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2011 ASLA Design Awards

A Virtuous Garden Far Beyond Form and Emptiness
Honor Award
Marpa Design Studio, Inc.



Residential Design Over \$100,000 Construction Budget

PROJECT FACT SHEET

Project Name: “Virtuous Garden Far Beyond Form and Emptiness”

Location: Boulder, Colorado

Project Summary: This large private estate combines elements of both modern and wabi-sabi principles in a contemporary design that respects the natural environment. We worked closely with the architect to produce a landscape design that integrates perfectly with the architecture and with the spectacular mountain surroundings.

Purpose of Project: This was a rare instance when the owners selected the landscape architect first, before any other members of the design team. Our firm helped to hire the architect, and was instrumental in siting the house, outbuildings, and drives on this large private estate. The result is a seamless connection between the home, its garden, and its surroundings.

Our design is a celebration of the form known as the “vesica pisces,” a shape that is the intersection of two circles with the same radius so that the center of each circle lies on the circumference of the other. One side of the form is the house; it is faced by the opposing form in the garden. CoreTen steel edging shapes the landscape close to the pool and patio, while the outer circle of the garden is shaped by land forms we created. The house and the landscape use similar materials, forms, and colors, making an integrated whole.

The nearby houses were carefully concealed by mountain forms and trees, while the views toward the mountains were preserved. The pool wall is glass to ensure an uninterrupted view of this magnificent landscape.

The west garden has both inner and outer aspects. The inner garden is planted with ground covers and ornamental grasses; the outer area farther from the house is planted with native prairie grasses. This outer area is mowed, so that the two parts to the garden flow together.

The house was designed as a combination of contemporary vocabulary with the Japanese principle of “wabi sabi”: the appreciation of beauty in imperfection and the natural cycle of growth and decay. The wood used in the siding was reclaimed from old buildings and combined with native stone. Our design extended this principle into the landscape, with the use of old, well-tended trees carefully chosen and trimmed so that the scale of the garden is maintained with the distant views. The clean, simple lines of the patios and the pool, the use of glass and steel, the radial drifts of ground covers, and the small lawn within the vesica pisces shape, are all part of this aesthetic. All planting is xeric, and foliage color was considered as important as the color of the blooms in creating an integrated palette.

The entryway to the home has large boulders set in three “families,” so that visitors feel they are entering through a canyon. This makes the space feel protected and intimate for the journey from the drive to the front door. As the path twists and turns, it provides different views of various xeric plants, all in a muted color palette of green, purple, and brown that matches the facing stone of the house.

To the east is a small, protected garden that offers a contrast to the sweeping views from the west patio. Here there is less wind, and the sun warms the space enough to allow the owners to enjoy it late into the autumn season. This intimate space is built on two levels and is partly surrounded by a low wall on one side and a raised planting bed on another. Like the west patio, this east side has furniture custom-designed and had fabricated to our specifications.

Construction Budget: \$750,000

Role of Landscape Architect: Entire landscape design and oversight during construction.

Special Factors: Our greatest challenge was to seamlessly integrate the landscape with the architecture so that it is impossible to tell where the architect left off and the landscape architect began, and then to integrate the domicile envelope with the existing landscape. The architect borrowed both forms and materials from the environment, as did we. The land forms we created hide the intrusive view corridors and recapitulate the distant mountain forms. The trees and other plant material also join the microcosm of the domicile to the macrocosm of the Rockies.

Winds blow down Eldorado Canyon and pick up speed as they cross the site. One of the design challenges we faced was how to protect the home from the wind as well as the views of the neighboring houses. The land forms to the south and west were the solution to both these site-specific problems.

Another issue was that the water source for the property is a shared well, which produces relatively little water for so large an estate. We had to cover a lot of ground with xeric plant material, while at the same time striving to satisfy the client’s high aesthetic expectations.

Significance: This was an extraordinary example of team process: collaboration between the architect and landscape architect to site the building and garden in the correct place, and design of both aspects in conjunction with one another. The product perfectly suits the space and the client’s needs.



