

**Inside: Brian Van Bower on Thriving in Tight Times**

# WATER SHAPES

**Design • Engineering • Construction**

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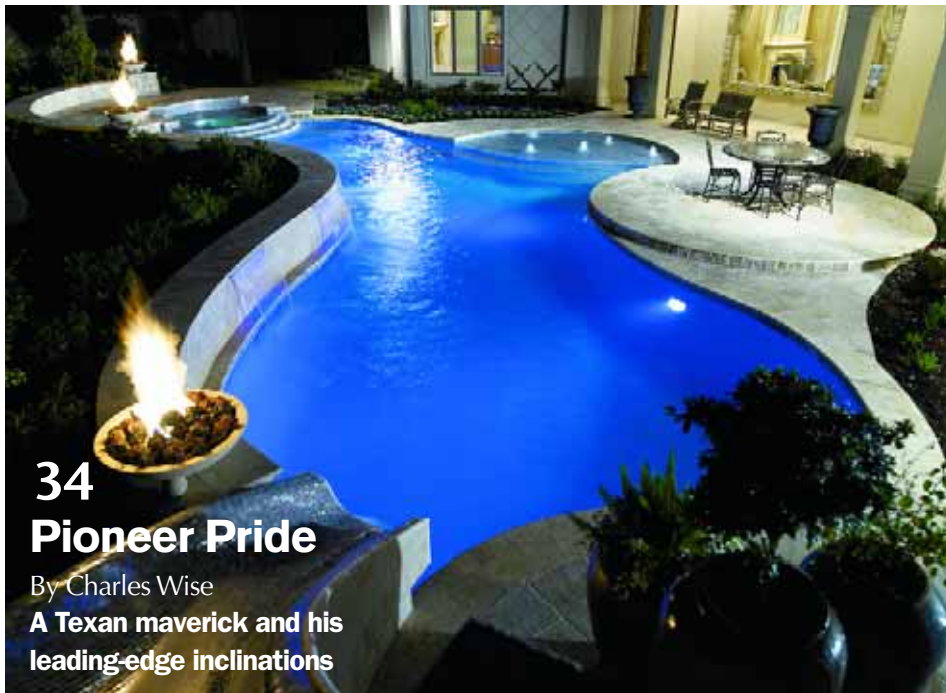
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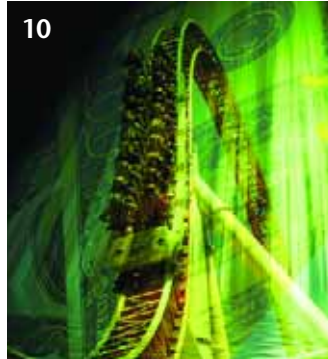
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By Eric Herman

## Troubled Waters

Back on March 17, the World Wildlife Fund released a report on the profound level of environmental damage that's been done to some of the world's most iconic rivers. The news about the Nile, Danube, Yangtze, Ganges, La Plata and Rio Grande rivers is indeed grim: All are so severely polluted that they're in immediate danger of losing most or all of their plant and animal species.

As a rule, I don't bring up current events in this column, but I can't help seeing the meticulous work watershapers do in managing artificial bodies of water and in restoring wetlands and watersheds and thinking there may yet be hope for these wild waterways.

The World Wildlife Fund reports that, overall, more than 2,000 of the 10,000 most common freshwater species of fish are in danger of vanishing completely within the next 10 to 25 years. The environmental implications of extinctions at that level are so broad that they defy description: Even if the projections are dramatically out of whack, even if just a fraction of what the experts are predicting actually comes to pass, the blow to the environment – and perhaps humanity itself – is simply devastating.

The forces driving the deterioration of our world's most renowned waterways are all-too-familiar: dramatic population growth, chemical/nutrient runoff from agriculture, the dumping of industrial waste, global warming, lack of environmental oversight and diversion of river flows. In that last case, the World Wildlife Fund reports that, of the world's 177 longest rivers, only 21 now flow from source to sea unimpeded by dams or other diversions.

Leaving aside the ethical imperatives behind environmental preservation, the practical fact is that these massive bodies of fresh water are absolutely critical to local populations and economies. They are a source of food, potable water, recreation, transportation, energy and irrigation. If these rivers continue on their current downward spiral and/or die completely, it's not hard to see that the disruptions to local, national and global economies and standards of living will be profound and enduring.

I'm not the sort who indulges every apocalyptic prediction that comes along; in fact, I'm the first to say that those who approach such reports with skepticism may have cause to question findings in some cases – but not here. What the World Wildlife Fund is reporting is an update on long-term, ongoing monitoring of deteriorating waterway conditions and is therefore hard to dispute.

The upside in all of this is that there are many cases in which sound environmental stewardship has brought dying waterways back from the brink – think Lake Michigan, Boston Harbor, the Cuyahoga River and lengthy portions of the Mississippi. With concerted action, there's obvious hope.

As an industry dedicated to creating wonderful artificial bodies of water, I think it's incumbent upon us who love water and make our livings from it to be aware of the bigger picture and, as they say, "think globally and act locally" when it is appropriate and possible.

The first step, as always, is simply being informed. The rest is up to each of us – and it seems to me that watershapers have just the sorts of skills and insights that might come in handy down by the river.

*Eric Herman*

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**Charles Wise** is president and founder of Wise Pool Company in Houston. A Texas native, he has been designing and building high-end residential pools, spas and waterfeatures since 1970, winning more than 100 design awards in the process. His firm has also been honored with the Houston Chamber and Community College small business awards as well as the Better Business Bureau's Torch of Excellence award for small construction companies. Wise runs the firm with his wife Merry, the company's vice president and a well-known industry veteran in her own right. Charles Wise has two stepsons, a daughter and two grandchildren; stepson Brock Stapper is carrying on the family tradition of designing and building award-winning watershapes, having recently won his first gold medal in the Association of Pool & Spa Professionals' design competition.

**Alan Hochman** is a stone sculptor with studios in Cave Creek, Ariz., and Fallbrook, Calif. A native Californian, Hochman's first careers were in the high tech industry, where he worked as a computer scientist and then as a marketing consultant. He began trying his hand at stone sculpture as a hobby in the mid-1990s and soon found himself fully immersed in learning all about it. By 1999, he completed his transition to his third career, becoming a full-time artist and building his first studio in Arizona. Working almost entirely on commission, he has provided his unique brand of contemporary sculpture to scores of residential, commercial and public clients throughout the United States. He can be reached at [www.stoneandwater.com](http://www.stoneandwater.com)

**Mark Holden** is a landscape architect, con-



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tractor, writer and educator specializing in watershapes and their environments. He has been designing and building watershapes for more than 15 years and currently owns several companies, including Fullerton, Calif.-based Holdenwater, which focuses on his passion for water. His own businesses combine his interests in architecture and construction, and he believes firmly that it is important to restore the age of Master Builders and thereby elevate the standards in both trades. One way he furthers that goal is as an instructor for Genesis 3 Design Schools and also as an instructor in landscape architecture at California State Polytechnic University in Pomona and for Cal Poly's Italy Program. He can be reached at [mark@waterarchitecture.com](mailto:mark@waterarchitecture.com).

**Jim Robinson** is president and founder of

Daichi Landscape, a Eugene, Ore.-based design/construction firm specializing in Japanese gardens. He has worked in the landscape industry since 1975, when he and his father started a maintenance firm immediately after he graduated from high school. He then studied landscape design and construction at Portland Community College for two years and, in 1980, apprenticed himself to Japanese garden master Hoichi Kurisu, with whom he worked and studied for 10 years. In 1989, he entered the landscape architecture program at the University of Oregon and later was an exchange student at Waseda University in Tokyo. In 1996, Robinson founded Daichi Landscape, which now provides highly stylized gardens, watershapes and sculptures influenced by the traditions of Japanese gardening, culture and art.

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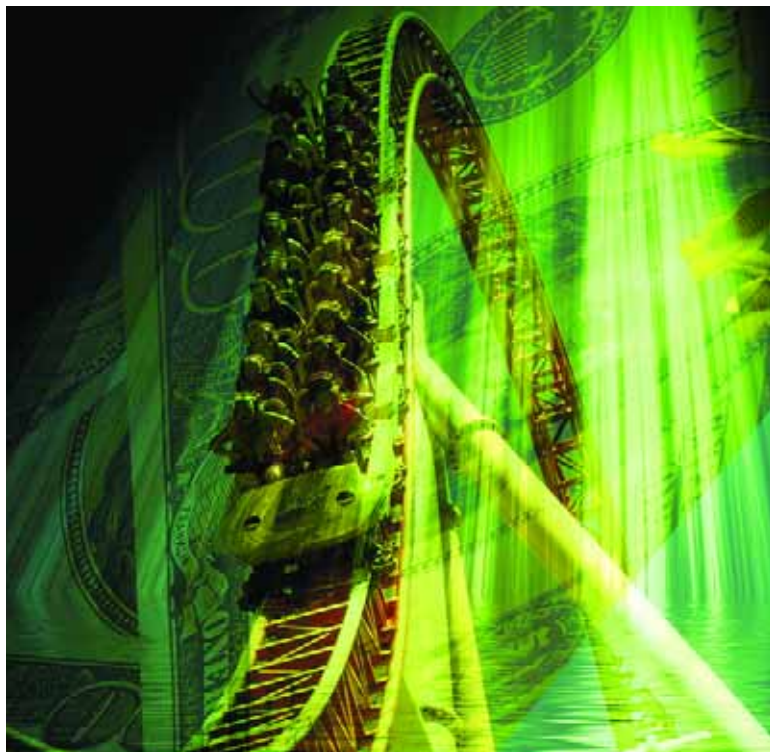
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By Brian Van Bower

# Turning Down, Tuning Up



**W**e knew it had to happen. After several years of superheated growth, some sectors of the watershaping market are now slowing down – in some areas, dramatically so.

In my travels and through dozens of conversations with watershapers and their suppliers during the past several months, I've been hearing consistently that the volume-oriented, price-driven end of the market has been hit particularly hard – off somewhere between 30 and 60 percent in some areas.

That's a big number no matter which end of the spectrum is closer to the truth. It represents an enormous change from the extreme demand that most all of us were experiencing just a year ago. So now, a great many firms that were once flush with work are now suffering, in some cases to the point where their businesses are being threatened.

Among upper-mid-range and high-end firms, however, I have yet to hear of such declines. In fact, as has been the case for the past several years, the watershapers who've fully embraced an orientation toward design, quality and artistry are as busy as ever.

It's a tale of two industries, and it's so for plenty of reasons worth discussing.

We all know the real estate market is subject to ups and downs, and the fact that it's been more than 15 years since the last time housing went south on us didn't change that basic economic fact of life.

## what's up

You don't have to be an economist to recognize that something serious is happening. The housing market has slowed, prices have fallen in many markets, new housing starts are way off, interest rates have risen, sales of existing homes have stalled and refinancing, once white-hot, has plummeted to a fraction of the levels it was achieving just a short time ago.

The result is that a great many people who once had equity and therefore the capital needed for home improvements are no longer flush with cash and are not looking to buy watershapes – or any other significant home improvements, for that matter. And the situation isn't likely to improve anytime soon.

The brutal truth is that too many consumers overextended themselves. Now, with home prices dropping and interest rates rising, many are struggling to make ends meet. This means that huge numbers of homeowners who once would've looked to amenities such as swimming pools, watergardens and elaborate landscape treatments to increase the value of their properties have fallen out of the ranks of our potential clients.

Personally, I blame both homeowners and the lending institutions that went after them knowing how completely they'd be exposed during a downturn. We all know the real estate market is subject to ups and downs, and the fact that it's been more than 15 years since the last time housing went south on us didn't change that basic economic fact of life.

Consumers are at least as culpable as the financial institutions that have fed their addictions. As I see it, there's a misguided ethos in our culture that says that all of us are entitled to every kind of luxury imaginable so long as we own real estate. Just a year ago, in fact, you didn't have to be wealthy to have everything you ever wanted, from expensive cars to the latest plasma televi-



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sions: You just needed to own a house and watch its value appreciate.

Just how bad things might get is anyone's guess. There's all sorts of prognostication being offered these days, however, and most experts seem to agree that we're currently on the front end of this cooling off period – and none know for certain when the next upswing will start.

## a cosmic bind

From a business standpoint, it's safe to assume that things are going to be slow for at least a year or two, maybe more. Just as the market became cyclically hot after 1992, better times will return – but in the meantime, we all need to determine where we stand and what we need to do to make it through to that brighter future.

As I mentioned above, so far the downturn seems to be affecting only the middle and lower ranges of the watershaping market. As those households go, so goes the volume market. Will things slide so far that even high-end clients will pull back? At this juncture, that doesn't seem to be happening – and we all should remember that it didn't happen to any great degree when things were at their darkest in the early 1990s.

The whole situation is, of course, brutally ironic: I can't count the number of clients who've told me that, when they started looking last year for someone to design and build a watershape for them, they could barely get a return phone call let alone find anyone willing to take on their jobs.

What strikes me about that memory of once-searing demand is that the work of a great many companies pretty much echoed the shortsightedness of the market itself – that is, even firms doing what might be classified as substandard work didn't have to try at all to drum up more business than they could handle. Just as the decline of the real-estate market has been driven by what I see as short-term thinking on the part of consumers and financial institutions, so, too, the volume builders have been caught by their lack of forethought and planning for an always-uncertain future.

This isn't a blanket indictment: I know for a fact that many volume-oriented watershaping operations are professional and do a creditable job of creating affordable products for a predominantly middle-class clientele. That doesn't alter the fact, however, that all of these companies – good and bad, reputable and deplorable – are now feeling pressure they couldn't even imagine a year ago.

In considering what to do about it, there are no easy answers. First, we have to look at what we know for certain: The clients still available are those who were in stable financial positions and have what might be called real wealth rather than wealth on paper. In referring to wealth, however, I don't mean the *uber*-clients who own their own islands and private jets; instead, I mean people who haven't mortgaged their homes for every penny they once were worth and have amassed assets that insulate them from general downturns in the economy.

Continued on page 14



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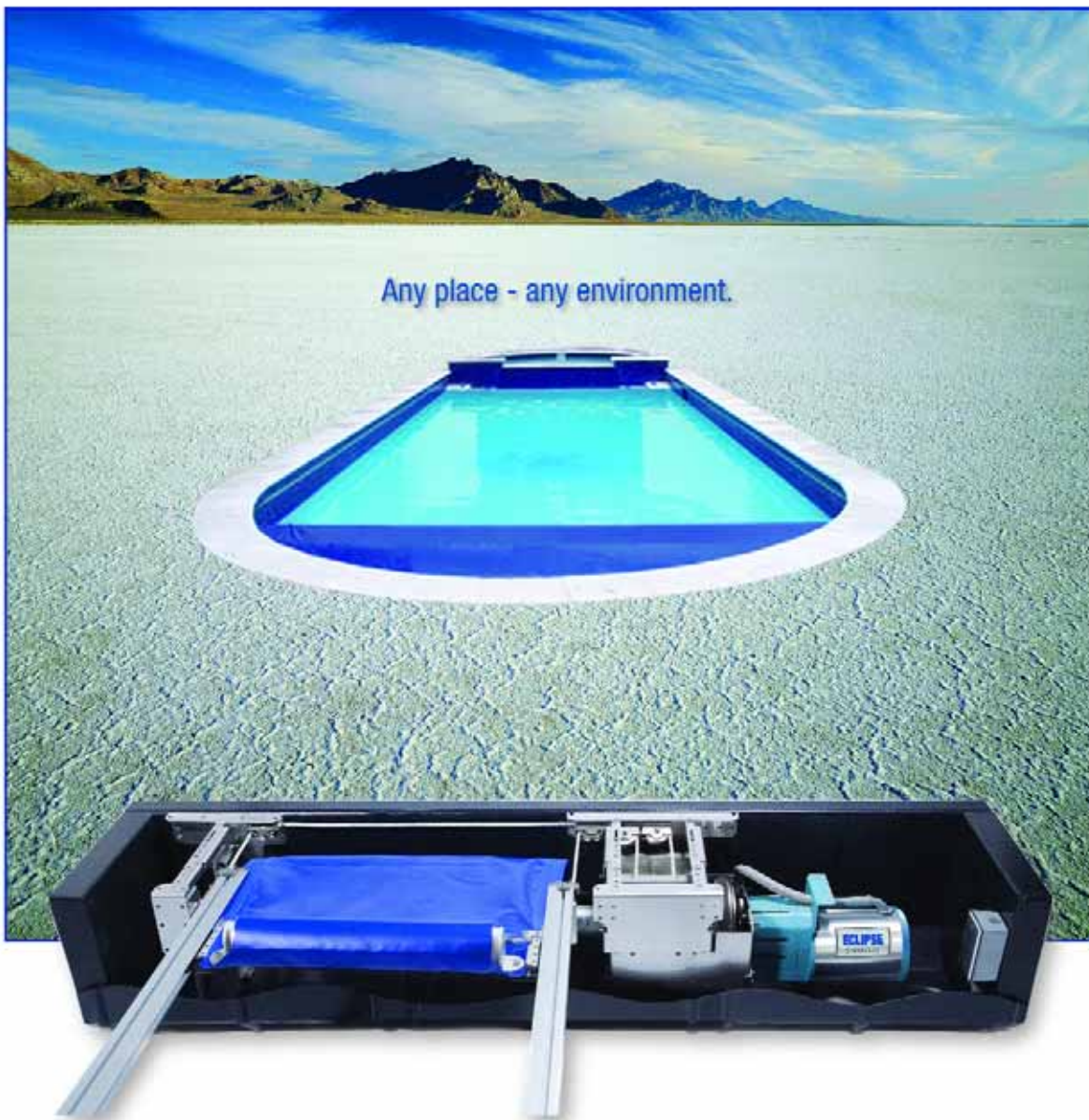
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This is why the custom, high-end market is still rolling along at very nearly the same level it was last summer and I've yet to hear any worrisome complaints from high-end watershapers. Just as I'm describing conditions on two levels of a single industry, it's as if we're looking at clients existing in two completely separate economic realities – one occupied by

those who were positioned to be relatively unaffected by fluctuating real estate trends, and another by those for whom the clock was ticking.

## more from less

Assuming we all know it's impossible to conjure clients from thin air, the most reasonable course is to consider how to

make headway with those who are still in the market. And there's no time like the present to start thinking about what that means.

To thrive in a market such as this one, it's clear that change will be required of a large number of businesses and practitioners. Without question, those firms that set their sights on the high-end market long ago are prepared for leaner times and will be able to do a better job of riding the waves of change. Those that aren't there at this point need to change rapidly – and the sooner you make the most important of these adjustments, the better your chances of success will be.

What does that mean in more specific terms?

First, I believe one of the areas in which a great many firms can make a substantial, effective and *feasible* change is by shifting the focus of their work to cover a broader range of exterior elements. For a long time, most firms in the volume business have provided only a swimming pool or a pond and nothing else, leaving the associated hardscape and features to others.

As has been suggested for years in *WaterShapes* and elsewhere, there are tremendous advantages to broadening what you do to encompass elements such as decks, shade structures, outdoor kitchens, outdoor dining areas, landscape lighting, greenscapes, fire features and even exterior sound and television systems. In basic terms, this means instead of leaving potential work for others to grab, you need to bring those elements into your scope of work.

Second and certainly related to that first point, those who want to make the transition from low-end to high-end or make the most of what's left in the middle need to get educated when it comes to design and creating integrated spaces that respond to a site, its architecture and the clients' needs. To be sure, learning what design is all about and developing legitimate skills isn't an overnight process, but none of the people I know who are worthy of being called designers are hurting for work these days – far from it.

Third, you may need to broaden your scope and diversify: If you're into pools and spas, you should think about getting into ponds and streams or fountains –

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which in turn means you'll need to learn to communicate differently about what services you provide. And of course, this third point relates back to the first two: In all cases, your aim should be to gain a greater understanding of the integrated nature of overall exterior environments.

## spreading joy

Look at it this way: If custom, higher-end work represents the stable slice of the market, then it only makes sense to move yourself in that direction. It doesn't mean you'll be able to walk in and land six-figure projects: There's plenty of hard work involved in elevating your game to that level, and above all, there's an essential focus on creating clusters of satisfied clients in whatever you do, for whatever price range.

Make no mistake: Succeeding in custom work has never been about price or the concept of not wanting to leave any money on the table. It's always about appropriate designs, styles, materials and details for specific settings and clients. This isn't about

selling bells and whistles. Instead, it has to do with doing more in the backyards of fewer clients and making them exceedingly happy with your total effort and output.

The key here is creating satisfied, even ecstatic clients, because referrals and the future business they represent are what you're pursuing on this level. Indeed, perhaps the greatest common characteristic of companies doing best in today's market is that they largely work off of referrals.

As has been said time and again in this column and by many other voices in this magazine and elsewhere, there's no greater marketing tool than a happy client. It's no secret that volume builders do not tend to score high on this scale. When business was booming, this didn't seem like an issue. Now, however, a lack of concern on this front might lead that side of the industry to a shakeout the likes of which we haven't seen since 1990 and 1991.

Some degree of sorting out is, of course, inevitable in a downturn, and some companies will shrink or disappear altogether.

er. It's my belief that firms doing a reliable, good-quality job throughout their sales, design and construction processes – that is, companies that don't leave clients with bad tastes in their mouths – will be those that can ride the waves of change far more effectively than those that rely on mass marketing or, even worse, rock-bottom prices to keep the phones ringing.

The dynamics of our business point us in a clear direction: First, if you have been among those who focus on leaving clients smiling and proud of their new water-shapes, it's time to do whatever you can to lift your game and legitimately, sincerely do what it takes to satisfy them. If you can't get this simple message, then I wish you well in finding a new career.

Second, working with higher-end, more sophisticated clients and making them happy effectively puts an end to competing on price. This will be a real challenge to those who don't know how to do it any other way, but as you'll see in a moment, it's yet another recipe for disaster.



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## don't go there

If you've read through all of this and are in a grand enough state of denial to think you can brass your way through the current market situation – and if you see cutting prices as being just the ticket – think again: When you lower prices in a down market to keep business rolling along, you've given yourself over to the notion that it's acceptable to make less money off each of a diminishing number of projects. If that isn't illogical, I don't know what is.

And not only is it illogical, it's also desperate and a sure path to business failure. Instead, you need to head in the other direction, seek out clients who are still around, do more for them at a level of quality and design excellence that makes them happy and turn their referrals to prosperous friends and business associates into even more business and probably to greater profitability than you ever saw when you were grinding out projects by the bucketload.

None of this is new advice. It's something I've discussed in *WaterShapes* from the very beginning and is also a key thread unifying the approach my partners and I have taken with Genesis 3. Personally, I've never understood why anyone would resist an approach that leads to larger, more profitable, more interesting projects as well as to greater stature within the industry and, more important, among prospective clients.

The bottom line is that it's just more fun to work this way. Now that economic pressures are forcing the vulnerable fringes of our industry to wake up and face an uncertain future, it appears that a quality-first approach is not only the wise option, it's also starting to look like the *only* option. **WS**

**Brian Van Bower** runs Aquatic Consultants, a design firm based in Miami, Fla., and is a co-founder of the Genesis 3 Design Group; dedicated to top-of-the-line performance in aquatic design and construction, this organization conducts schools for like-minded pool designers and builders. He can be reached at [bvanbower@aol.com](mailto:bvanbower@aol.com).



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By Stephanie Rose

## The Shock of the New



**R**ecently, much has been written and discussed in our local Los Angeles media – newspapers, magazines, television – about an influx of architectural styles to our area that “just don’t fit in” and are generally thought of as being a blight on our collective landscape.

This isn’t anything new, of course. I recall similar dustups in the 1970s and ’80s when the stylistic serenity of old, established neighborhoods was being disrupted by the insertion of ultra-modern and post-modern structures among the ranch houses, Spanish Colonial casitas and Craftsman-style bungalows that dominated the terrain.

The latest clamor has arisen because of the arrival in our fair city of a large and prospering Middle Eastern population that has brought along with it a distinctive style of architecture with which long-time Angelenos aren’t familiar – and for which some have been quite vocal in declaring their disdain.

This sort of uproar is, of course, not unexpected: It would almost be more unusual if people *didn’t* reject this unfamiliar look and instead sat quietly as changes occurred in their neighborhoods. Personally, I’m an aficionado of architecture and exterior styles, so I keep an open mind – but this latest wave features very large homes without much (if any) landscaping and has challenged even my tolerant spirit.

As watershapers and landscapers, we must always be aware we’re surrounded by a universe of styles and variations and be clear when designing and installing environments exactly whose interests we’re serving.

### an open mind

My meditations here were prompted by an article that appeared in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* a short while ago. In analyzing the substance and style of what are commonly referred to as “Persian Palaces” – a term I find derogatory and so will not use further – the text explored some basic characteristics and thought processes behind Middle Eastern architecture and landscaping.

I read the entire article with great interest and reinforced my awareness that there are many distinctive styles operating under the umbrella term “Middle Eastern” – so many that generalizations are hard to make. Whatever the specific features being considered, it was made clear in the article (and in letters to the editor later on) that a lot of people don’t like what they see cropping up in Beverly Hills – the geographic focus of the article.

Why is this style so jarring to so many people? Why is it that they seem universally to have turned their heads in resoundingly negative reactions? Why does this Middle Eastern style, more than almost any other style I’ve encountered, strike them as being so awesomely inappropriate for our cultural scene?

I think the answer is actually quite simple, although not readily apparent – and it has to do with how we in the Western world think about the relationship of architecture and landscape by comparison to Middle Eastern cultures. In fact, by the time I was finished reading the article and rolling through my own observations, I had gained a new awareness of why these residences are the way they are.

In essence, the style is characterized by considerable levels of ornate detailing and places





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Homes with those two characteristics provide their owners with tremendous pride – much more so than a beautifully tailored landscape ever would. And of course this reflects a cultural background based on life in hot, arid climates – a not-so-minor detail that has attracted many of these immigrants to the Los Angeles area.

What isn't considered, of course, is that Westerners have fixed it in mind that Los Angeles has a Mediterranean climate, not a desert climate, and assume that lush landscapes should be the rule. Where the newcomers want light and warmth, long-time residents crave shade and *relief* from warmth. It all began making sense to me.

## balancing acts

For all that, there's still a problem for me here – a struggle with my belief that architecture and landscapes need to work with their surroundings rather than stand in denial of them.

My objection isn't that this influx of Middle Eastern styles obliterates or ignores given topographies or surroundings so much that it leads us down a path that promotes less green in our environment. I'm not a tree hugger in the conventional sense, but I do believe we all benefit when there's as much green as possible around us. Especially in a smoggy place such as Los Angeles, it's a scientific fact that green is good.

Just the same, I'm not proposing doing

away with any style of architecture that the majority of us don't like. On the contrary, I'm suggesting that we need to embrace new styles and the introduction of distinctive styles from established cultures.

While I'm comfortable with architecture that blends into its surrounding environment and landscaping, I've long been aware of plant-free approaches to architecture that have nothing to do with the Middle East: This is an architecture that's made to be confrontational and jarring to common sensibilities, as with Frank Gehry's homes with their corrugated-metal exteriors and chain-link detailing.

For the most part, however, I believe that architecture works best when it works *with* rather than in *opposition* to its surroundings. When you go to a tropical resort, for instance, the buildings tend to hug the ground and let you feel like you're living in the surrounding environment. If that same resort were 25 stories tall and you were on a top floor, you wouldn't get the same feel for the place and might have less of a connection to the place.

In that light, the argument goes that if something doesn't feel right, perhaps we as architects and landscapers should consider whether we are doing the environment a disservice. What, after all, are our goals?

Speaking for myself, I always prefer to create settings that blend architecture and landscaping in ways that soothe observers, but even so, I am aware that each client perceives things differently. Thus, I separate personal preference from professional need and am determined to keep an open mind in accepting the fact that



Homes like this one, with its imposing façade and minimal landscaping, are increasingly common in Los Angeles neighborhoods and tend to stand out among the more conventional architectures and fuller landscapes that surround them. But does the fact that this style is *unusual* really make it *wrong*?



what appeals to one person and is soothing to that person may not soothe or appeal to the next person.

And this holds true whether it's a deconstructed Gehry or a landscape-free Middle Eastern mansion. Neither may be to my taste personally, but if it's what a client wants, the client is entitled to the final word. (Also, keep in mind that in these instances, nobody's forcing you to work with a particular client.)

## finding a path

This is why we're surrounded by a universe of styles and variations on each: All of us have different ideas about what is appealing. As with menus in restaurants, we all like having choices!

As watershapers and landscapers, we must always be aware of those differences and be clear when designing and installing environments exactly whose interests we're serving. Are we working with our preferences? Or are we serving our clients' needs, interests and tastes to the best of our abilities?

To my way of thinking, the goal of good landscape design will always be to fuse land and architecture, but I keep doubling back to something I've said time and again in these pages: You need to know your clients and be clear about what's important to them. Moreover, just because a landscape style (even a plant-free one) doesn't appeal to you, that doesn't necessarily make it wrong.

If we try to understand what is important to each client, we have a better chance of developing successful landscapes. No, we can't please all of the people all of the time, but we can please most of our clients (if not always their neighbors) if we approach our work with an open mind and a cooperatively creative spirit. Yes, we can help them understand what they're doing and the fact that some may take issue with their choices, but ultimately, the decisions are theirs.

Now I find myself looking at buildings and styles that up until now just seemed "wrong" to me on some level and consider whom they were designed to please and their cultural background, wants, needs and desires. I don't always end up liking what I see, but I wonder if there wasn't some astute designer who

took the clients into consideration and delivered precisely what they wanted by way of a landscape.

I still believe it's a good idea to guide clients to design and build something that blends into the surrounding neighborhood, but now I'm trying to see possibilities in new approaches to ingrained ideas. **WS**

**Stephanie Rose** runs Stephanie Rose Landscape Design in Encino, Calif. A specialist in residential garden design, her projects often include collaboration with custom pool builders. Stephanie is also an instructor on landscape design for the Genesis 3 Design Group. If you have a specific question about landscaping (or simply want to exchange ideas), e-mail her at [sroseld@earthlink.net](mailto:sroseld@earthlink.net).



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By David Tisherman

## Expert Oversight



In the last several of these “Details,” I’ve covered what happens in my projects before construction begins. Now we’re ready to shift gears and look at what happens on site – the place where design and execution meet.

Before we look at the way I build things, however, I want to take a hard look at common practices in the field. What I write here may seem harsh, but it’s not intended that way: To establish a baseline for doing things in what I would term the right way, I need to point to practices in our industry – particularly the pool/spa sector – that cause problems for all of us who want to take the high road and do right by our clients.

Please be clear that these deficiencies aren’t common to everyone who builds pools. Indeed, the past decade has seen lots of watershapers step up and approach the work with skill and dignity. To illustrate a point, however, I’m going to paint a realistic picture of just how bad things can (and still do) get out there in the real world: Let’s call it a corrective suggestion rather than a wholesale indictment.

As I see it, all of our problems stem from two key factors: First, in far too many companies, the people who do the selling haven’t the slightest clue what construction is all about. They focus entirely on getting a client to sign on the bottom line and give no thought to what’s going to happen when the project is actually being built.

Second, in too many cases there’s an almost complete lack of expert field supervision during construction. In my view, this is inexcusable. In Los Angeles County, for example, the contractor is *the* expert of record on site.

If we as an industry were to confront and address just two key deficiencies, there would be almost no limit to the great things we could achieve.

He or she makes all the calls on what’s needed, brings in geologists and soils specialists and works with engineers. When things go wrong, he or she isn’t the only one who can shut down the site – government officials can do it, too – but he or she is the only one who can reopen it when whatever caused the delay has been addressed.

How can this level of oversight be exercised by someone who’s never there? This is the worst sort of passing the buck.

### ‘pool guy’ mentality

When you combine these two deficiencies – as a large number of operations do – you have a situation in which projects aren’t sold with any view to the technical realities of construction – and then the process that ensues moves forward in a freeform, haphazard way without expert oversight.

It’s sad, but all too often, it’s true.

If we as an industry were to confront and resolve just those two issues, there would be almost no limit to the great things we could achieve.

That potential is evident when you look at the growing number of firms that do things the right way. What we see in these operations is a virtual explosion of design creativity and reliably installed systems: The output is more artistic, the structures are more durable and the mechanical and control systems perform well and are easily serviced. What’s more, these companies aren’t being sued, experience less stress, have more fun, make more money and create boundlessly happy clients.

With companies on the flip side of the coin, however, the exact opposite can and does prevail. Designs tend to be weak and uninspired, the vessels can and do fail, systems are plagued by problem after problem – and the operations exist in a defensive crouch, doing little beyond trying to avoid the liability that sprouts from basic in-





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competence or indifference.

If you ask me, that's a rotten way to do business – the perfect expression of what I call the “pool guy” mentality. This inadequate mindset can be traced to the industry's origins, when pool contractors were seen as being a slight cut above purveyors of aluminum siding. The idea was (and in some cases still is) to get in and out as quickly as possible, provide products as cheaply as the market will bear, collect the money and never look back.

In my case, I took that standard and did just the opposite. As I see it, we work with clients to provide them with beauty, art and luxury. The thought that this service is being performed by people who don't know the first thing about design or construction is, to me, completely disconnected from the mission of watershaping.

On that level, it's all about standards – not building department standards or industry standards, but instead *personal* standards that are established, observed and maintained by companies that place

value on quality.

High personal standards aren't being maintained when a company has two or three “field supervisors” who drive around and do little more than check to see that crews are working. Those crews have been left with “designs” and sets of “plans” generated by salespeople with little or no experience in construction, let alone any sort of design background.

These plans can be filled with inadequacies – oversized pumps or undersized plumbing, for example – because poorly trained salespeople are all about dollars and revenue rather than about what's best for the site or the client. They have no idea what's underneath the lawn, either, and all too often fail to mention that soils conditions might make a \$40,000 pool cost three or four times that much.

Scrutinizing these designs and plans is the sort of role in which an experienced, honest-to-goodness field supervisor can prove invaluable: If he or she sees that a salesperson's or draftsman's plans call

for a two-horsepower pump on two-inch lines, for example, he or she can advise the contractor or the company owner of the deficiency and the project may have some hope of success.

Supervision is a constant need, not a casual, occasional activity. The perils of unqualified salespeople working with absentee field supervisors shows most clearly at the gunite or shotcrete stage, where improvisations by the excavator, the plumbers, the steel subcontractor or the applicators can result in shells that are improperly sized, positioned in the wrong place, too short, too tall, too shallow, too deep – all calamities that can be overcome if roles are properly defined, salespeople are well-informed and field supervisors do more than drive from site to site to site.

And this situation isn't much improved in operations in which salespeople are supported by production designers who crank out plan documents based on standard templates and details. These documents take no account of soils, hy-

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draulics or materials, and once these designers hand off their “plans” to permit runners, they’re finished: All they do now, if they think about it at all, is hope that things will work out well enough so they’ll get paid rather than sued when the project is complete.

## looking for problems

Is the above an exaggeration? I would hope so, but my observations through the past 25 years tell me otherwise. The plain truth is that the industry has its dark pockets: Although I’d be happy to sing a different tune, this is the one I’m stuck with – and writing this grim depiction is one of the few ways I have to provoke change.

To drive the point home in specific terms, let’s stick with the abovementioned issues of hydraulics and soils.

It completely blows my mind these days to see projects going in with small pipes and big pumps. There’s just no excuse for that: Information about hydraulic efficiency abounds in the industry today, and

I have no idea at all how or why so many companies simply choose to ignore it.

It’s sad, but all I can think is that these companies are still selling pools with the bigger-is-better mentality most forward-thinking companies abandoned years ago. After all, a two-horsepower pump can be made to seem bigger and therefore better than a half-horsepower pump, and to keep job costs down after selling a more expensive pump, they install it on two-inch (or even worse, one-and-a-half-inch) plumbing.

Think about that: We live at a time when energy efficiency is becoming a crucial societal issue, but instead of embracing it as a core value, many pool guys stick with the old way of doing things. The simple fact is that improper hydraulic design wastes money and energy; moreover, improperly designed and installed systems almost always require more repair and maintenance – and they’re usually noisy as well.

It makes me ill knowing that it’s so easy to do things the right way – and that do-

ing so doesn’t even drive up the cost of the job to any significant extent.

Look at it this way: If we’re really in the business of moving water, then at a minimum we should all be smart enough to understand the basic principles behind how water flows through pipes and how to make things work as efficiently and reliably as possible. And this is *not* new information. In fact, this idea has been covered to death in this magazine and in seminar rooms for years, thousands of times over.

And yet – right now, as you read this sentence – there are pools and spas being installed with hydraulic systems that are fundamentally unsound.

## in the dirt

The issue of soils carries the same weight. As with hydraulics, this is an area where there really should be no question about the expertise of the contractor, yet as I’ve mentioned in these pages before, many contractors seem to operate as though they have no responsibility to build



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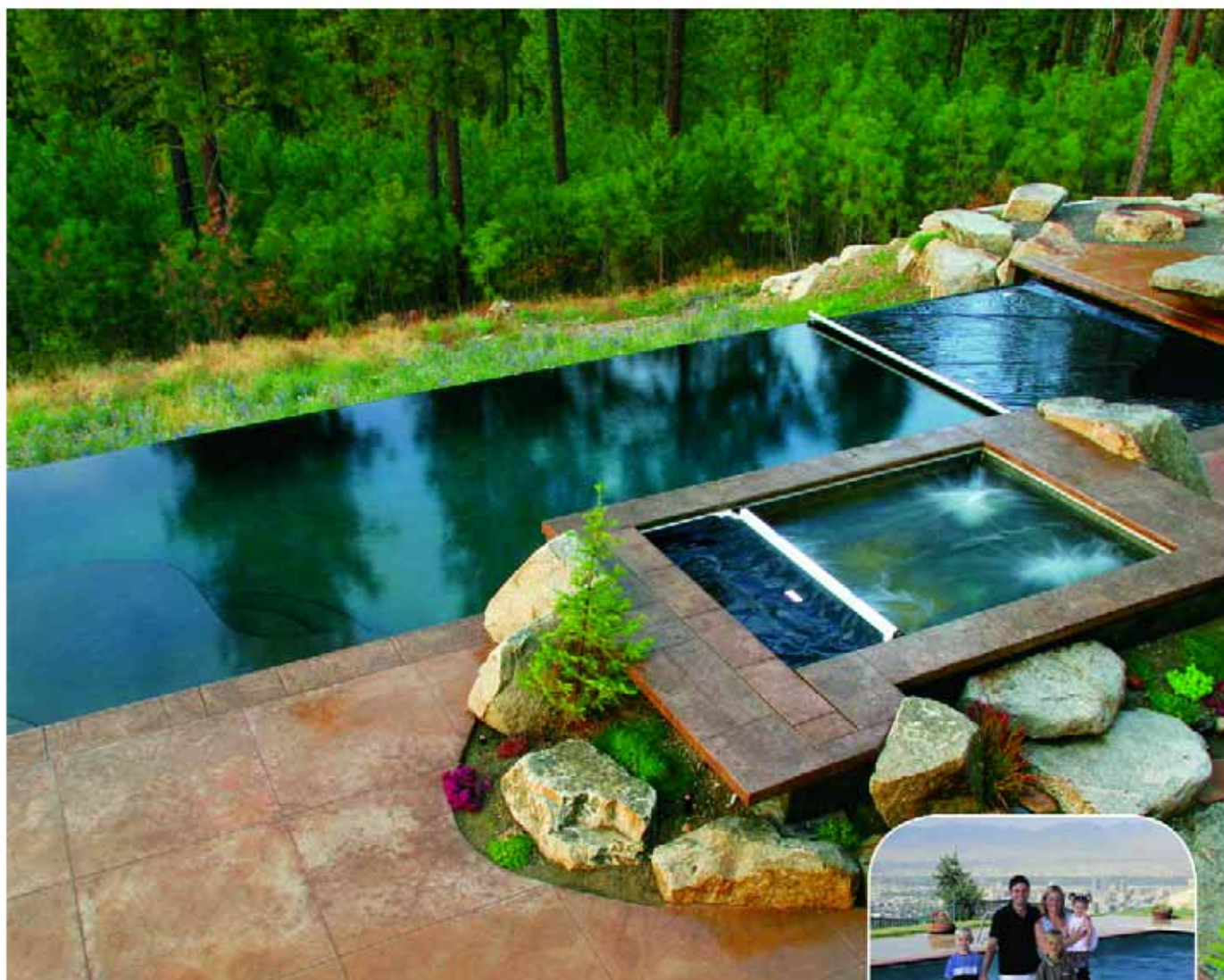
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in accordance with a site's soil conditions.

To me, that's an outrageous assertion. Setting aside the need for professional soils reports for the moment, let's take a look at the issue from the practical perspective of job-site management: When you build structures that require significant excavation of the ground (as with most any swimming pool), there are going to be surprises – not on every project, of course, but on enough of them to make assuming a hazardous exercise.

I hold fast to the idea that, although watershapers do not need to be geologists, when we are charged with managing and supervising a construction process, we should know enough to recognize the clear signs that we've run into unexpected conditions.

It's not unusual, for example, to dig the hole for a pool and find two distinctly different soil types. This is a red flag, of course: When you have a structure installed in two or more types of soil and the substructure of the shell isn't designed to accommodate their potentially different rates of settlement or withstand the stresses of ground movement, failure will be the eventual result. The pool will crack or shift positions and destroy or separate from surrounding decks, mangle plumbing runs and turn an otherwise satisfactory project into a total, gut-wrenching mess.

What happens with companies using supervisors who are not up to speed with these issues is that they move blindly forward, ignore the situation and move on to complete the plumbing, hang the steel

and gunite or shotcrete the shell as though there's no problem.

If the contractor is lucky, a smart inspector might catch the problem and demand a soils report or some form of appropriate structural change. At that point, the inspector might have the builder remove the steel and the plumbing and install a footing or pile – thereby stopping a project in its tracks, hitting clients with substantial new costs (at least tens of thousands of dollars and often much more) at a point where their property is already ripped apart and creating a general atmosphere of distrust, anger and, in many cases, an inclination toward litigation.

Put yourself in a client's shoes for a moment: How would you feel if you were

## misplaced emphasis

Every year and in some cases several times each year, large companies (and even some small ones) in the watershaping industry pull all their salespeople out of the field and sit them down for inspirational speeches and seminars intended to help them sell more and make themselves and their employers more money.

There's nothing particularly wrong with that (although I believe it builds the wrong attitudes into some of these operations), but I have a simple suggestion that might help alleviate some of the problems highlighted in the accompanying text.

Why don't each of these companies use these opportunities to help their sales staffs understand the practicalities of the products they're selling? Why don't they use part of that "educational" time to bring the sales staff face to face with field personnel who end up trying to build what the salespeople have sold?

As I see it, an educated sales force is of tremendous value – and so is a measure of transparency between the sales and construction sides of the business. Who knows? The whole situation might improve with this simple addition to the agenda.

–D.T.



When I arrived at the property, the view was sublime, but the 'backyard' space was essentially unusable – a steep slope with little to offer.



Now that construction is complete, my clients come home to an entirely different vista, with an elegant pool and spa in the foreground inviting them and their guests out to enjoy an even broader view of the city's lights from the new deck. In the next several issues, I'll describe every step of the process by which this watershape was built, from site preparation through to application of finishing touches.



to learn, after your backyard has been destroyed and you've lost a serviceable lawn, irrigation system, landscape lighting and more, that the soil under that lawn was unsuitable for ordinary construction and that it will cost you \$15,000 to \$25,000 even to get back to where you were before excavation began? And how angry would you be to learn that if your contractor had done the right thing and required a \$4,000 or \$5,000 soils report, you could've made the call either to expand the budget or nix the project before a blade of grass was bent?

Ironically, official intervention in projects draws complaints from watershapers, but in my view, smart inspectors are sometimes all that's standing between contractors and certain project failure, whether the breakdown takes five months or five years. When this happens, of course, everyone scratches their heads and says, "Oh dear, it must be earth movement." There's no other way to describe this situation: It's a travesty!

### a call to ignorance

Some of you reading this may accuse me of overstating the problem or exaggerating to make a point, and others might say that the situation has improved to a degree that my comments are now out of line. If either of those counterpoints is valid in your area, my hat's off to you – but I'd argue that exceptions don't diminish the basic point that too many watershapers, particularly in the pool industry, operate on slippery moral slopes when it comes to soils reports and engineered responses to soil conditions.

To this day, I pick up trade magazines and see classified ads from contractors that read something like this: "Field supervisors and sales professionals needed. Will train in three weeks." These are the firms that put ill-informed supervisors in the field and ignorant salespeople in living rooms – and moreover, they have no expectation that salespeople and supervisors will ever communicate with each other on any level.

Those who own and run these com-

panies are archetypal "pool guys," and they continue to give our entire industry a collective black eye. And lots of them don't care so long as the jobs keep moving along and the problems don't get so bad that they cut too deeply into the bottom line.

What's left out of these calculations is what happens with clients who are left in the lurch by these poor players. Sticking with soils issues and hydraulics as examples, these are the clients who will be stuck with systems that are excessively noisy, waste energy, cost a bundle to operate and experience steady strings of visits from service technicians who try to make silk purses from sow's ears. And all too often, these are clients who, at some point, will be informed by those technicians that their shells have cracked or moved with disastrous effects.

These are ugly scenarios that play out too often in markets around the country.

At best, the clients will come away with negative attitudes about owning watershapes, and you can bet they won't be shy



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about sharing their insights with more of their friends than our most satisfied clients ever will. At worst, these clients will pursue litigation, always resentful that instead of relaxing in luxury by a pool, they're spending their time in courtrooms seeking compensation and revenge for jobs poorly done.

To watershapers who cut corners or deliberately ignore soils conditions and hydraulic efficiency – and then make excuses when things go terribly wrong – I pose this simple question: How would you feel if the roles were reversed and you were the one spending thousands upon thousands of dollars for the privilege of wallowing in anger and frustration?

The answer is obvious, so why on earth are self-styled “professionals” in our industry willing to do that to others?

## the simplest concerns

I could go on to construction issues beyond soils conditions and hydraulics, but I think you get my point.

When we go onto someone's prop-

erty and install a swimming pool or some other type of watershape, it's a terribly intrusive process. We rip up the yard, make lots of noise, impede access to driveways, disturb neighbors – and it all runs on for a period in which the client experiences what can best be described as *chaos* at first hand. From my perspective, skillful project management and supervision are all about minimizing the effects of these disruptions.

It all starts with thoughtful, detailed, well-informed communication: Clients need to know what they're in for, how it all will be managed and how long it's going to take – and then it's up to us to meet those expectations.

But even in the simplest ways, I've seen projects where the fundamentals are seemingly ignored. This one kills me: I've been on many sites where there's no portable toilet for workers. Not to put too fine a point on it, but when you have crews on site for eight or more hours a day, if they don't have a place to go, they have no

choice but to find places to relieve themselves (discreetly, one would hope).

Reverse roles again and imagine this is your backyard filled with strangers using your bushes as lavatories. I wouldn't want my wife or children seeing that or even suspecting it might be happening. And just as bad are those situations in which a porta-potty appears on site but is dropped without thought in front of, say, a kitchen window or a *neighbor's* kitchen window.

This may seem a minor detail, but I guarantee you that as weeks and months pass, items such as this become major issues for clients. Think parking for crew vehicles, for example, or access to the yard, materials storage, site clean up, standards for crew behavior and protecting a home from dust, debris and incidental damage: Too often these issues are ignored or addressed casually. They may or may not ever become issues, but in my view and, believe me, in the view of every single one of my clients, these things should be considered and discussed before you disturb a single blade of grass

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on the property.

And don't get me started on contractors who leave it to clients to wet down shells to ensure proper curing. I consider this utterly inappropriate and unprofessional: A few clients may be involved enough not to mind, but what happens if they don't follow through as asked? The solution is simple: Either rig up a soaker system with a timer, or send someone to the site as needed to get the job done properly!

The key is that none of these issues requires an advanced degree in anything other than common sense: It's all about accommodating clients' needs and doing your work courteously and properly.

### not that tough

In my own operation, what I do on site is basically the opposite of what I've been describing here. There is no separation at all between sales, design and supervision; all projects are designed with proper hydraulics and with full knowledge of soil conditions; and I inspect every site and conduct

pre-construction meetings to cover every detail of on-site performance with all crews.

As is true in any endeavor that requires expertise, education is the key. That's a familiar refrain, but it's the only way that anyone, no matter how natively intelligent, can truly understand what it is to be a true designer or know the ropes about project supervision and job-site management.

You can find this education in the classroom, or you can get it through experience – and most of us need and benefit from both. Of course, I'm probably preaching to the choir, as those of you who read *WaterShapes* and my columns already know all this – a fact reflected in the full classrooms at trade shows and at our Genesis 3 events.

As always, the first step toward improvement is recognition of deficiencies and a conscious decision to set yourself on a better path. If you do so and incorporate in some measure the approach to construction I will lay out in the next sev-

eral issues of this magazine, my suspicion is that your work will get better and better, you'll make more money and you'll live with fewer hassles. The work will be more fun, you'll derive more personal satisfaction from what you do, you'll stay out of court and you'll find yourself with a stable of happier clients.

If you don't see it as being worth the effort of learning to do things the right way, do yourself and the watershaping industry a favor: Ever consider finding another line of work? **WS**

**David Tisherman** is the principal in two design/construction firms: David Tisherman's Visuals of Manhattan Beach, Calif., and Liquid Design of Cherry Hill, N.J. He is also co-founder and principal instructor for Genesis 3, A Design Group, which offers education aimed at top-of-the-line performance in aquatic design and construction. He can be reached at [tisherman@verizon.net](mailto:tisherman@verizon.net)



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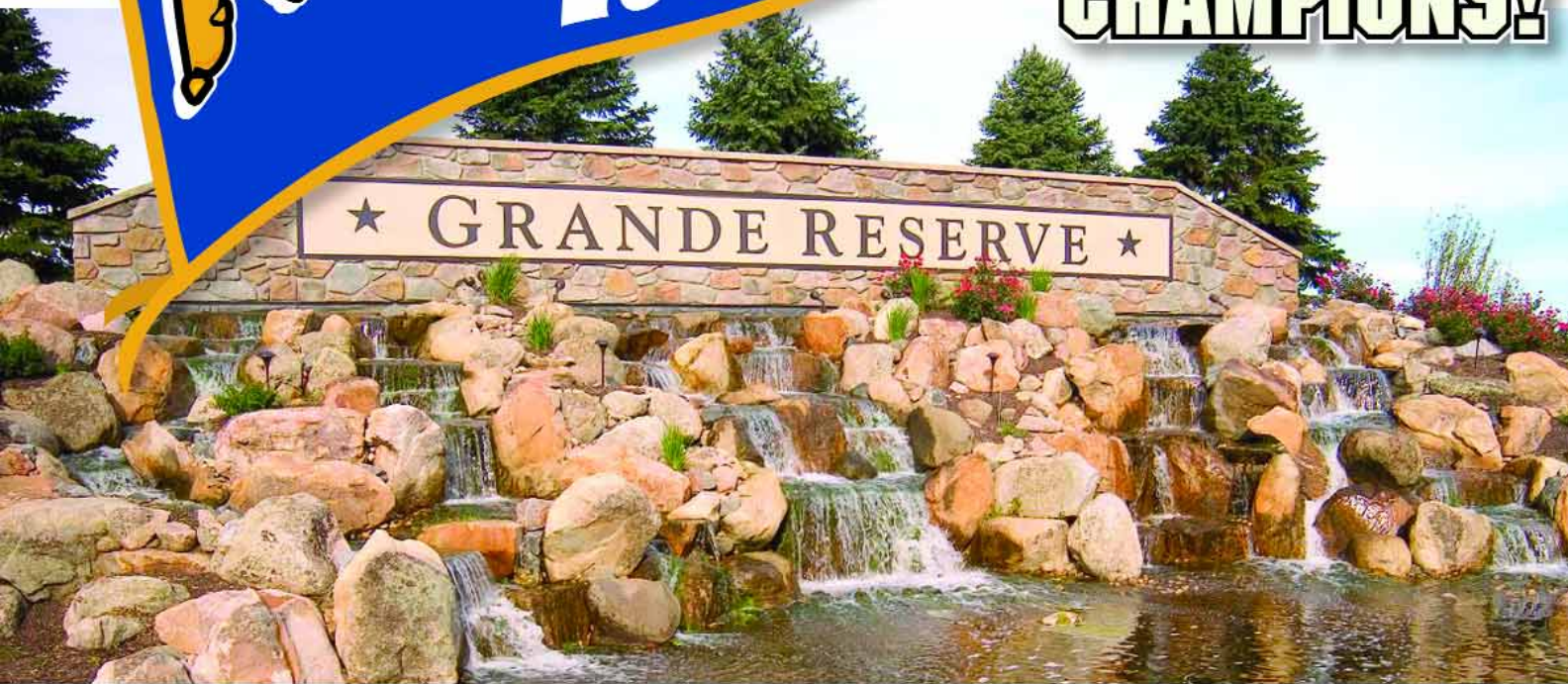


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Charles Wise is a Houston-based watershaper with ambitions as large as the Lone Star State. Through a career spanning nearly four decades in pool design and construction, he's done all he can to stay at the leading edge when it comes to technical innovation and aesthetic appeal – a strategy he discusses here while offering a bit of homespun philosophy and the perspectives of one who has been at the forefront as watershaping has evolved into an art form.

# Pioneer Pride

By Charles Wise

When people ask me what I do for a living, I like to tell them I'm a Texas-style maverick in the world of watershaping.

That's a lighthearted way of characterizing what I do, but it speaks the truth when it comes to describing what I think this industry is really all about. Indeed, I see the best watershaping as being defined by a pioneer spirit and an appetite for innovation – a drive and hunger that convincingly overcome the all-too-common fear of trying new ideas, technologies and approaches.

In my 37 years in the business, in fact, I've seen the process of shaping water change radically from what I witnessed when I started out in the 1970s. All those years of change and experience have helped me look at the art of watershaping in new ways: As have many other opened-minded artists in this business, I've embraced the value of combining the unique, beautiful appearance of any given project with an engineering expertise that makes the systems function properly and reliably in the real world.

As one of those who have designed and built pools from start to finish with my own hands, I've learned what I know not in the classroom, but rather by understanding from direct observation how water functions, the value of great materials and the latest in modern technologies. I'm also profoundly sensitive to what a site tells me; heck, I even take





the way the prevailing winds blow into account in designing my pools.

When I think about the past, present and future of my industry, I always hope that future generations of watershapers will embrace this combination of practical experience tempered by curiosity and the vision it takes to expand capabilities and continually strive for excellence and innovation.

### **On the Move**

My company, Wise Pools of Conroe, Texas, had humble beginnings, but I've always believed that our work speaks for itself – especially in recent years.

It took time, but our firm has steadily gained respect, and we've long been proud of the fact that we've often been recognized with industry awards. That process was capped by our winning the Chairman's Award in the Association of Pool & Spa Professionals' International

Design Competition for a gold-medal-winning residential pool in the engineering and technical category.

I bring this project up here because I believe every artist should strive to create work that represents his or her very best. And I'm determined not to rest on my laurels: I have projects on the horizon that are even more exciting.

To get to this point, I spent long, hot days in lots of holes, personally handling much of the most backbreaking labor myself. Although age and the necessities of running a now-large company keep me largely on the sidelines, I still love being on the job site as the principal interpreter of my own designs.

I am particularly happy when a project offers me the challenge of solving difficult problems with water and creating effects that are new, beautiful and exciting for my clients. Many of my favorites have been developed for large,

multi-generational family estates, and my greatest hope is that, 100 years or more from now, people will still be using and admiring my work in these magnificent settings.

I know I'm not alone in thinking and feeling this way about what I do. In fact, I believe every single watershaper has the potential to approach the work in this way and that those with the right kind of energetic spirit can come away from the watershaping experience with soul-satisfying levels of pride, public recognition and, best of all, esteem among clients.

And you don't have to have been at it for four decades to recognize that swimming pools and all forms of watershapes have changed a lot through the years. Back in the '70s, I was a pool builder; today, I consider myself a "sculptor in water" and see mine as a medium in which water and concrete work in





**MANY STYLES:** From the freewheeling and playful to the formal and traditional, we always work within the context of the site and its architecture as well as in accordance with our clients' desires. When coupled with our determination to build systems that will reliably stand the tests of time, these are watershapes that will serve their families for generations to come.



broader environments that include fabulous tile, rockwork, decking, lighting, mist and even fire.

Along the way, I have sought out and been among the first to exploit new technologies, from those intended to streamline office operations to those that automate the bidding and design processes. I've even fostered development of a customized water-analysis program for our retail operation that is still far ahead of what is available from suppliers today.

### The Arduous Art

It's not enough, however, to push past the limits of the state of the art unless you keep at least one foot on the ground.

Many years ago, I was taught that life lesson by the experience of demolishing a pool that had originally been built by J.V. McNeme, the grandfather of the pool business in Houston and an industry-wide icon in his day. The pool was at a Girl Scout campground in our area, and we'd been called in to design and build a much larger pool with modern, state-of-the-art equipment.

Before demolition began in earnest, I carefully chiseled out the two brass McNeme Pools nameplates that had been set on the top steps; I then invited Mr. McNeme over and hosted a little ceremony in which I presented one of the plates to him. (I kept the other in tribute to his place in our history.)

I was purchasing all the equipment for the new project from his distribution firm, so he was glad to see things evolve. As the project moved forward, however, I recognized that I didn't want to see my own hard work being demolished someday – and ever since that day my goal has been to make pools so advanced and well-built that they will be enjoyed by many future generations.

To my mind, the only way to achieve that kind of longevity is to be intimately involved in every step of a project. As a result, I am doggedly engaged in on-site construction management and maintain the highest possible standards for every project, from the simplest to the most complex.

I do so to be fair to my clients, who've come to see today's pools as extensions of their living spaces and as outdoor



rooms rather than as add-ons bearing no relationship to the rest of the property or its design. Through the years, I've learned how to create bodies of water that work seamlessly as parts of homes and sites, weaving them carefully into integrated wholes.

My inspiration in this comes from observation of great designs of water elements found all around the world in homes and public spaces as well as from my sense of the way nature interacts with built spaces over time. My eyes are *always* open to this sort of insight: I never know when I will see something that will spark my imagination and lead to a level of creativity that will take an upcoming project to the next level of design sophistication and excellence.

In other words, based on my experience, watershapers do well to dig into the world around them, finding inspiration and ideas and looking to grapple with their working lives with restless spirits.

### High Minded

Rather than that kind of inspirational testimony being simply a matter of rhetoric, I see it as the essence of practical application: We should all be constantly evolving, from the ways we work with the practical details of construction and installation to our implementation of the sorts of esoteric design possibilities that emerge in our increasingly complex projects.

I'll get specific: When I first began to design and build pools in the early '70s, I noticed that the commercial pools I'd worked on all had built-in overflow systems that I never saw in residential pools. I liked the function served by the overflows, however, so I was probably the first watershaper in the Houston area to incorporate these simple systems into residential pools.

It just made sense to me: We regularly get torrential rains here, and without this feature, pools would fill up, fail to skim properly and even flood, creating maintenance headaches involved in getting the water back to a workable level. That basic overflow innovation solved the problem, and so it's now a standard feature on all home pools built in our area.

Another example: On most of my residential pools, I noticed early on that there was just one skimmer, basically because that was the way it had always been done. I wasn't satisfied and began adding a second skimmer on the opposite side of the pool, also placing the return inlets in ways that encouraged proper surface flow to aid in skimming. This ultimately led to development of our "Wiseclean" circulation system – a big step toward creating more maintenance-free pools.

We further refined this plumbing concept by notching the pool beam down to create a shelf onto which we set our plumbing lines, thereby minimizing the use of 90-degree fittings and other flow-restricting patterns in our hydraulic systems. And because the plumbing is encased in the gunite shell, it is also much less likely to break as a result of any movement or settling of the pool, should either one occur.

I also was among the pioneers in computerizing my business. I'd been a good draftsman ever since pursuing a great program in my high-school days, but I never settle for the status quo and have come to find great value in computerized bid-management and AutoCAD programs. It would have been easy to keep us-



ing pencil and paper, but there's no denying the advantages we've seen in automating these processes.

We even found ourselves designing electronic control systems for pools long before manufacturers made such technology widely available. Our systems included waterproof housings, wireless modules and handheld remotes way before these became off-the-shelf items.

### Close Observation

Again, those kinds of innovations were possible because we are always assessing and reassessing every detail of the watershape environment. As satisfying as these technical details can be, however, we have even more creative fun when it comes to applying that same level of energy to the aesthetics of our watershapes.

Many of these innovations have extended from simple observation of the ways in which people react to our work. Like many firms, for example, we jumped on the vanishing-edge bandwagon when they became popular, and we changed our approach to them when we noticed an interesting response to these designs.

It all had to do with the fact that some of these pools were built overlooking golf courses. In visiting these sites after our work was done, I couldn't help noticing that golfers would stop to enjoy the sight and sound of the water cascading over edges and into catch basins.

Not long thereafter, we were given the opportunity to create a special pool for a local Showcase of Homes and the site was perfect for trying a *reverse* vanishing-edge system in which the water flowed toward the home instead of away from it. I placed the spa below the cascade, conjuring a multi-level symphony of water, sight and sound.

When the public toured this showcase home, the tendency was to step in and stop almost immediately to enjoy the view of the water flowing toward the big windows overlooking the





pool. And this was especially true at night, when fiberoptic lighting made the water glow. These soothing visuals and sounds created new sensory experiences for people attuned to standard pools (and typical vanishing-edge systems).

A big factor fostering my desire to innovate and develop true design solutions for particular sites extends from my travels around the world. From the classic Moorish gardens of the Alhambra in Spain to the amazing resort pools of Hawaii, the unique, compelling use of water always excites me and stirs my creative juices. These sites have always encouraged me to think about the way the flow of water influences its environment and have also led me to explore the use of such elements as fog and fire in select projects.

Indeed, nowadays I often consider the use of fire effects in natural-rock waterfalls as well as in poolside fire pits. And one thing always leads to another – in this case pushing me to develop fire features atop formal columns rigged with scuppers for dramatic fire-on-water effects. This is a detail I adopted for a second Showcase of Homes project – another true showstopper.

### Combined Effects

At the same time we've focused on computers and aesthetic progress in our work, we've also evaluated basic pool systems and keep looking for ways to apply technical expertise in support of our aesthetic sensibilities.

Back in the early days of our business, for example, we became one of the first companies anywhere to work with Diamond Shamrock in trying out a saltwater chlorination system – the precursor of the salt systems in such wide use today.

After a time in which we'd used the product on several pools, the fact that we were pioneering its use led to our being referred for a large, elaborate all-tile pool in Houston's exclusive River Oaks development. The owners had become attached to the special feel they'd experienced in the saltwater pools of Europe and chose us for their project both for



**MANY MOODS:** Our clients these days are seeing spaces in their yards as outdoor rooms – as literal extensions of their living quarters – so we focus our efforts on making them a seamless part of the home at all times of the day. It's all about managing mood and atmosphere and making these spaces as attractive after dark as they are during the day.

our aesthetic credentials as well as our special expertise in this technology.

We've also deliberately been pursuing effective, efficient approaches in the field of wetted-edge or perimeter-overflow pools. At first, we worked with suppliers of gutter systems that could be applied for the purpose, but some of their deficiencies led us to develop our own system in which we gunite the plumbing into the beam of the pool itself – a technique that has since been adopted by scores of other firms.

This year, we took yet another step in our design progression with the award-winning project I mentioned at the beginning of this article.

This pool is the crowning touch for a multimillion-dollar home reconstruction project, and executing it took more than four years from design phase to completion. Along the way, we used absolutely the best of everything in all aspects of design, materials and construction, and the outcome is wholly unique and exhilarating.

For starters, the area for the pool was excavated to twelve feet below the natural grade – and then the vessel itself was carved into this sunken area, supported by eight-foot-deep belled piers and 18-inch-wide by 24-inch-deep grade beams, all for anchoring and stabilizing the pool and establishing the necessary substructure. Then the pool was stubbed out for plumbing and oversized steel fabrication was begun.

The beam around the top of the pool is 24 inches wide to support two-foot-wide by four-and-a-half-inch-thick precast limestone coping. The vessel's walls and floor are 12 inches thick and are reinforced with a double curtain of #5 rebar set at 12 inches on center both ways.



## Big Doings

The quality that went into fabricating the substructure and vessel also went into designing this pool's all-custom hydraulic system. Water is skimmed through a specially designed overflow trough we concealed in the shallow end's wall, and all wall and floor-cleaner fittings as well as the drain covers were custom made in emerald green to match the tile.

Inside the pool, 65,000 two-inch-square, emerald-green glass tiles that arrived as individual, tissue-wrapped pieces were set one by one using epoxy – a process that took more than five months in covering the complete interior of the pool.

The result is a vision of formal elegance surrounded by pre-cut, 24-inch-square pieces of Pennsylvania greenstone decking on multiple levels, with custom-made, leaf-design fountain spouts set up to match the home's ornamentation. The site also features an outdoor grass-terraced theater at one end, complemented by formal gardens. Completing the project was a terrific team effort led by a fine landscape architectural firm.

The pool is heated with four geothermally driven water-to-water heat pumps with a gas-heat backup, and the overall system is managed by a One-Touch computerized control system (Jandy Pool Products, Petaluma, Calif.) integrated with the home's own automation system to control all features including the pool equipment, lighting, fountains and spa features.

Among the challenges of constructing this one-of-a-kind below-grade pool had to do with the huge rainstorms we get annually in the Houston area. These monsoonal torrents made the occasional mess of things, but we always maintained our focus on producing unique results with the pool as well as the entry fountain, a secluded spa, a party kitchen, dressing rooms, a sound system and the sub-grade entertainment area.

From the start, the idea was to create one of the world's greatest pool settings, and I am proud to have been a part of making it a reality.

Through this project and a great many others, I've learned that imagination pays big dividends in the watershaping realm – and that sometimes this means thinking way beyond the practical confines of where the state of the art might be at any given time.

Back in the 1980s, for instance, when NASA was talking about setting up a base on the moon, I had serious thoughts of helping build a pool there, my belief being that the resistance offered by water exercise would be an ideal way for astronauts to maintain muscle mass and tone in a weightless environment.

I know now that I'll probably never see waterfalls and fountains perform on the moon, so I satisfy myself with earthbound settings and on scoping out new opportunities that emerge every day. Some doubtless will flow my way, and I'm determined to answer the call.

If you ask me, that's what being a maverick is all about!

**MANY FUNCTIONS:** In some of our larger projects, our responsibilities in design and construction extend well past the usual pool and spa – as in this case, where we installed architectural fountains in addition to sculpting a multi-level, complexly geometric pool and spa.





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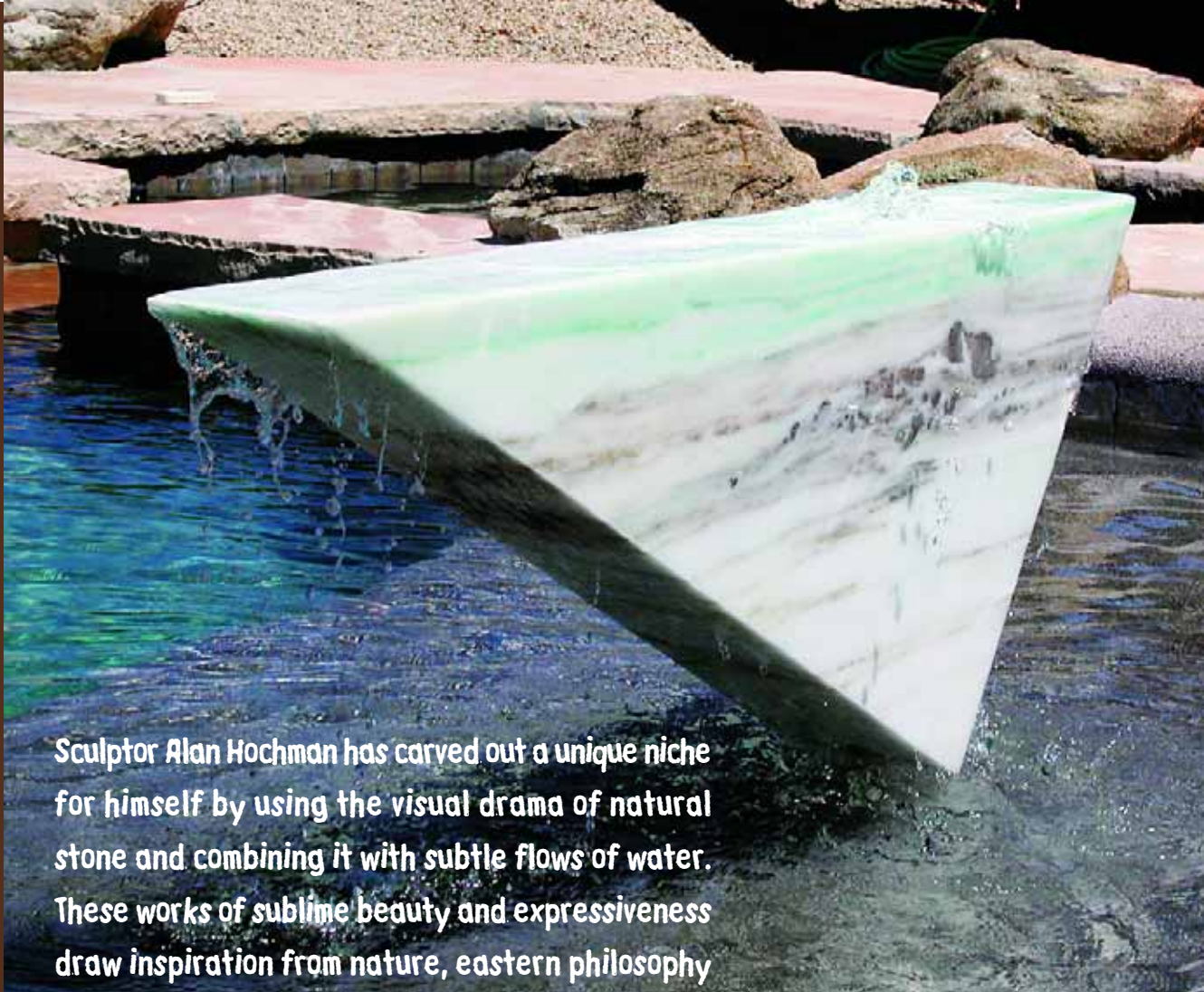




# Hearts of Stone

By Alan Hochman





**Sculptor Alan Hochman has carved out a unique niche for himself by using the visual drama of natural stone and combining it with subtle flows of water. These works of sublime beauty and expressiveness draw inspiration from nature, eastern philosophy and a lifetime of study, but he carefully tailors each piece to suit a specific site and the needs of clients who share his passion for sculptures that play with contrasts and even contradictions.**

When people ask me how long it takes to create one of my sculptures, I sometimes like to answer, “My whole life.”

I’ve always loved art and started collecting it while still in high school, but I never imagined in those formative years that I’d become an artist myself. After all, I have no formal training, and to this day I can’t draw – not well, at any rate.

My first career was as a computer programmer, my second as a marketing consultant – both distinctly sedentary occupations that led me to seek something physical to do in my spare time. For whatever reason, I decided to try my hand at sculpting stone, crafting a few rough pieces and taking pleasure mostly from the hard work they involved.

Right from the start, however, people responded to my pieces in positive ways, so I soon found myself with the serious hobby of generating commissioned works of art. It took several years, but gradually I found myself doing more pieces of increasing sophistication – and did so while teaching myself how to sculpt, reading and re-reading books on stone carving and working largely by trial and error.

Eventually, I came to a point where I decided to make a complete transition and declared myself a sculptor on a full-time basis. By 1999, I’d built a studio in Cave Creek, just outside of Scottsdale, Ariz., where I still spend time designing and sculpting works that could loosely be termed “modern” or “contemporary” – and all of which draw on the raw power and beauty of natural stone.





I sometimes cut large slabs with curving lines and then arrange the resulting pieces relative to one another in ways that highlight either a contrast or continuity in the material. The flowing water brings the grain and its colors forward – or, in cases where the grain is less pronounced, lends a shimmering texture to otherwise flat, smooth surfaces.

## Senses of Wonder

I've heard it said that all sculpture is in one way or another about the human form. Although what I do can't be called "representational" in the usual sense of the term, what I do is nonetheless about the human experience and the way art influences people, the spaces they're in and the way they interact with their broader surroundings.

What I like most about sculpture compared to any other art form is that it is three-dimensional, so it creates a very different set of experiences for viewers than does art, for instance, that hangs on a wall. That's not to diminish what painters accomplish by any means, but with sculpture there's an immediacy to the experience that emerges when a piece is well-placed in a landscape or an interior space: You can walk around it, touch it and, in the case of a fountain with moving water, you can hear it.

Most often, sculptures define their spaces by creating focal points and destinations. With mine, I additionally try to create



stone images that work in harmony with nature and the architecture of the home, office or adjacent structures as well as the interests and personalities of my patrons. In that sense, these are works that are not separate or removed from their surroundings, but are instead very much a part of them.

This is why I work almost exclusively on commission: If I don't know the client or the space in which a sculpture is to be placed, I cannot strike up those harmonies in any meaningful way.

At the same time, I do have a certain approach I follow: I'm always excited by the idea of creating pieces that embody certain types of contradictions, puzzles and surprises and enjoy giving viewers a sense of wonder at how a given piece was made. (I love it when I hear them exclaim, "How did he *do* that?") Moreover, I try to set up juxtapositions in all my sculptures that are designed both to captivate and intrigue.

Some of my larger pieces, for example, seem to balance on a pinpoint even though they obviously weigh thousands of pounds. I'll also cut a slab of stone with curved lines so that the veining creates visual continuity between pieces in ways that can be truly surprising. I also create works in which extremely polished surfaces abut untouched natural or carved rough surfaces, and there are some extremely large sculptures that have voids, portals or windows cut into them or that feature sharply contrasting colors.

Water is another key to my work on large and small fountains as well as what I call my "Zen pools," in which water provides a constant source of contrast and the sounds it makes interact



There's wonderful playfulness in the concept of cutting 'windows' in large slabs of stone: It's unexpected, incongruous and creates the opportunity to use small flows of water to lend intense, surprising dimensionality to monolithic surfaces.

with and animate the solid, unchanging shape of the stone while enhancing sensations of color and texture.

### One of Three

As is true of many artists who celebrate natural forms and materials, I've always been inspired by nature.

I currently live in the desert, which in this area isn't barren at all but is actually filled with a surprising volume of plant and animal species. My studio is located above an arroyo, and when the rains come, there's a wonderful, fleeting drama that occurs when the ditch fills with torrents of flowing water and then quickly returns to its usual dry, empty state.

In the past, I found similar inspiration living near the Pacific Ocean. I lived for a time on the coast just beyond San Luis Obispo, Calif., with easy access to the whole central California coast, and also lived for a while farther south in Santa Monica.







Singly or in groups, the totem-like qualities of stone pillars are always intriguing, but I must say that the process of drilling through their lengths to set up the water flows I almost always include is challenging work. The dancing surfaces that result, however, make it worth the effort.

## A Creative Space

I'm quite proud of my studio in Scottsdale, Ariz., which I consider to be a work of sculptural art all on its own.

The building features split-stone construction, a curvilinear shape and beautiful hammered-copper doors. The back of the building features hammered-copper accordion doors that open completely to the desert air and scenery.

It was important to me to have a place to go every single day that would be both fun and inspiring, so I took the time and made the effort (and investment) to shape a building that is both visually interesting and ecologically sound. It was situated in such a way that, during construction, we disturbed as little of the natural landscape as possible – a fact that often frustrated my stonemason, who had to work too often in close quarters with prickly desert plants.

The structure sits under a beautiful ironwood tree with a view of the mountains to the north and a horse ranch to the south. I'm surrounded by a wonderful variety of life that always makes me feel right at home in the presence of the beautiful flora and fauna. It's so inspiring a place that I named it *El Taller del Alma*: "The Workshop of the Soul."

–A.H.

It was there that I developed a profound appreciation for the vast drama of the sea – and, after announcing my intention of moving to Arizona, heard friends register their shock that I would consider such a move since the ocean seemed so much a part of my work.

To me, however, the ocean and the desert provide similar experiences in that both are connected to vast expanses of air and space, both always changing but in extraordinarily different ways and time frames.

At present, I'm in the process of opening a second studio in north San Diego County in Fallbrook, Calif., where I'm similarly taken by the wonderful topography of rolling hills and deep canyons and their proximity to the ocean. In short, I'm happy wherever I find a connection to nature. Even though I don't draw literal "artistic" inspiration from being in natural spaces – that is, I don't mimic nature – I find that natural surroundings always energize and propel me in my work.

I believe this love of nature shows through in every piece I've ever done. It's at a point where I regard the creative process as one of unleashing forms hidden in the stone – so much so that there are three participants in my work: There's the stone itself to dictate the artistic moves I make; there are the tools I use to work it; and there's me, lending thought, strength and sinew to the process.

My goal in resolving this triad is to get out of the way and let the stone and tools do most of the communicating as an intuitive process unfolds. This is why I have difficulty expressing how specific design ideas come to me: I'm fully comfortable





knowing that what I do is fueled by experience and my subconscious appreciation of forms, textures and the materials themselves.

I'm also a devotee of eastern philosophies and the way those traditions see no separation between the human spirit, nature and the rest of the universe. My works aren't literal, iconic representations of anything along those lines, but I draw on that connectedness and find that it constantly guides me.

## Groundings

Sometimes, when I listen to the way artists – myself included – talk about their work, I recognize that it can all start to sound like well-considered nonsense. To me, however, any philosophical or spiritual underpinnings are not the substance of the work, but are instead part of the method, the sheer practicality of the way I create my sculptures and connect them to their settings.

And there are other practicalities in what I do that are quite imposing. First off, stone is generally heavy stuff, and working with it can be phenomenally

demanding in a physical way. Among the first things I consider in a design is how I'm going to move the raw stone and how it will be lifted, transported and installed when I'm done. (Working with high-speed saws, chisels and grinding tools is no walk in the park, either.) I'm also aware that making a living as an artist leaves little room for self-indulgence: I must be constantly mindful that people need to enjoy looking at what I produce and that some of them need to find value enough in what they see to pay for it with their hard-earned dollars.

It's a wonderful business, but it's definitely a business just the same.

As mentioned above, I'm unlike many other artists in that I prefer to work on site-specific commissions for specific clients looking for something that will fit into their homes or places of business. I do some public works as well, but those, too, are always tied to sites and contexts, taking into account architecture, color schemes and the personalities and desires of the clients. These are processes that hold me tightly to a grounded, real-world,

completely open approach to what I do.

As I also mentioned at the start, I don't draw very well, so using my background in computer technology, I develop my designs as three-dimensional computer images based on careful site surveys and detailed discussions with the clients. I choose the stone type, whether it's travertine, onyx, marble, soapstone or some other material, based on the color palette, veining and the type of visual effect we're trying to achieve.

A lot of the stone I use comes from quarries situated near Albuquerque, N.M. Finding just the right raw piece is a constant challenge, and I spend a great deal of time looking for one that has the right "personality" for a given project. In particular, the travertine I often use offers tremendous variations in color, grain and veining in a way that can make it resemble petrified wood.

Once a selection is made, balancing the needs of water flow and its design with the desire to release the beauty of the stone is both the biggest challenge and most satisfying aspect of this type of



I often let stone speak for itself, but in some cases for certain clients in certain settings, I will work the surface of the stone in various ways to create specific looks and sculptural effects. In the case of the paired pillars, the impression is also celestial: They are arranged in the space so the sun rises between them twice a year on the solstices.



sculpting. It's an interplay that is controlled and planned – yet at the same time, it's not entirely predictable. Sometimes, for example, a chunk will break off unexpectedly. I never attempt to reattach those pieces, but I will often use those incidental cleavages as part of the finished piece.

When it all comes together, I have the sense that the result is as much a work of nature and circumstance as it is the product of my handiwork.

## Fluid Motions

Almost all of my pieces include water, typically as a low-volume flow emerging from the top that trickles and sheets down the sides. Some of my pieces stand in small reflecting pools into which the water flows; others are placed in basins filled with stone, so the water is really only evident on the surfaces of the sculpture itself.

Quite recently, I've designed several pieces that have been installed directly in swimming pools – settings that give these pieces dramatic and entirely different sorts of interactive qualities and leave me with interesting sets of technical challenges in marrying heavy stone with pool structures.

In all cases, combining stone with water lends these works a vitality and tranquility that simply cannot be achieved with dry sculptures. Although I have done a very small number of waterless works, my preference is always to use moving water to capture attention and draw the viewer close to a piece with its delicate sounds and almost hypnotic interplay with light.

The hydraulic systems for these sculptures are quite simple and seldom involve more than a single valve, but they do require care in the execution. Typically, I get involved in core drilling from top to bottom – several feet in most cases – and the goal is almost invariably to accommodate a tiny flow that starts as a mere bubble at the top that breaks to dress the stone in a thin sheet of water.

Many of my pieces have been commissioned for arid settings, and I love the contrast of water and stone in a desert. There's nothing new in thinking this way or exploiting the contrast, of course. After all, Middle Eastern artists and cultures have been taking advantage of exactly this juxtaposition for centuries.

And it's no small point of pride that the gentle flow of water across my sculptures is less subject to evaporative water loss than are standard, multi-tiered, roughly flowing fountains and cascades. In fact, the losses with my pieces are roughly equivalent to what you'd encounter with a low-flow drip-irrigation emitter.

## Visual Celebrations

Among the great joys of what I do is the opportunity my work gives me to collaborate with truly fascinating people. Most who choose to spend their money on my sculptures are already art collectors and are in their own ways creative and thoughtful people. I've also had the pleasure of working with some wonderful architects, landscape architects and designers as well as pool designers and contractors.

I'm sure I'm like many other artists in that my greatest joy



I take special joy in installing my pieces inside pools. These projects (including the one seen on the opening pages of this feature) bring all sorts of special challenges of a technical nature, but the level of interaction encouraged in these settings is unmatched and lends special drama and a sense of 'audience participation' to the results.



comes from seeing a sculpture installed and knowing that it brings my clients pleasure.

Even before that, however, there's a terrific feeling of anticipation when I get to the point where I finally stand a new piece upright in the studio and turn on the water for the first time: All the planning and hard work begins to pay off at this point, and it only gets better when a piece is installed and my clients and I finally get to see how it fits within the setting.

For me, the highest compliment I get is when my clients have receptions or parties to welcome and celebrate the presence of a sculpture as a new addition to their homes. Although there was a time I never could have imagined being an artist, no words can describe how happy it makes me to hear of my clients' inclination to share what I've done with others.





Classic Roman Mosaic Swimming Pool & Spa



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deep, so this system doesn't need to meet health department standards, and I suppose most people would say that's lucky for us. Plus, it's a fountain and is not intended for human contact.

No problems here, right?

Well, in this case at least, I would argue that relying on the basic meaning of terms would be foolish in the extreme. The fact is that just about every public fountain ever built at some point becomes "interactive" (another loaded term I'll tackle below) because there are always going to be people who will get into them, whether it's teenagers who enjoy challenging social boundaries or small children who just don't know any better. In other words, I know as a matter of reality that the John Q. Public is going to come in contact with the water in this so-called "residential" installation.

I know as well that if someone gets injured or sick from exposure to unclean water in this fountain, there's a high probability that the designers, builders and service technicians will be hailed into court right alongside the homeowners and the homeowners' association. This is everyone's issue!

Committed to avoiding that fate and based on experience, we designed our system with elements common to commercial swimming pools in so far as turnover rate and chemical treatment were concerned. And we did so despite the fact that neither the city nor the health department defined this installation as "public" or "commercial" because of zoning and the location of the property lines.

## BREAKING DOWN

In just this one small example, we can see how the terms "residential," "commercial," and, in this case, even the word "fountain" have absolutely no bearing on the realities of the situation. Setting aside the fact that most fountains reside in an enormously gray area when it comes to regulations and liability, in this case we can't even be clear about what is and isn't "residential" with respect to design standards.

In other words, these terms are defined by their situations and, in fact, have very

little objective meaning.

Some might argue that a situation such as the one I described is not normal and that we can, in good faith, continue to rely on the terms "commercial" and "residential" in describing what we do. I'll buy into the idea that when it comes to backyard pools, we can make a reasonable assumption that the word "residential" actually does work in a majority of cases. A basic definition here might be something like "a body of water located on a privately owned property where access is controlled by the owner and use is limited to the immediate family and close friends."

That works up to a point, but consider the ramifications of that narrow meaning when a backyard pool is used as a site for private swimming lessons. In such a situation, dozens of people (maybe more?) might be using a small, residential-scale pool in a manifestly "commercial" way. I would argue from a simple liability perspective that such an application falls under the umbrella of commercial rather than residential construction.

Granted, that's a heretical notion: Nobody wants health departments to get involved in regulating backyard pools or have anything to say about people conducting swimming lessons at home. Yet in such situations, one could reasonably argue that by virtue of usage, such pools are, in fact, "commercial" by definition as they are a means of making money.

The same is true of extremely high-end "residential" installations where wildly wealthy or famous owners routinely host parties for hundreds of people. In those circumstances, the same issues apply: The work may be officially "residential," but in terms of liability exposure, you'd better think "commercial" or you'll be exposing yourself in genuinely frightening ways.

When it comes to the challenge of teaching landscape architecture students how to use these terms, I'm pushing the idea that although there are some basic definitions in use, it's the application that unfortunately sets the standard, not an official definition around which all watershapers could rally.

In all my years of creating a broad range of water-shapes, I've come to see that if there's one area in which terms matter the most, it has to do with how a given vessel reflects the level of legal and financial liability incurred in designing and constructing it.





With several types of watershapes, the lines between ‘residential’ and ‘commercial’ are sometimes blurred according to placement and probable use (or misuse). By code, for example, fountains of less than 18 inches in depth can be built with only marginal sanitizing and filtration systems (or none at all). But the fact of the matter is that people will come in contact with the water, which leads some of us to meet or beat the *pool* codes when it comes to making these bodies of water safe for non-approved bathers.

### COMMERCIAL TERMS

Let’s briefly take this discussion of “commercial” versus “residential” in yet another direction in which we’ll see another spasm of imprecision: Consider for a moment the manufacturers of pumps, filters and other basic circulation components who classify their wares as being either *commercial* or *residential*. They do this for obvious marketing purposes, and the distinctions are based more or less on the volumes of water given components are capable of handling instead of on the specifics of an application.

The problem in the real world is that there are always going to be residential installations large enough that they will use so-called “commercial” equipment and just as many small commercial installations that will use “residential” components. So even when it comes down to specifying circulation components, the terms quickly lose any certainty of meaning.

With all that in mind, I’ve come to believe the term “commercial” should actually be retired. If defining a “residential” installation is subject to varying circumstances (as in my street-side fountain), the spectrum of “commercial” pools is so broad that the term becomes completely and utterly worthless.

Of course, elimination of the term is impractical because it’s in such wide use. So, undaunted, I came up with a definition for a commercial watershape installation that says, “A body of water that will be used in some way by the public for the owner’s economic gain.”



As with the residential definition, the above sounds pretty good – until, that is, you consider settings such as private health clubs or exclusive resort properties or condominium developments. In all those situations, access to the water is supposed to be monitored and controlled by property owners or homeowners’ associations. Those places are *anything* but public, in other words, but referring to them as “commercial” says absolutely nothing with respect to bather load or actual usage.

Yes, they’ll be regulated by health departments in most cases, but to me, that single factor should not be the sole determinant when it comes to categorizing installations within our industry. It’s the usage to which these vessels are put (rather than any official designation) that determines liability and/or the nature of system design.

It gets worse: These days, I sometimes hear the terms “semi-commercial” or “semi-public” used to describe specific water-



shapes, and I suppose in the context of projects that are on private properties owned by companies rather than individuals there's some sense to those terms. In application and usage, however, they mean next to nothing.

### PUBLIC AND INSTITUTIONAL

Adding spice to the discussion is the wonderfully slippery use of the word “institutional,” which to some people means an installation that exists on a property such as a college campus. I would argue instead that institutional pools are those for which standards (typically dimensional and performance-related) are set by organizations other than building or health departments – mainly the plethora of organizations that deal with pools designed for competition.

The nuances of requirements set forth by organizations such as the International Olympic Committee, U.S. Olympics and others are beyond my concern here – other than that they help me illustrate the fact that projects designed to meet those standards exist in all sorts of settings and have a range of owners, from schools to municipalities and even the federal government.

In considering this term, is a pool at a dormitory on a college campus that's meant strictly for recreational use by students called “institutional,” “semi-commercial” or “public”? I suppose it could be any or all of those things depending on how you look at it. But what if it's a really small pool at a tiny private school owned by a church? Then I suppose you could say it's “a commercial pool owned and operated by a private institution in a semi-public setting built using residential equip-



Often, watershape-related definitions are dictated by regulations. Health departments, for example, require safety signage, access to emergency telephones and the specification of maximum bather occupancy for public, commercial and community pools and spas. But are bathers any less safe in residential pools without these items?



Nobody wants public agencies to get involved where they aren't already, but it might be argued that there are certain high-use residential projects in which following the authorities' regulated tread and riser dimensions for steps and even including stainless steel handrails and ladders might make sense from a liability standpoint – another point at which conventional ‘definitions’ simply aren't adequate.



ment but regulated by the local health department – *maybe*.”

When you break things down to that level, the usefulness of the terminology is a laugh-out-loud proposition – except for the fact that when we consider the potential of watershaping as a distinct subject being taught as part of an accredited university program, it becomes plain that, as an industry, even the best among us can’t be absolutely certain of what we mean when we use these common terms.

In the real world, this leaves us to use words tied to settings and intended uses – but even then you’re left with the fact that a number of terms in common usage simply do not work adequately.

To drive that point home, here’s one more brain-twister: What do you call a pool built for therapeutic purposes at a non-profit facility for physically challenged people? Is it “commercial” or “semi-commercial”? Well, not by any convenient definition I know. Is it “institutional”? Maybe. Is it something else that hasn’t appeared often enough to have attracted a specialized descriptive term? Almost certainly – and I can hardly wait to add that one to my list.

### GOING INTERACTIVE

Let’s take this discussion in yet another quirky direction and consider the terms “interactive” and “decorative.” Although they have no official or formal meaning, it would seem natural to say that an “interactive” body of water is one that is designed for human contact and that a “decorative” body of water exists purely for aesthetic enjoyment.

As with the more objective terms discussed above, on a rudimentary level “interactive” and “decorative” both make sense. But once again, as soon as you apply pressure and ultimately break them down in terms of applications related to how these words are actually used, you enter another terminological funhouse.

In fact, *all* swimming pools and spas could be said to be functionally “interactive.” In fact, they could be said to be the most interactive of all watershapes because they’re designed for complete bodily immersion. Yet when we say “interactive,” that’s not what anyone is referring to: Instead, we use the term to impute that a system provides some form of human contact with water by a means other than immersion.

Some water-oriented theme parks are probably the readiest examples of “interactive” facilities, along with the now-familiar leaping-jet fountains and settings that have so-called “splash pads” that might themselves be defined as areas that have waterpark-like features without being located in actual waterparks.

In this context, we also could say that slides and diving boards are “interactive” elements when they’re part of swimming pools, even though those elements are seldom considered “interactive” in common industry vernacular. On the other end of the spectrum, a hydrotherapy spa in a hospital facility is distinctly and intimately “interactive,” but I’ve never heard one described that way.

Finally, of course, there’s the example I used at the top of this discussion – that is, the *unintentionally* “interactive” body of



Some health department rules might actually be helpful for much-used backyard pools. In lots of cases, for example, regulations require showers around pools as well as restrooms and drinking fountains – all in quantities tied to the surface area of bather-accessible water in a given area. These items are never required on residential pools, but that fact alone doesn’t make them bad ideas. The same goes for filtration systems: In many areas, we must create ‘dry wells’ for discharging backwash water so it ends up replenishing subterranean aquifers. Does it necessarily make sense to set up residential systems so all that water is sent into the municipal sewer network?



water – a catch-all phrase that could be attached to just about every fountain that has ever been built. (For that matter, if there's a watershape that's ever been made that isn't touched by a human being at some point, I've yet to see it.)

It is with watershapes described as “decorative” that we come about as close as we ever will to a definition with some clarity. I define these installations as any vessel meant to have visual appeal – the one problem there being that, while every backyard pool is meant to look good, some of them clearly do not.

And so, even where we might expect some relief, we get caught in yet another loop of imprecision and amazing verbal inadequacy.

### MAKING SENSE

So what does the word “decorative” actually mean to watershapers?

Well, we can comfortably assert that competition pools aren't decorative because that's not their primary purpose, but these days, most of these projects include quite advanced aesthetic programs. I suppose we might stipulate that pools meant for training Navy Seals or astronauts are not “decorative,” but such watershapes are so rare that it's hard to base any kind of definition on them.

Conversely, koi ponds, lakes and lots of ponds and streams can be comfortably defined as purely “decorative.” Yet as we know, these days a great many of these watershapes are also intended for human contact or even swimming. And honestly, I don't know whether touching the water to feed a beautiful fish qualifies as “interactivity” or not. If I had to decide one way or the other, I probably would say yes, that counts as interactivity – but don't chemically treat the water the way you would a typical “interactive” body of water unless you want to kill the fish!

Again, we find ourselves left with terms that really don't stand up to scrutiny when considered in light of either common usage or real-world applications.

What's sort of intimidating about this entire discussion is that the terms we're talking about here are the ones that actually have the clearest definitions. Our

lexicon gets even more absurdly imprecise when we talk about distinctions between, for example, “steps” and “benches.”

There's more: What's the difference between a “waterfall” and a “cascade”? Is a spa's “spillover” a type of “waterfall”? By what definition does a “pond” become a “reflecting pond”? Where do we draw the line between “architectural” and “naturalistic”? Do we define a pool with a brimming water level as a “perimeter-overflow,” “slot overflow” or “deck-level” system? Is there any difference between a “beach entrance” and a “zero-depth entrance”? What constitutes the “shallow end” as opposed to a “deep end”? What do we mean when we say “hot tub” or “spa”?

And, finally, of course, what the hell is a “waterfeature”?

I won't belabor this point any longer because the discussion could become utterly ridiculous (if it hasn't gotten there already). The problem is that it would be easy to dismiss the whole matter, except for the fact that as an industry we use these words every day to communicate with clients about what they're buying and with regulators and other professionals around whom we're designing and building.

### BEYOND HUMOR

When I stand up in front of my students and try to make sense out of the mass of terminology we currently endure, the challenge, ironically I suppose, is much more than a mere academic exercise. These young people are in their chairs because of a genuine interest in pursuing this field of endeavor, and they're looking to me as a distinguished representative of our industry to say what I mean and mean what I say.

Beyond mining the rich comic potential of the subject here, all I can say is that I'm going to keep trying and, I hope, will someday succeed in provoking this magazine or some industry entity into coming up with a set of terms that will stand up in the face of the permutations and combinations of the watershapes we produce. So far, however, I must report that I've yet to run into anything that's even approximately definitive, let alone authoritative enough to be persuasive.

Until we do come up with some sort of working vocabulary, I believe the best we'll be able to do is consider the application first, then attach the terms that fit the best. If we can't fly to the moon, at least we should put the horse in front of the cart.



In lots of cases, equipment sets for public pools are located indoors, both for aesthetics and noise control. This confronts the eager minds of my students with a simple question: Doesn't it seem odd that in the residential realm, where there is generally a higher standard set for both aesthetics and bother-free performance, that neither aesthetics nor noise are considered in the common practice of placing residential equipment sets out in the open in side yards?





# Eastern





By Jim Robinson

# Influences

*For the past 30 years, landscape artist/architect Jim Robinson has pursued his projects with a distinct focus on creating subtle and complex beauty. Based on traditions of Japanese gardens, the resulting sites range from the monumental to the decidedly intimate – but in all cases, his approach to the placement of plants, stone and water is directed to establishing spaces that speak to visitors with a timeless, sublime tranquility.*

## My Love

of nature started with a rock collection I had as a child: My fascination with the simple beauty of those small pieces of stone hit me early in life and never left.

Several years later, my outlook was dramatically expanded when a great uncle of mine paid to have a formal Japanese garden built for his home in Boulder, Colo. Ever since, I've had a profound appreciation of archetypal Japanese gardens and the way they celebrate nature through landforms, rocks, plants and water.

By the time I was in high school, I had already decided that my career was going to involve working outdoors, and from that time forward, my prime interest was in bringing the techniques and disciplines of Japanese gardens into the greater American landscape both where I grew up in the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere.

For 30 years now, I've worked as a landscape artist in that region – for 15 years in Portland and for the last 15 in Eugene, Ore. Although many of my designs are not what you could describe as “Japanese gardens” per se, everything I do is informed and influenced by those traditions.

I bear no grudge of any sort against the beauty of gardens in the Western European tradition, but to my mind, there's nothing in landscape design that harmonizes more seamlessly with nature than does a true Japanese garden.

## Master Studies

One of the fantastic things about this mode of design is that it connects you to centuries of well-documented history and traditions that have led to development of some of the world's most refined and beautiful spaces. Many are in Japan, of course, but they are also found in the United States and elsewhere.

As is true of many who work in the realm of Japanese gardens, the masters who have gone before me have had a profound influence on what I do.

Without question, my greatest teacher is the renowned Japanese garden master Hoichi Kurisu, with and for whom I worked for more than ten years. He showed me the spectrum of specific details that go into creating whole gardens that exist in harmony with nature and the human spirit. More to the point, he's personally responsible for some of the most beautiful public and private gardens found anywhere in the United States.

When you strive to work in this design tradition, the importance of having a great mentor can-





'It's that very effort, that careful arrangement of available components, that makes everything come together in a scene that simultaneously calms and energizes those who enter and move through the space.'



not be overstated. I worked with him from 1979 to 1989 out of his office in Portland, Ore., and was privileged to be a part of an array of projects of stunning beauty throughout this country.

The way he patiently crafts these spaces and their rocks, plants and watershapes is still a constant source of inspiration for me. As just one example, in Rockford, Ill., he created the Anderson Garden, which has been honored by a range of experts as the best Japanese garden in the country. It's a space of supreme balance, sublime beauty and magnificent subtlety that must be experienced to be fully understood.

To this day, when I'm designing a garden I often ask myself, "What would Kurisu do in this situation?" In many cases, I've openly worked to echo his approaches in my own work: I always strive to be original in what I do and to make





‘In developing these spaces, we don’t try to copy nature; rather, we interpret nature and build an impression of it that ultimately relates to the people who will move through the space.’

certain each project is true to its site and my clients, but the work never strays too far from the lessons he gave me.

Even today, I still work with him from time to time. In fact, Kurisu and I collaborated not long ago on a lovely part of a large garden project in Napa Valley. We’ve also worked together on projects in the Cayman Islands and throughout the Northwest and elsewhere.

### *Transplantations*


One of the many things I’ve learned is that the principles of Japanese gardening can be applied almost anywhere. Yes, there are certain plant materials that are more closely associated with the tradition than others, but the overriding approach to organizing spaces and the elements within them can easily be translated to a variety of settings.

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## Specific Methods

For all of the intuitive and even spiritual qualities that pervade Japanese gardens, our work is not that far removed from the work of landscape designers operating within other design traditions. What we all do begins with the site and visualizing how the existing landforms and surrounding views can be used to shape complex and layered compositions of stone, plants and water.

This is why I always spend time observing the setting at various times during the day and taking pictures I can use to revisit the space when I return to my studio. Using those images and recollections, I create hand-drawn renderings of the garden that help my clients see what I'm seeing.

The plant and stone palettes we work with are almost always entirely indigenous to the areas in which we work – and in my primary sphere of activity in the Pacific Northwest, I'm lucky to have a wonderful selection of both. I manage every detail I can, creating the planting plans for many of my projects and often working at length with clients to be sure they understand what they'll see once we're finished.

When we start working on site, the process is a mix of following a basic design while also improvising somewhat as we move forward. The hardscape and watershape structures always go in first, of course, as the bones of the garden. Once those elements are in place, we move forward with the plants, exercising tremendous care so their forms are best revealed in the finished product.

It's important to note that this is not a solo effort: I'm a participant, but I work with an experienced team of installers who often contribute their own ideas to the process. Through the years, we've come to an intuitive understanding of our collective design mission, and I know the results wouldn't be the same without their help.

—J.R.

In my case, I'm fortunate to do much of my work in the Pacific Northwest, which sits at roughly the same latitudes as central Japan and shares many similar plant species as well as the dramatic topography that's such a key design element. Here, for example, my working life is made much easier by the abundance of pine and fern species that thrive in the natural environment.

Setting that advantage aside, however, the population here consists mostly of people who have little or no familiarity with Japanese gardens, which makes it a challenge at times to foster an appreciation of my approach among them. Fortunately, however, these gardens speak for themselves, and once they see photographs of my past projects, the nature of the work becomes clear: Clients don't need to know the first thing about Japanese gardens to recognize their simple beauty, visual balance and existence in harmony with nature.

How do these gardens convey this sense so well on so many scales and in so many settings? I've read a great deal about them and have heard many descriptions, and it all seems to boil down to the designer's ability to enhance and magnify every detail in the garden, from the smallest stone to the largest tree, and show off each one in the best possible way.

This is why I marvel at the creative process of a master such as my friend Kurisu: The level of patience required to work and rework each element not just as something on its own but also as part of a dynamic, overarching composition is nothing short of phenomenal. But it's that very effort, that careful arrangement of available components, that makes everything come together in a scene that simultaneously calms and energizes those who enter and move through the space.

You don't need to know anything about that exercise to absorb this brand of beauty and gain an intuitive appreciation for the composition of the space around you. Best yet, in Japanese culture, this human participation – the impressions each visitor develops and takes away – is as much a part of the garden as are the rocks, plants and watershapes.

Unlike many of the descriptions of Japanese gardens that attribute such

qualities to an almost mystical dimension, I believe that the true power of these spaces is due to a very grounded sense of connection between the human mind and senses, and the surroundings.

## Stone by Stone

In developing these spaces, we don't try to copy nature; rather, we interpret nature and build an impression of it that ultimately relates to the people who will move through the space.

What this means in practical terms is that when I design or install a garden, my crews and I are always thinking in very specific terms about each and every element contained within the space – about every rock, plant or watershape and how it will be viewed and what it will mean in the greater context of the garden.

That may sound impossibly complicated, but there's a balance here that brings things into focus with reasonable speed. With experience and patience, it gets to a point where you're always thinking about both the overall view and feeling and the way that every piece contributes to that impression.

One of the keys to finding that balance comes in the fact that everything in a Japanese garden has a direction: The views and the pathways are all designed so that you're either visually and/or physically led through the space. There's a constant sense of discovery, enjoyment and fascination with the landscape's complexities, and the main aim is to eliminate any sense of separation between the human experience and the space that surrounds us.

This is why in a Japanese garden you don't try to show everything at once. In maintaining a visitor's sense of oneness with nature, it's helpful instead to sustain variations of view and a subtle sense of surprise. In the greatest gardens of this type, the footpaths are carefully orchestrated to govern how one moves through the space – where you speed up, where you slow down and where you stop. This can happen on a relatively large scale over dozens of paces, or it can take place within just a few feet.

This is achieved by the way we layer the views, arrange varieties of textures and colors and place stones within the garden. It's





'There's a constant sense of discovery, enjoyment and fascination with the landscape's complexities, and the main aim is to eliminate any sense of separation between the human experience and the space that surrounds us.'

largely a pursuit of asymmetrical balance on a level that penetrates the consciousness of the visitor and affects his or her sense of the space on an intuitive or in some cases a spiritual level. Japanese gardens achieve this not by way of mysticism or mythology, but by managing the visitor's moment-by-moment experience.

The idea is that the visitor is not someone who is separated from nature but is instead intimately part of it, simply by being there and allowing his or her senses to take over.

### *Fluid Perceptions*

To achieve this sort of sensory cascade for visitors, designers of Japanese gardens follow certain principles – not hard, fast rules, but governing insights that inform specific design decisions.

In placing stone in flatwork or in vertical elements such as retaining walls, for example, one always tries to avoid places where four corners come together. In other words, any intersections of stone should form "Y" shapes and not "X" shapes.

There's also a general rule that five-sided flat stones work well in decks, and considerable attention is paid to avoiding pieces with even numbers of sides. Indeed, odd numbers are always important in Japanese and other Asian cultures, and it's particularly important where there are groupings of elements that they come together as threes and other odd numbers.

But no such rules are absolute. With rock placement, for example, there's a general principle that dictates that the flat surface of the rock is placed on top, but there are many situations having to do with topography and the needs of the design that can dictate otherwise.

Visual balance is achieved through asymmetrical arrangements and curvilinear forms. This is distinctly different from







formal Western gardens with their axial and bilateral symmetries and geometric squares and octagons driving views and defining lines of sight. In our work, we strive for balances that are subtler and less easily dissected by way of immediate visual perception.

Again, this is not achieved by directly copying nature, but instead by means of representation. In Japanese gardens, in other words, the hand of the gardener is seen and there's full acknowledgement that these are *created* spaces.

One of the most powerful elements we have at our disposal in creating these spaces is water. The idea is not necessarily to give the impression that the water is pre-existing and completely

natural; rather, these watershapes are *representative*, in a realistic way, of bodies that might be found in nature. This is why, for example, water is sometimes only *suggested* in these gardens in a metaphorical sense by way of raked beds of sand, swatches of grass or patterns of rock that represent a stream or cascade.

In other words, water doesn't need to be there *at all* to play its usual significant role in a Japanese garden design.

### *Waterforms*

In working with actual watershapes, however, the Japanese gardener is using one of the most powerful of all elements in a composition. By nature, water al-

most always creates a sense of arrival, sending a message that the visitor has come to a special place where he or she is expected to stop and contemplate both the water and its surroundings.

This is true, of course, no matter the garden style: Water has a profound effect on the human psyche, and in any garden it can create near-hypnotic states by, for instance, reflecting the surrounding plant and stone material. In that sense, water asks visitors to stop and absorb their surroundings, which cuts to the core of my mission as a professional by enabling me to revitalize people through their appreciation of natural forms.

In doing so, the Japanese gardener





‘By nature, water almost always creates a sense of arrival, sending a message that the visitor has come to a special place where he or she is expected to stop and contemplate both the water and its surroundings.’



exploits the tension that rises between nature and the artificial world in the juxtaposition of clearly manufactured elements and those that are less obviously “designed.” By orchestrating the experience – by, for example, bringing a stone deck right up to the edge of a creek – we create feelings of transition, feelings of freedom from structure that are immediately perceptible on a subconscious level.

The goal here is always to create gardens as places of repose, comfort and even revitalization. When we achieve that, I know we’ve lived up to the expectations of our clients and aligned our efforts with tenets of the design tradition I hold so dear.





## NIGHTTIME RENDERINGS

## Circle 135 on Reader Service Card



STRUCTURE STUDIOS has added new presentation features to its Pool Studio software, including new rendering tools that show homeowners how a new watershape will look during the day, at sunset and at night—complete with dynamic shadows and illuminated watershape and landscape lights. The update also offers highly realistic water effects, materials and surfaces. **Structure Studios**, Las Vegas, NV.

## FOUNTAIN CATALOG

## Circle 136 on Reader Service Card

PEM FOUNTAINS has released the 2007 edition of its catalog. Covering special equipment and parts for waterfeatures, water displays and fountains, sections include information on water switches, jumping and laminar jets, spray-apron modules, screen jets and more. Highlighted new products include flow straighteners and flanges, stream jets, junction boxes and shallow niches. **PEM Fountains**, Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada.



## DECKING SYSTEM

## Circle 137 on Reader Service Card



EON has introduced its Ultra line of decking, railing, cladding and accessories. Designed for low maintenance, the materials have a wood-like appearance and resist the elements as well as fading, cracking, splitting, rotting, mold and mildew. Available in two colors (chestnut and sandalwood), the product is easily installed using clips that ensure even spacing and a flawless, fastener-free surface. **Eon**, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

## 2007 CATALOG

## Circle 138 on Reader Service Card

PENTAIR WATER POOL & SPA has released its 2007 product catalog. The 768-page book contains product descriptions and ordering information for Pentair's and Sta-Rite's lines of residential and commercial pumps, filters, heaters, cleaners, controls, lighting systems, replacement parts and more. For convenience, all of the same information is available on a compact disk. **Pentair Water Pool & Spa**, Sanford, NC.



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## SITE-MARKING PAINT

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**RUST-OLEUM** has introduced Industrial Choice High Output Inverted Marking Paint for excavation, landscape and construction applications. Designed to produce bold, 2-to-3-inch-wide markings on a variety of surfaces, the product features a specially designed valve that offers greater saturation than other site-marking products while providing resistance against early fading and chalking. **Rust-Oleum**, Vernon Hills, IL.

## LANDSCAPE LIGHTING

### Circle 140 on Reader Service Card

**DABMAR** has released three new landscape fixtures: LV131, a brass directional spotlight with a hood and LV231, a directional spotlight without a hood – both of which come with antique brass or bronze finishes; and FG132, a fiberglass directional spotlight with a hood that comes with black or bronze finishes. Intended for low-voltage applications, all come pre-wired with direct-burial cable. **Dabmar**, Oxnard, CA.



## POOL-STEP SYSTEM

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## RESERVOIR SYSTEM

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## PERSPECTIVE DRAWINGS

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FETCH-A-SKETCH.COM offers outdoor contractors the chance to make first-class presentations using renderings and perspectives created by top designers. The drawings – from full landscape designs to renderings of individual features such as pools, ponds, waterfalls and outdoor kitchens – are all ready for purchasing, downloading and printing for use in winning presentations. **Fetch-A-Sketch.com**, Canoga Park, CA.

## POND VACUUM

### Circle 145 on Reader Service Card



EASYPRO POND PRODUCTS offers a remote-control pond vacuum. Intended to make quick work of cleaning sludge, fish waste and other debris from ponds, fountains and other watershapes, the unit is designed for quiet operation, has a 9-1/2-gallon tank capacity, comes with three vacuum heads and is packaged with suction and discharge hoses, a mesh bag and a 6-foot handle. **EasyPro Pond Products**, Grant, MI.

## WIRELESS POOL CONTROL

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BALBOA INSTRUMENTS offers the Poolux control system. The easy-to-install, easy-to-use, completely wireless device manages a comprehensive chemistry-automation system that monitors pH, ORP and TDS levels as well as filter pressure. It also has a module that allows for control of a pool system via the Internet – ideal for clients who are second homeowners or frequent travelers. **Balboa Instruments**, Tustin, CA.



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## RETAINING WALL SYSTEM

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VERSA-LOK offers the Mosaic Retaining Wall System. Designed to provide a natural-looking, environmentally sound landscaping solution, the product features the company's pin-locking system, readily accommodates geogrid soil reinforcement and can achieve heights of 50 feet or more for limitless design flexibility, high structural integrity and easy installation as a random-patterned wall. **Versa-Lok**, Oakdale, MN.

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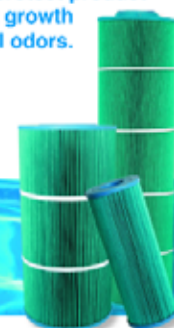
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By Mike Farley

## Outdoor Living

For a long time now, clients and prospects have been asking me about exterior facilities that will enable them to cook, dine and entertain in their backyards.

It's been so prevalent, in fact, that I've mentioned the trend in this space on a couple of occasions – noting once or twice my frustration about the lack of books available for me to use in meeting the need. The sheer demand for these features seems to have arrived several steps ahead of publishers' being able to put books on the shelves.

In the past year, however, that picture has changed. Just recently, in fact, I picked up four books on the subject. There are others, but these struck me as being particularly useful in filling the information gap:



► *Outdoor Rooms, Fresh Air Kitchens and Living Areas* by Tina Skinner and Melissa Cardona (Schisser Publishing, 2006). This 144-page book offers a visual overview of design ideas for outdoor living areas. Filled with beautiful images covering a range of styles, details and material choices, it's very much an "idea book" and has little by way of technical or "how-to" guidance for those asked to develop these spaces. Despite that, however, it's a wonderful source for design inspiration and includes a rich selection of approaches to balconies, arbors, trellises, lanais, verandas and other decorative spaces and structures.



► *Fire Outdoors* is another book from Skinner and Cardona (Schisser Publishing, 2006) and is similar in approach: The 128-page book deals with all manner of exterior fire systems and is long on beautiful images but short on text and solid technical information. Again, it's a wonderful idea book filled with images of fire rings, fire pits, fireplaces, chimneys and a particularly interesting set of wood-burning ovens – a terrific resource for design meetings because it presents concepts that most people haven't yet seen and aren't yet considering.



► *The New Outdoor Kitchen* by Deborah Krasner (Taunton Press, 2007) is the true gem in this quartet: Her 230-page book is quite simply the best resource I've seen so far on outdoor kitchens and dining areas. The text includes highly detailed case studies of outdoor facilities (owned by professional chefs) and crosses a range of styles, configurations and geographical settings. It includes every-

thing from sinks and beer taps to the debate over charcoal and gas grills, and there's a helpfully thorough listing of suppliers. In addition to beautiful photography and great ideas, the author offers a fair measure of technical information about the planning and execution of these projects – and a checklist of specific issues you need consider in designing and/or installing similar ones on your own.

► *The Ultimate Outdoor Kitchen* by Michelle Kodis (Gibbs Smith Publisher, 2006) offers another useful set of case studies covering a broad range of styles and geographies. The 158-page text neatly covers technical considerations, and I found its plan views to be particularly helpful. In addition, for people working in colder climates, there's a detailed section on winterizing outdoor cooking facilities and taking care of outdoor furnishings when the weather turns cold.



Taken together, these books – all of them published within the past 18 months – represent the awakening of publishers to the fact that outdoor living is an idea whose time has come. For those of us charged with turning our clients' desires into real spaces, I am happy to know that I now have these resources at my fingertips. **WS**

**Mike Farley** is a landscape architect with more than 20 years of experience and is currently a designer/project manager for Claffey Pools in Southlake, Texas. A graduate of Genesis 3's Level I Design School, he holds a degree in landscape architecture from Texas Tech University and has worked as a water-shaper in both California and Texas.





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## *Convenience and Control... The New LXi Heater*



### **Experience the next generation in advanced heating products by Jandy.**

Integrating the most advanced features in every aspect—a technologically innovative control and automation system, lightest and strongest composite material construction—and superior hydraulic design, the LXi brings the future of heating comfort to your pool today.

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