PARALLEL ART FORMS
The Intersection of Garden Design and Photo Composition

by Jason Morse

At some point in our careers, most landscape architects and garden designers develop a few photography skills as an affordable way to document and market our work. About a dozen years ago—when I graduated from relying on cell phone snapshots by taking a class and investing in some camera gear—I found that my study and practice of garden photography was not only making me a better photographer, but also a better designer.

As I studied the generally accepted “rules of composition” in photography, I realized how much they had in common with the principles that I had always been using to inform my landscape designs. When sketching out different design solutions, I would find myself mentally composing photographs of the future garden I was creating. It was a new way for me to see things, and to test out an idea by putting myself in the position of future users of the space.

My interest in photography has helped me get through the pandemic. For the first year or so, I used some of my extra time and energy to take online classes and practice by heading out early in the morning to photograph local parks and gardens, including our fabulous Arboretum. In early 2021, I bought a minivan, set it up for a much pared-down version of “van life,” and began a five-month road trip to visit 32 botanical gardens around the United States. I arranged interviews with the directors of most of these gardens and used that opportunity to request sunrise-hour access to each garden to take photographs. To my surprise, almost all of them agreed.

The following is a sampling of the photos I took on my trip, and a description of some of the ways the designers of these gardens made it easy for me to compose compelling images. I’ve chosen to highlight five of the design principles I learned about in my landscape architecture education—contrast, emphasis, rhythm, movement and enclosure—and to tie each of them to one of the composition rules I learned about in photography class.

Movement is implied in its most literal sense through the use of a paved pathway at the Dallas Arboretum. Linear swaths of tulips appear throughout this garden in the spring, emphasizing the pathways and calling on visitors to continue exploring.

Movement is provided by natural forms at the base of the century-old Banyan Grove at Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, Florida. A recently-completed children’s garden now surrounds these giants, whose dynamic forms invite kids to play and explore.
Design Concept: Movement

*Photo Composition Rule:*
Look for Leading Lines

No matter what you’re designing, the magic ingredient in good composition involves directing the viewer’s eyes around the visual field to focus on the main subject. This is often accomplished through the use of leading lines. In garden design, lines can be hard-edged, like the top of a wall or the center of a runnel, or softer, like the curve of a path or the edge of a planting bed. They can also be created using plants. Lines do the same thing in photographs, moving our eyes around a composition in order to lead us to a focal point or simply creating a dynamic sense of balance to keep our attention inside the frame of the photograph.

Design Concept: Emphasis

*Photo Composition Rule:*
Find a Focal Point

In both photography and garden design, creating a form that draws attention to a single spot in one’s field of vision is a powerful design tool. For designers, it can be a newly installed item like a sculpture, a tree, or a garden structure—or a “borrowed” feature like a mountain in the distance. Photographers can choose any of the above items that come into view but usually try to avoid the temptation of placing the focal point in the middle of the frame. Of equal importance in both disciplines are the objects behind and in front of that focal point. Making sure the viewer can contextualize the focal point by showing a foreground, mid-ground and background helps create harmony and makes the subject stand out. Photographers also get to play with focal length, which allows the camera to focus more or less sharply on an object in relation to others that are closer to or farther away from the lens.

Focal points are most effective when they can be viewed from many angles and distances. This Dale Chihuly fountain at the Atlanta Botanical Garden serves as an organizing element between foreground and background plantings.

Emphasizing water, whether in the form of a still pond or in a dramatic fountain such as this one at the Chicago Botanic Garden, is a common device used by garden designers. This fountain really came alive after sunset!
The repeating forms of columnar water jets bring a sense of dynamic order to the Italian Water Garden at the famous Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania. The visual pattern they create draws the eye around the frame. Repetition can also be created using color. The designers of this rose garden at the Chicago Botanic Garden resisted the temptation to include “one of everything” and instead used a restrained palette to induce a sense of rhythm.

Contrast perfected at the Magnolia Plantation and Gardens, in Charleston. The built form and stark red color of the bridge make it stand out against the soft green foliage in the background. Also, the smooth plane of water contrasts with the busier surrounding forms. Contrasting foliage textures create dynamism in this woodland scene at the magical Chanticleer Garden in Wayne, Pennsylvania. The variegation of the hosta foliage adds another layer to the contrast provided by the beefy texture of the leaves.

Enclosure created by oaks and dripping Spanish moss frames the scene at Magnolia Plantation and Gardens, in Charleston, South Carolina. Enclosure is experienced in layers as visitors are drawn into an enclosed clearing where they can find even more shelter within a gazebo. Enclosure on a more open scale is created by architectural plants framing the view of these beautiful sandstone formations near the Desert Botanical Garden, in Phoenix. Different versions of this view are cleverly framed throughout the property.
Design Concept: Rhythm
Photo Composition Rule: Capture Pattern and Repetition
Whether it’s a heartbeat, the columns on a building, or the stripes on a jacket, our world is full of elements—both natural and artificial—that repeat. These repetitive elements can comfort us by giving order to what may seem like a chaotic world. Patterns occur on almost every scale, from the Earth’s lines of longitude to the coding in our DNA, but in landscapes these elements usually exist somewhere in the middle. Designers can use paving patterns, the timbers in a pergola, or the pickets in a fence to create repetition, but they can also create compelling rhythms using plants. The shape of a leaf, the silhouette of a tree, and even the color of a flower can create rhythm if thoughtfully repeated. For photographers, it’s simple: Just seek these patterns out and find a way to get them into the shot.

Design Concept: Contrast
Photo Composition Rule: Include Negative Space
I think the most common mistake I see in planting design is a failure to appreciate the power of contrast. Varying the colors, textures and forms of adjacent plant groupings makes them pop in relation to each other. This works for built forms as well, especially with smartly applied color. It works on a larger scale too, in the form of negative space. Landscape photographers look for negative space in paved areas, lawns, water, or the sky to help their subjects stand out. Designers can create it by including these elements or, in the case of the sky or natural bodies of water, by opening up views to it. Negative space creates calm by giving our eyes a place to rest, and it emphasizes the dynamic qualities of the “busier” elements adjacent to it.

Design Concept: Enclosure
Photo Composition Rule: Frame the Subject
Whether it’s due to a basic human need for shelter or because we just like to control our environments, people tend to put things around other things. It makes us feel safe and, in the case of landscape design, can also protect us from the elements. We designers accomplish this with fences, hedges, pergolas and tree canopies. Finding the right balance between enclosed spaces and the openness of the outdoor environment is among the most challenging aspects of garden and landscape design. Photographers are drawn to enclosure for the same reasons but also know it can help us to direct the viewer’s eye toward our subject by seeming to draw a circle around it. In both design and photography, use of the overhead plane to achieve a sense of enclosure is both the most effective and elusive version of this device.

In conclusion, it’s no great secret that most forms of visual expression—from architecture and garden design to fashion and photography—rely upon some of the same basic design principles. But for me, creating an outdoor space, and then learning to photograph it well, gave me new insights into how to approach my work. Going across the country to photograph some of the most compelling built landscapes in the world has opened up my thinking about both design and photography and given me some great stories to tell.

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