

Studio Elwes

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The Garden Dispatch

vol. XII - 03.ix.26

Addressing a New Site

One of the hardest moments for any designer comes right at the start of a new project. Negotiations over fees, insurances, timelines and scope are complete and you find yourself looking out over the space thinking ‘now what do I do’, because its not always a blank canvas, often it will be a complex site with unclear boundaries, or the client’s scope is vague, often you’ll be ask to redesign a garden that has already been designed that the client just doesn’t like. Sometimes, it is a blank canvas and it’s hard to know where to even start.

So how does one begin?

Over the years I have developed a collection of tools at my disposal that help me analyse a space and get the creative juices flowing. To begin with I

ask myself a series of questions;

What does the client want out of their garden and what is it that they're really saying. A large open lawn, for example is a very aspirational thing in a garden, but what does it represent? Is it a clear representation of the amount of space they have? Is it because they want to host garden parties? Is it space for children to play?

What does the client want to do in the garden and what do (in my opinion) they not know yet realise that they want to do in their garden (if you get my drift). For example, a client wants to throw open the doors in the summertime and dine near the house but is that the best way for them to make the most of their garden. Would they be better suited to have a seating area close to the house and their dining area further away to enhance the sense of dining somewhere that's not their kitchen. Furthermore, I always want to encourage people to explore deeper into their space, so bench spots throughout the garden and interesting yet practical ways of getting to those spots.

Once these things have been considered, its time to think about how best to approach this. I always look at the local vernacular, whether that's on site or further afield. I always like, when possible, to explore the neighbourhood and take inspiration from what other people are doing successfully, it's important not to try and reinvent the wheel at every turn.

Then its about how to lay out the space; the gardens and the buildings always need to have a relationship, so drawing lines and grids from the building gives both a sense of belonging, connection and scale. I often look to the landscape provided for clues on what to open up and what to close – designing gardens is, to a certain extent about theatre and drama – the magician trick of misdirection, revealing what you want them to see while distracting them from what you don't. The great gardens, Rousham, Dixter, Sissinghurst to name but a few, pull off this trick superbly, giving one the sense of being enveloped entirely within a fantasy realm.



Micro-changes

I had a conversation with a fellow landscaper the other day about the eternal satisfaction of being a gardener. Micro-changes to plants and trees that happens this time of year, so slight that they're ignored by those without their eyes finely tuned, give those looking out for them such pleasure. A minute bud on a Hydrangea, the chartreuse on a willow tree, the liverish red of a peony stem pushing through the mulch. Optimism abounds.

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