

Design excellence: playing with scale and space

Neil Ross¹

From a design perspective, the spaces between your plants are as important as the plants themselves. Good gardens convey a sense of mood, atmosphere and drama, and scale and space are key factors influencing these qualities. People love to feel 'squashed in' and then 'stretched out', to go from light to dark, from down to up, and under and over. For these reasons it is important to create a set of distinct and varying spaces that are well linked.

Large spaces

Large, wide-open spaces such as a beach, mountain top or tussock land provide feelings of exhilaration, confidence, and slight foreboding.



Fig. 1 Wide open spaces are exhilarating so don't be in a hurry to box yourself in. The MacFarlanes' celebrate the surf and sky in style at Winterhome Garden south of Blenheim.

- Don't be frightened to embrace the great wide open. If you add too many trees in a large space you may lose the unique quality and generous proportion of that space. Consider sticking to low growing plants and celebrate the sky as the star of the show.
- Plant your large spaces in proportion. Around a pond or large lawn in particular, many people develop fussy and high maintenance planting that looks totally inappropriate. Think big and create a cathedral quality with simple mass planting and save your more intricate gardens to spaces which are more intimate where they will best be enjoyed.

- Don't allow too many exits from a large space; otherwise the garden develops 'leaky sieve' confusion. This is often the great weakness of some large New Zealand country gardens which are either developed as a series of island beds in a large lawn or are plant collectors' woodland gardens which have become a meaningless spaghetti maze of paths snaking between the plants. The result is nice plants but confusion in the design and no sense of a journey around the garden where one space should lead naturally and easily to the next.
- Don't let features 'float' in lawns like boats out at sea – anchor them down with walls, hedges, and trees, and link together island beds so that things don't get too busy and confusing for the eye.

So how do you create the illusion of spaciousness in a small garden? Here are a few ideas:

- Use low divisions or veils of see-through planting to create 'rooms', but rooms which maintain an overall feel of spaciousness rather like cubicles in an open plan office. The suggestion of divisions with open-mesh trellis or vertical poles set in lines ably creates a feel of distinct spaces which don't fragment a small garden.
- Keep areas simple and uncluttered.
- Use bold planting and ornamentation – it seems to enlarge the boundaries.
- Mask boundaries so the eye imagines the space to be larger than it is.

Small spaces

In contrast to large spaces, small spaces impart a sense of cosiness, intimacy and appeal. They feel safe and human in scale, and are often near to the house. Small spaces are places to concentrate on detail in ornamentation and in planting.



Fig. 2 This beautifully executed low wall in Jenny Oakleys Taranaki garden creates intimate spaces without dividing the garden too severely.

- Narrow corridors can become under-utilised highways to get from point A to B. You may want to slow people down so they can enjoy that particular part of the garden or a collection of plants. If so, create a small space simply by swelling a path then perhaps adding a birdbath or feature in the centre to interrupt the 'highway' feel. Some intricate planting and a seat at that particular place will also imbue the sense of focus.
- Make small spaces obvious but not so much so that they stick out and are not linked to the garden as a whole. In a large garden, fiddly little sundial\herb\potager gardens floating in a vast lawn look detached and need to be 'woven' in to the whole by creating a soft setting of mass planting. Announce the entrance of such separate areas clearly with architectural plants or topiary either side of the entrance. Framing a distinct area within a garden with a hedge or trellis can be useful to help draw the eye; for where the eye goes the feet will follow.

¹ 12 Westpark Glen, Warkworth 1241; neil.ross@xtra.co.nz

Distinctive rooms but relational
 Regardless of whether garden 'rooms' are large or small, they should always be distinct from one other. In one garden I visited recently there were two linked rooms – each with a square lawn in the centre. There was little sense of individuality and therefore little reason to go beyond the first room. However, the simple addition of croquet hoops to one lawn gave it just the point of difference it needed to justify its existence. Choosing a clear theme or colour scheme for distinct spaces, using a signature plant or plants, changing a paving pattern, changing levels or enclosing a space; these all create distinctiveness as one moves around a garden.



Fig. 3 In Penelope Hobhouse's 'Country garden' at Wisley in England, a new garden space is announced with dramatic 'framed' planting and a change in level.

In creating distinctiveness however, do not forgo the underlying feeling and identity of the garden as a whole. This can be achieved by sticking to a common path material, furniture style or hedge species, and using the tree canopy to link areas while still stamping different corners with their own particular flavour by the details you choose within this larger framework.

Corridors and flow



Fig. 4 Gardens need a sense of flow to draw the visitor. Here William Kent in the seventeenth century uses a rill at Rousham Garden in Oxfordshire, England, to ably lead the way.

Linking wide garden spaces, where we are encouraged to pause, with narrow corridors provides the necessary counterpoint – drawing us along at a faster pace and encouraging movement between

open spaces. These confined areas are not the places for fussy details and are often an opportunity to create dark and shadowy alleys to further the feeling of mood changes as we go from one point to another.



Fig. 5 Again at Jenny Oakley's Taranaki garden — the simple addition of a hole cut in the hedge created a logical flow from one garden room to another.

Two models are often seen in great European landscape gardens:

1. The 'golf course' model, where there are a set of distinct 'tee-off' points and vistas leading from one obvious focal point to the next in a logical sequence with perhaps a few minor cul-de-sacs along the way (e.g., Stowe Gardens, in Buckinghamshire, England; Cashel Garden created by architects John and Pauline Trengrove in Ohoka, north of Christchurch, New Zealand).
2. The 'sausage and string' model, where a long, fat space such as a serpentine, open lawn leads to a focal point and then visitors can return to where they started along a second, more intimate space such as a shaded woodland path positioned to one side (e.g., Rousham Garden in Oxfordshire, England, created by William Kent)

Both models involve making the most of varied space, and surprise combined with that overlooked quality of a good garden – the sense of a logical progression.

People want to know where to go so make it clear. For example, at Ayrilies, Beverley McConnell built a gallery at the back of one pond as a destination but found that few visitors bothered to visit as its presence was not obvious. Suggestions to make the landscape more 'readable' and thus more enjoyable have included constructing wider steps to entice people off the beaten track, re-

routing the approach and adding a sculpture at the top of the stairs to get people to the 'teeing-off' point. These have all helped, and removing trees so the gallery is easily seen is in this case a last resort.



Fig. 6 This Marlborough garden uses a 'sausage and string' model to lead the visitor. A wide snaking lawn sucks us toward the hills and a narrow woodland path to the side provides a contrasting return route.

Such directional devices are important where signage would be inappropriate or would compromise the aesthetics of a particular area. Devices such as adding a path across a lawn or narrowing a wide lawn will help draw visitors along in a certain direction and prevent visual confusion. Similarly, repeat planting creates a rhythm that tends to lead us through a larger garden rather than leaving us floundering and confused. Make the dimensions of paths, gaps and vistas in proportion to their importance. Side paths should be narrow and unobtrusive; the main route should stand out. Using markers such as topiary, pots, and even a yellow robinia at thresholds to the next space all subconsciously point the way.

Topography



Fig. 7 At Ayrilies, attention is drawn to the best viewpoint and most dramatic topography by screening the less interesting features and building this simple lookout – out over a bank to add drama.

We all know that topography adds something to the garden but often we fail to take advantage of it. Something as simple as putting in two steps between one area and the next can signal a change of mood and enhances the journey. Divert wheelchair or mower access



Fig. 8 People like the transition from wide open sunny spaces to narrow gloomy tunnels. At Hampton Court in Gloucestershire, England, a maze leads down into a cave which emerges under a waterfall at a thatched cottage – pure spatial theatre!

if need be so as not to confuse the eye. Great landscape parks can teach us much about accentuating and manipulating a sense of space for dramatic effect. Often shallow slopes are masked with shrubs so that the eye cannot easily gauge the drop when seen from above. Conversely, paths are routed to teeter on the brink of steep slopes and these are planted with low planting to accentuate their drama. Capability Brown skilfully heightened his hills and deepened his valleys by planting woods on the high ground and we can do the same albeit on a smaller scale if we own a garden with a few undulations or are bold enough to hire a digger and carve something exciting from a flat plot. In summary:

- Accentuate bluffs and headlands with trees following the example of Capability Brown.
- Mask gentle slopes with bushes – if you cannot see a slope it increases its perceived sense of drama.
- Create balconies and terrace walls at steep parts to create a sense of danger.
- Plant the bottom of slopes with small plants to accentuate the scale.
- Save your viewpoints for the most dramatic drops (e.g., the viewing deck at Ayrliès).



Fig. 9 Dark caves are an essential part of a fun spatial experience yet we seldom use them to good effect. The grotto-like ponga 'cave' at Te Kainga Marire ("New Zealand's Native Garden") in New Plymouth is a stroke of design genius.

Dark tunnels and caves create a sense of menace, melancholy, secrecy, melodrama, sombreness and spookiness. They also add to the gardens 'roller coaster' appeal, such as walking under tunnels and over bridges or hillocks. By simply limbing up a tree or making a rose arbour you can create a tunnel. Even a close planted grove of evergreens will make a suitably dramatic dark area from which to emerge into a contrasting bright space – contrast and theatricality is the key.

In summary

In large gardens we often fail to think about detail and small spaces, or if we do, we put them in inappropriate settings. On the other hand, in small gardens we can forget to think big. In both we often fail to create a sense of flow between areas. Do not forget: create a set of distinct and varying spaces that are well linked.



Fig. 10 A well positioned tree can make a gloomy cave from which to emerge into something all-together different.

Questions you might ask yourself while standing on the back door step:

- Which is my primary big room or space?
- Is it at heart a pleasing shape and scale with a distinctive feel or personality?
- How easy is it to read your garden – is it clear where to head next? Do rooms flow?
- In a big garden do you have enough intimate spaces in logical places?
- Is there a pleasing variety of topography, mood, scale and theme?
- What are the signature plants, colours, materials or features making each area within your garden distinct?
- Is there enough overall unity in the garden as a whole?

Neil graduated from the London University with a degree in Horticulture and first worked on garden restorations at Cobham Hall (an Elizabethan Mansion), Leeds Castle in Kent and a Tudor house owned by the National Trust. Neil gained practical training over four years while working in a team of eight gardeners at the world famous Sissinghurst Garden in Kent, England.

It was Beverley McConnell who offered Neil the head plantsman position with her team at Ayrliès. In 1998 Neil and the Ayrliès team designed and built a gold medal-winning garden at the Eilerslie Flower Show and he has been a judge there for the last three years. Neil now divides his time between gardening, writing and running his design and consultancy business.