

Without preconceived axis, symmetry, or asymmetry, the plan of the "hanging garden" was developed from the natural contours and Rose stresses an organic and structural use of plants

