

# KNOCK KNOCK

POINT YOUR GUESTS IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION



*Although the plantings here are colorful and lead your eye to the entry, two important mistakes have been made: no shelter from bad weather and guests must thread their way single-file to the porch.*

By Garry L. Menendez, ASLA

**W**e Americans love the holiday season. As our interests migrate from football to food, we see this as a time to gift-wrap our homes and put candles in every window. Our front doors may glow as they are adorned with festive new holiday wreaths accented by a well-placed light. But what happens after the last of the decorations is removed? The importance of an attractively designed, inviting entryway cannot be overstated. As Thomas Church states in his indispensable book on landscape architecture, *Gardens Are For People*, "Horticultural excellence in the garden can never compensate for a fundamentally bad layout." Which of us has not encountered a forgettable experience when arriving at an unfamiliar property? We have risked parking on a busy street for fear of blocking in another vehicle. We have approached front doors as we would a cafeteria line, in single file since there is seldom an opportunity to stroll side by side on a ribbon of walkway. Or who can forget an embarrassing moment of knocking on the "wrong front door?" Just because the UPS guy may leave packages at the side door doesn't mean your guests should wind up there.

Arrival should be pleasant and effortless and the entrance must say, "Welcome." Heaps of hospitality will add little comfort to the person who has stumbled up your front steps and stood in a chilling rain only to be bumped from a scrawny stoop as a storm door swings out to greet them. First impressions are indeed lasting. What follows is a collection of considerations you may want to contemplate when planning the perfect entrance.

## Keep It Simple

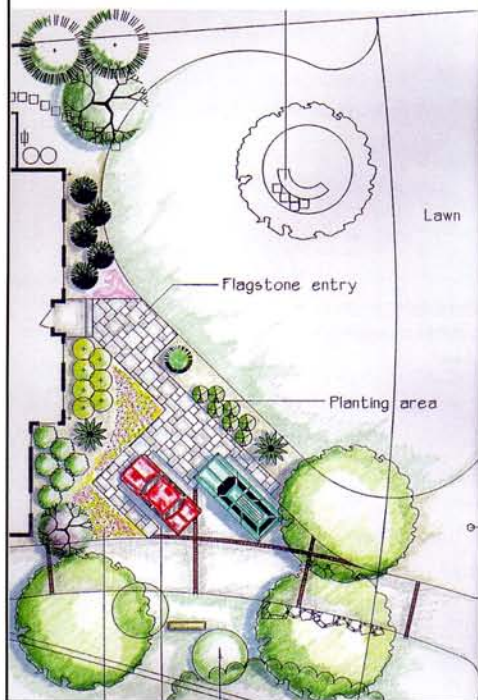
Garden designers love to use mysterious words such as allure, discovery, reveal, conceal and surprise. Remember, this is an entrance to a home we're talking about. Forget that cute, crafty little plaque reading, "All our closest friends use the side door." In other words, make it obvious as to which way a person should proceed the moment he or she sets foot on the property. In Christopher Alexander's bible of planning and design, *A Pattern Language*, he states that the primary entrance should be apparent as soon as a guest first sees the structure.

An inviting entrance must also provide



## SAFETY FIRST

- Safety should be the overriding concern in any design.
- Arrival should be pleasant and effortless and the entrance must say, "Welcome."
- Make it obvious how a person should proceed to the entrance.
- Provide a sense of enclosure. This provides a sense of security and a pleasant transition from public to private space. This is especially important when dealing with a home on a busy street.
- Walkways approaching a main entrance should be a minimum of 4-1/2 feet wide to accommodate two people walking side by side.
- Consider the size of landings. Allowing more space to the handle side of the door will allow visitors to move more freely and stay clear of an outward opening door.
- Appealing garden architecture such as gates, trellises and fencing will provide visitors with a sense of rhythm and scale.
- The primary surface must be attractive, durable and safe. Materials must complement the architecture and provide interest and contrast.
- Try to locate guest parking out of the line of sight from high-use windows.
- Lighting will add safety and security.



a sense of enclosure. Guests should feel as though they have entered the first room of the home. How often do we see an entrance that consists of nothing more than a raised concrete slab providing little interest other than the token foundation planting countered with a wide expanse of lawn? Separating the arrival area with a low seat wall or decorative fencing accented with attractive plantings will provide a sense of security and a pleasant transition from public to private space. This is especially important when dealing with a home that fronts a busy street.

A popular belief among designers and homeowners is in that of the relaxing, soothing, natural curved walk. While this works well in many instances, you should not rule out simple, geometric patterns. To approach a front door on a walkway which appears was formed at the conclusion of happy hour is not a relaxing experience. Consider the distance being traveled. If it is more than 30 feet from the drive to an entry landing, a simple (less than 3 radii) curvilinear approach might work well. However, if it is a shorter distance you might want to consider a simple angular approach. This is often more complementary with the architecture of the building and offers some creative opportunities for appealing niche plantings and accents.

### Size Matters

"Generosity in landscape design begins at the front door" is yet another practical observation from Thomas Church. Walkways approaching a main entrance should be a minimum of four and a half feet wide to accommodate two people walking side by side. In hardscape design (walkways, patios, landings, etc.) when choosing between making an area too small or too big, always opt for the latter. The human eye will much more readily detect a meager measurement than one that is too generous. Larger areas may be visually reduced with the additions of container plantings, benches and people.

Consider the size of landings when planning an entry. Exchanging hellos and good-byes in a spacious setting immediately outside the front door provides a sense of living beyond the walls of a structure. Foyers serve this same purpose during the winter months, but on those balmy summer evenings nothing beats competing with crickets when conversing with friends.

The relationship of such a space to the front door will determine movement and

function. Allowing more space to the handle side of the door will allow visitors the chance to move more freely and stay clear of an outward opening storm or screened door. Since this is a space where people will tend to linger, you may want to create detailed interest through paving changes and fragrant plantings.

### Go With the Flow

It is possible to control the speed in which users will experience an entryway by varying the width and direction of the walk. A funnel type of approach will direct guests to the front door in a logical but appealing manner. Widening the area where walks and drives meet will allow people to filter in, creating a natural transition from one "room" to another.

Appealing garden architecture such as gates, trellises and fencing will provide visitors with a sense of rhythm and scale. Plantings that provide seasonal interest may help lure guests toward the door, soften architectural angles and create a sense of balance.

Unless you live in Kansas, steps are an everyday occurrence. They may separate or unify an entire design. A few wide steps may unify two different levels whereas a large number of narrow steps will accentuate a change in elevation. The pace at which someone will experience an entry may also be controlled by the width of such steps. If the slope is steep, the design should persuade people to slow down for safety's sake. Should the elevation change be less severe, the flow through this transition may be quickened by the presence of wide, graceful steps with generous treads. A note about riser to tread proportion is: twice the riser plus the tread should equal about 26 inches.

One last comment on steps is that there is sometimes a temptation to over-design and sneak in obscure angles for the sake of creativity. Safety should be the overriding concern in any design. Therefore, make sure that all steps are laid out perpendicular to pedestrian flow. Deviating from this may look cute on paper but may become a lawyer magnet if implemented.

### Selecting the Surface

A woody garden path and a front walkway are two different design elements. Choosing an appropriate material for an entry is critical. Stepping-stones should be reserved for the perennial garden. Legs come in different lengths and stutter step-



ping or leaping to these tiny targets is not the way to bring visitors to a front door. Installing brick pavers on a sand base may be easy but this method of construction should be reserved for lower traffic flows such as back patios and herb garden walks. Moss may form on shady sites and, as settlement occurs, minimal changes in surface elevation can be hazardous. Many forms of crushed stone drain well but who wants this stuff tracked into the foyer on a wet day?

So what does that leave? Plenty. Concrete, wood decking, brick and mortar, unit pavers on a solid base, exposed aggregate, and stone are a few. The point is, the primary entrance surface must be attractive, durable and safe. The selected materials must complement the architecture while at the same time provide interest and contrast. One option may include combining materials. Brushed finished concrete with brick expansion joints and borders is one such option if the home displays some brick.

Sometimes the color of the front door itself may set the theme for the surrounding landscape design. By repeating colors that are used in a home's architectural features in such nearby features as steps, drive, and plantings you can create a visual link that will unify the entire design.

### Cars Rule?

The ever-present automobile must be acknowledged in just about everything that is designed these days. Part of the arrival experience involves entering the drive and finding a space to park the car. Most American families today have at least one vehicle for every person over the age of sixteen and it never fails: somebody must leave shortly after a visitor blocks him or her in. So begins the car juggling routine. Though it may be clear to guests as to which is the main entrance, where these people may park their vehicle may not be as obvious.

When designing an entry, it often helps to visualize the experience of the visitor as he or she first arrives on the property. By situating one or two parking spaces in the design, the problem of circulation can be resolved. To minimize the visual impact, try to locate such guest parking out of the line of sight from high-use windows, or at least try to incorporate low plantings to allow screening.

The placement of additional paving strips on both the driver's and passenger's side of the parking space will ensure that a person may find firm footing rather than step off into mud or mulch. Contrasting this

*This design leaves no doubt in visitors' minds that they are knocking on the right door.*



paving with that of the drive surface will add a new dimension to the overall appearance and help to visually minimize the scale of hard surfaces.

### Keep the Light On

So the design has been drawn and implemented and a wonderful new entry enhances the home. Now what? Wouldn't it be great to show this investment off after the sun goes down? Wouldn't it be equally great not to get sued when the pizza guy trips negotiating your dark steps? Landscape

lighting is a must these days. It will illuminate an entrance and show off elements often unnoticed during daylight. Lighting will also add the safety and security that enables us to function after the sun sets.

A well-designed entry reflects the heart of any home. If it doesn't exist, all that remains is a collection of parts. It should not compete with, but enhance, the architecture. The entry should provide interest, beauty, detail and movement. First impressions are indeed lasting. ☺