

FIRST IMPRESSIONS: The Residential Entrance

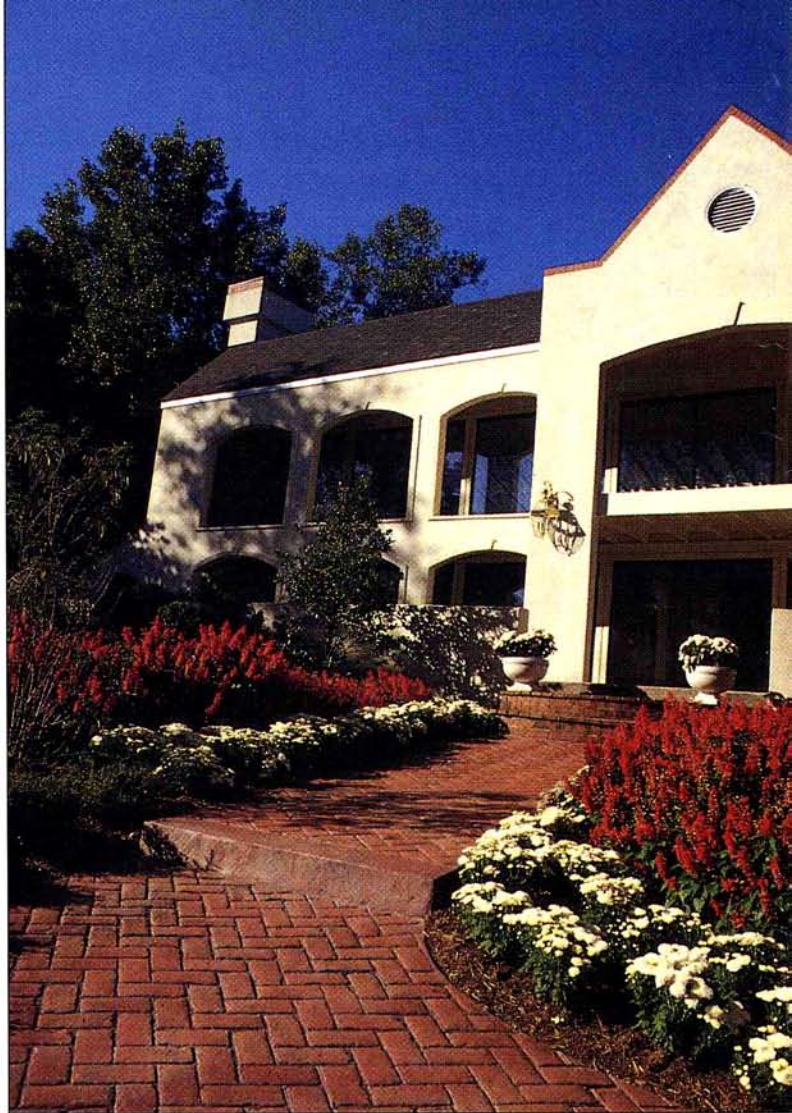
By Garry L. Menendez

"Horticultural excellence in the garden can never compensate for a fundamentally bad layout," as Thomas Church succinctly states in his book *Gardens Are for People*. This comment should flash in our minds whenever we take a look at the subject of the residential entrance. Which of us has not experienced a wishfully forgettable arrival when visiting a strange property for the first time? We've parked in the street out of fear of blocking someone in or, even worse, of not being able to get out when we wanted. Our Sunday shoes have met mud shortly after swinging open the car door. Even more frustrating is the embarrassment of waiting at the wrong door because we were not sure where to go.

Arrival should be pleasant and effortless and the entrance must say "welcome." First impressions are lasting, as banal as that may sound. 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. What follows is an assemblage of considerations you may want to ponder when planning the perfect entrance.

Simple Strategy

Many garden-design authors have stressed the importance of allure and discovery. While it may be creative to reveal and conceal or draw a person into a garden with the tease of mystery and surprise, you need to remember one thing. This is an entrance to a home we are talking about. Clamoring through a side door as a result of confusion will do little for the experience of arrival. In other words, make it obvious as to which way a person should proceed as soon as he has set foot on the property. In Christopher Alexander's essential book 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.



Repetition of colors from the adjoining residence in the entry plantings forms a visual link. Photo courtesy: Garry Menendez, University of Tennessee.



An inviting entrance must also provide 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 is 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 low seat walls, fences or railings accented with appropriate and attractive plantings will often provide a sense of security and a pleasant transition from public to private space. This is especially notable when dealing with a structure that fronts a busy street.

Straight lines are rigid and formal. Curves convey relaxation, comfort and naturalness. To approach a front door on a walkway that looks like it was laid out at the conclusion of happy hour is not a relaxing experience. Plopping down a wavering path for the sake of imitating nature should be avoided.

Consider the distance being traveled. If it is more than 30 feet from beginning to the entry landing, a curvilinear approach might be inviting. However, if the setting resembles the more typical suburban layout (less than a 30-foot walk), you might want to consider going geometric. This is often more complementary with the architecture of the building and the resulting angles or grid patterns can serve as the basis for appealing niche plantings and accents.

Size Counts

"Generosity in landscape design begins at the front door," mentions 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. Marching single file is something that should be reserved for military or marching band exercises. If an approach spans much beyond five and a half feet, it may become out of scale with human proportions. The resulting look, however, could be enhanced with the addition of other elements such as container plantings or other simple site furnishings such as a bench.

The actual size of the landing or waiting area should also be considered 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 on cold, blustery days, but on those warm summer evenings nothing beats competing with crickets when conversing with friends.

The relationship of a such a landing to the front door will determine movement and function. By situating it slightly off-center with the majority of the space resting to the handle side of the door, users will have the opportunity to experience the entire area rather than merely skirting the edge. Because this is a place where people will tend to linger, it is also advisable to create some interest in the form of paving patterns and detailed planting design.

A Change of Pace

By varying width and direction it is possible to control the speed in which users will experience the entryway. A funnel type of layout will direct pedestrians to the main entrance in a logical but appealing manner. Widening the immediate area where driveway, street or public sidewalk meet private walk will allow people to filter in, creating a smooth transition from one zone to another.

The incorporation of unique hardscaping features such as a gate, trellis or fencing will give users a sense of movement and scale. Plantings that provide seasonal interest may help to lure visitors to the front and can soften the architectural elements while displaying a sense of balance.

For most of us, steps are a fact that may separate or unify the entire design. A few wide steps will do much to make two levels appear as one, whereas a larger number of narrower steps will accentuate a change in elevation.

The pace at which someone experiences an entry will 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

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sake. Should the elevation change be less severe, the flow through this transition will be quickened by the presence of wide, graceful steps.

One last note on steps is that there is sometimes a temptation to over-design and sneak in obscure angles for the sake of interest. Safety should be an overriding factor in planning any project. Therefore, make certain that all steps are laid out perpendicular to pedestrian flow. Deviating from this may look good on paper, but will in reality become a lawyer magnet if implemented.

Manipulating Materials

Many more feet will travel the route to the main entrance than will stroll along the backyard garden path. Material selection should reflect this fact. Stepping stones should be saved

for the perennial garden. Legs come in different lengths and stutter-stepping or leaping to these often tiny targets is not the way to bring guests to the front door.

Installing brick pavers on a sand base is easy, but this method of construction should be reserved for less formal patios and walks. Moss will form on shady sites and, as settlement occurs, minimal changes along the surface can be hazardous. Many forms of gravel drain

well and are environmentally sound, but who wants this stuff tracked into the foyer on a wet day?

So what's left? Plenty of options exist. Concrete, wood decking, brick/mortar, unit pavers on a solid base, exposed aggregate and stone are but to name a few. The point is the primary entrance surface must be attractive, durable and safe. Whatever materials are chosen must complement the architecture of the building while at the same time provide contrast and interest. One option may include combining materials. Brushed finished concrete with brick expansion joints and borders is one such option if the house also displays some brick.

Sometimes the color of the door itself can set the theme for the scheme of the rest of the entry area. Repeating colors that are used in the architectural features of the residence in the encompassing steps, driveway and shrubbery will form a visual link between the two that will be hard to break.

Controlling Cars

The ubiquitous automobile must be acknowledged in the design. Part of the arrival experience involves entering the drive and finding a space to park the car. Most families today have more than one car. There often exists the occasion when a member of the residence must leave after a

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This unique entry feature beckons visitors to come in. Photo courtesy: Garry Menendez, University of Tennessee.

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visitor has arrived. So begins the car juggling routine.

When involved in the early phases of entry planning, it often helps to visualize the experience of the visitor as he or she first arrives at the property. Though it may be clear to guests as to which is the main entrance, where these people may leave their vehicle might not be as obvious. By situating one or two parking spaces in the design, the problem of circulation can be resolved. To minimize the visual impact, specify appropriate plants as low screening.

Whether it is a suburban setting as described above or a city situation, an idea germane to both is that of additional paving strips on both driver and passenger sides of the vehicle. This allows a person to find firm footing rather than stepping off into mulch or mud. Contrasting this paving with the driving surface will add a new dimension to the overall quality and appearance. This also allows some space in which to negotiate any nearby steps rather than being surprised by such a find upon immediately opening the car door.

After-Dark Adventures

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 off this investment after sunset? Wouldn't it be equally great not to be held liable when visitors trip on the shadowy steps they could barely see? Landscape lighting is a must these days. It will illuminate an entrance and

show off elements often unnoticed. Lighting will also add the safety and security that enables us to function beyond dusk.

A well-planned residential entry reflects the heart of any good landscape design. If it doesn't exist, all that remains is an incongruent collection of parts. It should not compete with the architecture, but yet it must provide detail, interest, beauty and movement. First impressions are indeed lasting. If the entrance is exceptional, visitors may avoid "good-bye," but rather reply "see you soon" because they will certainly hope to return. 🍷



This shady, rustic entry sets the mood for the country cabin beyond. Photo courtesy: Garry Menendez, University of Tennessee.

Editor's Note: Garry Menendez is an instructor at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He is a landscape architect and consults in private practice when not performing teaching duties.

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