





SEVEN LANDSCAPE DESIGN RULES

HOW TO CREATE BEAUTIFUL &
INVITING OUTDOOR SPACES

by Amy Gustafson

Landscape design ideas can help transform outdoor spaces from good to great, but they must be guided by core design principles. These common principles can be used in designing any outdoor area. Before groundskeepers start implementing landscape design ideas, landscape planners must understand the goals and grasp best practices for bringing the vision to life.

Landscape Design

A common thread drives all landscape design concepts: the goal is to make a welcoming and appealing space. Different spaces, however, need to be tailored to totally different audiences and often have completely different goals. Campus landscaping projects are generally meant to appeal to current and potential students as well as alums and donors, so these landscape concepts are often more geared at enhancing the look, appeal, and value of a space. On the other hand, some campus spaces need to include features that serve specific purposes—such as creating a comfortable place to relax or providing a space for athletics. To have the most successful landscape design, planners must understand the common principles and rules that will help ensure success in both types of projects.

Landscape Design Principles

When it comes to landscape design concept ideas, Dixie Sandborn at Michigan State University believes there are six fundamental principles that should be incorporated into the plan:

Balance

This concept refers to a sense of balance between seeing and being which creates landscapes that are both inviting and visually pleasing.

Focalization

Every good landscape design has a focal point where the viewer's eye is first attracted.

Simplicity

Great landscape design avoids clutter and keeps things simple and tidy.

Rhythm and Line

Things in the landscape should be repeated with a standard interval, creating a rhythm, and lines should be created by things like the shape and form of the planters, sidewalks, and where the grass meets the pavement.

Proportion

This idea refers to the size relationship of all the features in the landscape, including vertical, horizontal, and special relationships, and it extends to building size, lot size, plant size, areas of plantings, and use of landscape.

Unity

This value simply means that all of the components from the last five principles are working in harmony to create a great holistic design.

The Seven Fundamental Rules of Landscape Design

According to many experts, the above-mentioned principles can be achieved by following seven fundamental rules of design when it comes to landscaping.

1 The Law of Significant Enclosure

This rule is based on the idea that people love gardens because they provide a sense of refuge. For this reason, it is important to create a sense of both enclosure and openness simultaneously. This goal can be achieved by ensuring the vertical edge of a landscaped space is at least one-third the length of the horizontal length of the space. So, if your horizontal length is 30 feet long, your vertical edge should be at least 10 feet high. While this ratio won't work in every scenario, it's a good rule of thumb to keep in mind.

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2 The Regulating Line

According to famed architect Le Corbusier: “A regulating line is an assurance against capriciousness ... It confers on the work the quality of rhythm ... The choice of a regulating line fixes the fundamental geometry of work.” Effectively, what this idea means is that a distinctive landscape feature can create an imaginary line that helps connect and organize the design. Le Corbusier theorizes that this guide helps to create an underlying sense of order in the landscaped space by ensuring that, despite its wildness, it's founded on “good bones.”

3 The Golden Rectangle

When it comes to laying out terraces, patios, arbors, and lawns, experts recommend keeping the Golden Rectangle in mind. This theory, which originates from Greece and was named for the Greek sculptor Phidias, states that the short side to the long side is equal to the ratio of the long side to the sum of both sides ($a/b = b/a+b$). This ratio works because it can help create a pleasing sense of balance and order—and, as many experts will attest, it always looks good.



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Sustainability is important to WPI which boasts several LEED certified facilities on campus. The school has a broad reaching sustainability planning process which includes students as well as faculty. Faculty members have incorporated sustainability into many student projects and focused on various aspects of sustainability around the world. In 2012 alone, some fifty-one energy-related projects were completed at the school.



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4 Thomas D. Church's Rules for Designing Steps

In his book *Gardens Are for People*, Thomas D. Church states that, when designing steps, twice the height of the riser plus the tread should equal twenty six inches. This proportion is not just an arbitrary number. Church bases this notion in the generally accepted idea that five feet is the minimum width for two people climbing steps side by side. Church goes on to say that this rule can be applied to almost any type of stairs in virtually any terrain, making it a vastly applicable best practice.

5 Plant Properly

Landscape planners should always make sure to take the time and effort to plant things properly so that they survive and thrive. This rule can be summed up with one simple idea: no landscape design concept idea is going to successfully come to fruition without proper execution; the implementation must be as flawless as the design.

6 Pay Attention to How Plants Interact

Legendary landscape designer Roberto Burle Marx spent years creating a space which he used as a home, laboratory, and garden. In this multipurpose space, he grew more than 3,500 species of plants which he then used in his outdoor landscape designs. In his work here, he was concerned with plant communities and the interaction between plants

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Legendary landscape designer Roberto Burle Marx was concerned with plant communities and the interaction between plants and their environments. He was careful to choose plants that easily coexisted whenever possible; these ideas must drive landscape plans so that the design can endure for years.

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7 Respect the Genius of the Place

Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux submitted the winning design submission for what would become Central Park in New York City. Olmsted went on to design nearly five hundred parks, private estates, residential communities, and campuses for academic institutions. Olmsted's success was due in large part to his core philosophy: "respect the genius of the place." In his words: "The root of all my good work is an early respect for, regard, and enjoyment of scenery ... and extraordinary opportunities for cultivating susceptibility to the power of scenery." What he meant by this statement is that parks, in their purest form, are an attempt to return a place to what they once were: a place where nature can thrive unspoiled and humans only interfere to preserve nature's beauty. Olmsted understood this concept and tried to restore what was lost as he created each project.

Creating a Landscape Concept Plan

These principles and rules can help landscape planners achieve success. Professional landscape designers are best suited to getting this process underway, but campus planners can keep in mind some key steps to creating a landscape concept.

Consider Its Purpose

Planners much think about what the landscape design concept idea will be used for. If it's residential, is it intended for relaxing and hosting? If it's commercial, is it for making a space more functional, boosting its appearance, or providing employees with a relaxing place to unwind?

Think Big Picture First

The shape of larger spaces, like lawns or courtyards, must be decided first. The architecture of the space may influence design, but a lot of the plan comes down to preference, so planners should consider whether to use curves or angles, circles or rectangles, or symmetrical or

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asymmetrical design patterns. The campus brand should also be reflected in the chosen design elements to create the biggest impact.

Narrow the Focus

Next, planners need to start looking at the mid-sized details like garden sizes and locations of planters.

Get Granular

Finally, planners should look into granular things like the types of plants and trees desired, seating areas and furnishings, and water and fire features.

With the right approach, landscape design concept ideas can be translated into a beautiful reality serving a distinct purpose on campus. ■



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Amy Gustafson is the Vice President at PureModern. She spreads the word about PureModern and educates customers on planters, fire features, and more. Visit www.puremodern.com to learn more.

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