

MOVING ABOUT – The Art of Circulation Design

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“Horticultural excellence in the garden can never compensate for a fundamentally bad layout.” In his book, *Gardens Are For People*, Thomas Church says it all with this statement. Garden designers are finding their niche today and our industry is as diverse as any. Traditionally we have focused on species and cultivar selections in landscape design but we must not forget to step back and look at the “big picture”. Have you ever experienced a landscape that just didn’t work? While there may have been enough color and textural variety displayed in the plant materials, the overall layout may have left you confused or anxious to move on. This garden may have lacked one simple design concept: functional and appealing circulation design. If a garden visitor is having trouble getting from point A to point B and should logically do so, the basic design may need to be re-evaluated.



THINK FLOW

Whenever I am designing a garden there seems to be a specific sequence of events. First I consider major uses of specific rooms of the garden. Is this to be an active play area, a place to tinker or cut flowers, or a shady dell in which to lay in the hammock and dream? Once I’ve determined this I begin to think of major focal points within that room: a water feature, a piece of sculpture, a specimen shade tree, etc. Next comes the part of the design process I enjoy most, circulation. How can I connect these



different rooms? Maybe there should be no connection but heavy screening instead. It isn’t until I worked all of this out that I begin thinking of plant specifics or the “icing on the cake”.

HIERARCHY OF CIRCULATION

A woodland path and a main entry are used for different purposes and their design and material selections should reflect this. If the path of circulation is a major element, which is to be used frequently, think wide and hard. No one enjoys walking single file to the front door of a home, so plan on a width of 4 feet or more. It’s better to be too generous than too skimpy. Also consider the material selection. Crushed stone makes for a better herb garden path than it does a front walkway. Major, high use arteries should be of solid, durable materials (brick, stone, concrete) which drain surface water fairly quickly. Woodland walks, however, should be narrower and constructed of softer material to slow down the pace and encourage users to notice details along the way.

CHANGES IN ELEVATION

Unless you’re designing in Iowa, there’s a pretty good chance that your paths of circulation will have some changes in elevation. Consider ramps which meet ADA requirements



(below 8.3% slope or 1 vertical foot change for every 12 horizontal) and remember the magic rule of riser height to tread depth ratio when incorporating steps (twice the riser plus the tread = 26 inches). Wherever any changes in elevation do occur keep it safe and noticeable after sunset by using some path lighting.



TO CURVE OR NOT TO CURVE

Just because you may have heard that “curves are relaxing” or “curves soften the design” this doesn’t mean that they are the only solution. There are situations where simple, straight lines are best. If the surrounding architecture is formal and the space is limited an angular (30, 45, 60 or 90 degree) approach may work best. It may look “forced” to plop down an arbitrary curve that has no relation to the rest of the design. If you do use curves, make sure you have some minimum linear distance for every radius you use. I’ve seen front entry walks which were less than 30 feet long but yet had 4 or more radii. Not only did they look like they were constructed after the happiest happy hour, but you would have had to *been* at that happy hour yourself just to relate!

Good circulation design is a critical part of any landscape design process. It should be considered in the earliest stages for the design to be successful and pleasing. If you view it as another piece of the puzzle there is little doubt that you will have a beautiful and complete “big picture” as a result.