



HOW CAN A CITY GARDEN USE asymmetry to create a sense of perfect balance? In transforming the backyard of a Minneapolis residence, architect and garden designer Sarah Nettleton posed this challenge to the owners 10 years after they had fully renovated their compact and elegant house. Like many early-twentieth-century houses in the neighborhood, the old residence is a “four-square” design with a central hall separating living and dining areas. Ten years ago, architect

CITY SYMMETRIES

A walled garden redefines the Midwestern yard. *By Frank Edgerton Martin*

Martha Yunker’s renovation created a rich level of detail in beams, flooring, and spatial articulation and balanced enclosure and openness to the outside. The renovation by Y+A Architecture opened the house with a highly functional kitchen, an informal eating area, and a sunroom looking through a panoramic wall of

millioned windows at the center of which is a set of French doors.

“Part of the magic of this house is that it is small and open enough that you can see both Kenwood Park in front and the back garden at the same time,” Nettleton says. But the den and open kitchen also became the transition zone to the outdoors—and to neighbors’ yards that stood nakedly on display.

Nettleton’s task as garden designer was to refine Yunker’s early concept for the yard by establishing a subtle sense of asymmetry to accommodate vistas from within the house. The owners envisioned an outdoor room reminiscent of a Parisian courtyard—one in which the garden wall could, in a sense, “complete the back of the house.”

Such an enclosed and private world is very unusual for a city garden in a northern region. In much of the Midwest, the relatively low cost of land and the strong influence of the English Garden aesthetic and Olmstedian parks continue to

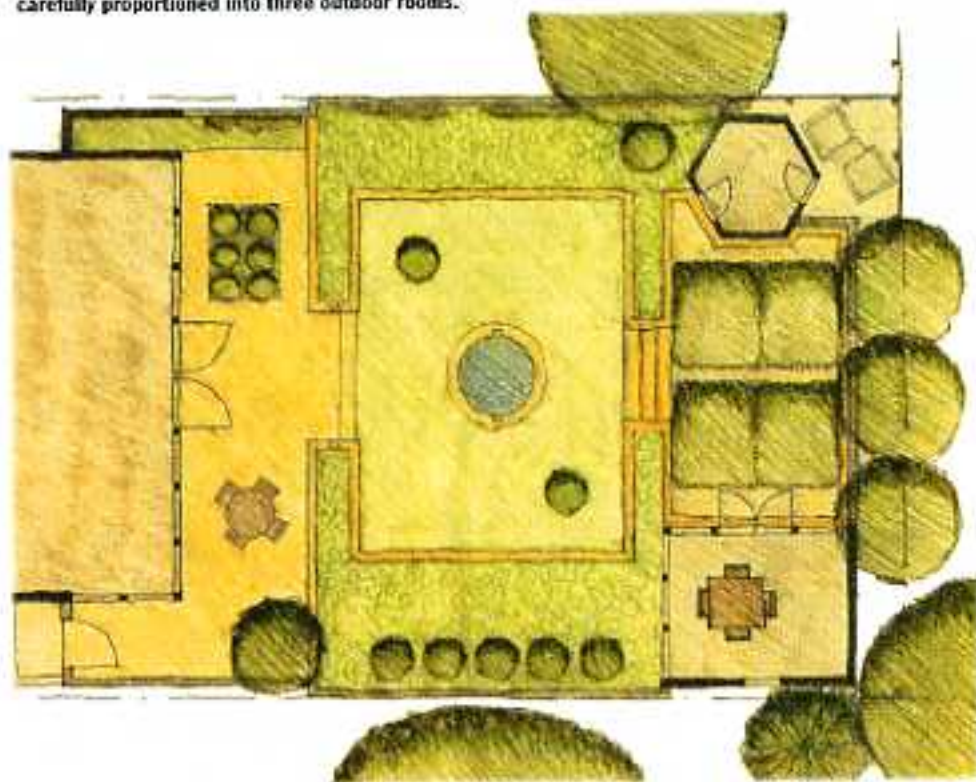
Accented by a dovecote shed and screen house, the subtly asymmetrical garden, top, appears both balanced and rhythmic. Recalling a Parisian park, left, four pleached lindens bring the structure of the screen house outside.



DESIGN



The panoramic view over the limestone terrace, above, reveals the sense of enclosure and quiet privacy of the sunken central lawn and fountain. The scaled plan, below, lays out the garden's rational geometry, carefully proportioned into three outdoor rooms.



encourage open and sinuous domestic scenes. Built on a fairly standard city lot, this residence is significantly smaller than many of its mansion neighbors and certainly more compact than the contemporary suburban McMansions beset with sod.

In developing the walled garden, Nettleton detailed a three-part scheme with distinct oblong rooms leading one on a journey all the way to the very private screen house at the back of the site. At the eastern edge of the sunroom at its bank of mullioned windows, Nettleton created a beige limestone terrace that steps down to a central lawn flanked by a flower bed for perennials, apple trees espaliered on the sunny north wall, and a southern bed backdropped by a row of shade-tolerant dwarf euonymus. This grass carpet focuses on a round pool and small waterspout. From the lawn, one follows three stone steps on axis with the pool to reach a linden bosque bounded by the eastern wall, a screen house to the south, and a

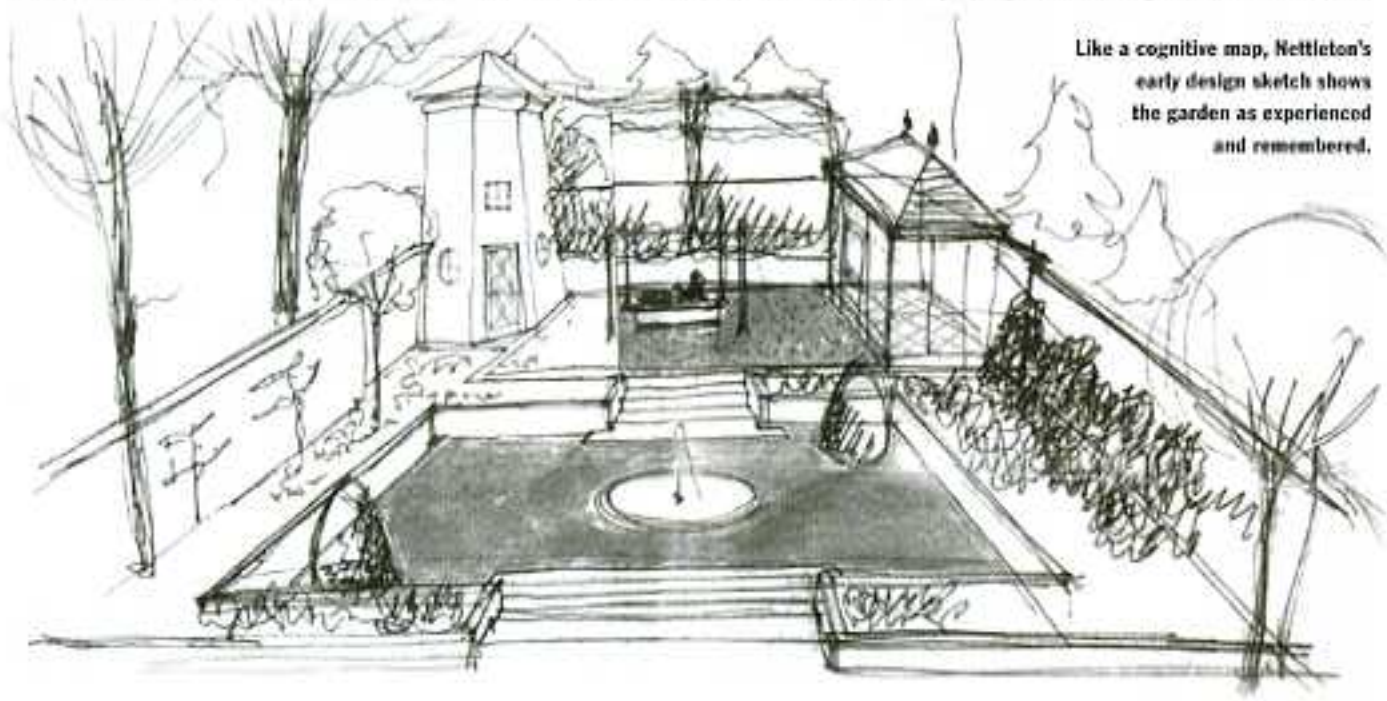


charming hexagonal shed designed by Yunker that recalls a medieval dovecote.

Responding to the structure and footprint of the house, the more-shaded south bed is wider than its north wall corollary,

yet unless one looks carefully, the beds appear to be the same size. The geometric force of the garden is so strong that the eye is drawn outward to the sunken lawn, shed, and screen house. The overall effect conveys

the even, bilateral balance of an Italian hillside garden. "This is the ultimate proportion...when asymmetry feels balanced," Nettleton says. Indeed, subtle diagonals playing off the hexagonal lines of the shed



Like a cognitive map, Nettleton's early design sketch shows the garden as experienced and remembered.

DESIGN

and two pyramidal yew trees on opposite corners of the sunken lawn help to knit this asymmetry into a tighter whole.

Planted with four pleached lindens, the gravel terrace evokes the outdoor cafés of French parks. The space between trunks echoes the rhythm of the sunroom visible across the sunken lawn. With a nod to garden designer Russell Page, and at the request of the owners, the rear wall is set five feet from the back property line to accommodate three Austrian pines that now loom over the back wall. In the more sunny central space, a yellow ochre wall frames a garden palette dominated by white flowers and set off by a few blue and chartreuse shades, dark maroon highlights, and dark green and variegated foliage.

This backyard is true to the concept of "yard." Like a churchyard, it is a sheltering enclosure that imparts a sense of safety. Here, the alignment of focused views is



The preconstruction view shows a barren and open space lacking both spatial articulation and privacy.

more important than great vistas. The balance of light and shade, solids and voids, creates an intricate series of spaces through which to travel.

The journey from house to garden to garden pavilion, is intentionally tactile and acoustic: from the house across the Kasota

limestone terrace, down the soft green lawn, and up again to the crunching gravel. Along the way, the scents and colors of flowers and shrubs change with Minnesota's four dramatically different seasons. Because architecture and landscape exist in balance, they complement each other. "It's

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When viewed from the bosque, the fountain is set on axis with the house's entry doors.

the flowers in contrast with the garden's strong structure that makes them so beautiful," says Nettleton.

Frank Edgerton Martin is a writer and campus planner who is working on a number of cam-

pus landscape preservation plans for colleges and universities. He is a regular contributor to Landscape Architecture.

PROJECT CREDITS Conceptual planners: Tom Morin and John Skogmo. Architect: Y + A Architecture, Inc., Rehn Hassel. Landscape design: Sarah Nettleton Architects Ltd., Sarah Nettleton.

Resources

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