

Making the Most Out of Small Outdoor Spaces

By MaraLee Olson & Steven G. Ziegler



before & after



"I have such a small space, I really don't need design—there is nothing that can be done" is a statement we repeatedly hear as practicing landscape architects and garden designers. A common perception is that small spaces are limiting, too hard to work with; or that they do not warrant the input of an architect or designer. We find just the opposite in our design office—often it is those small spaces that bring out the most creative and unique solutions. The challenge is to be inventive, and to make the most out of very limited spaces. Key concepts in creating a satisfying small space are: the doubling and/or tripling of functions, simplifying, and creating lushness and intimacy through detail.

Making elbowroom.

In tight quarters, space can be saved and even created by doubling or tripling the functions of an area. For example, offsetting a raised planter, and separating it from a driveway with a change in pavement that connects to a breezeway or entrance provides: 1) a visually and physically safe space for pedestrians to walk; 2) room for car doors to be opened, and passengers to get in and out; and 3) a visual connection between the architecture and open space. As simple as it seems, pavement can enhance the experience of a space, as well as the green aspects of the property through the creative use of drainage and permeable materials. In small spaces, it is important to maximize every square inch; not just in terms of the quantity of space, but also in quality, and what it offers the users.

Knowing when to move up or lay low.

Grade changes in small areas are critical to how they feel and function, and simplification often makes them look and feel larger than they are. Depending

upon circumstances, there are times when being above a space looking down, or being lower and within it, will each have a very different effect. In the case of a landscape that slopes down to an entrance, it often makes sense to push the landscape back to create a quiet, horizontal space that slows energy and creates room for rest. When a landscape slopes up to an entrance, the opposite is true; lifting can create quiet separation and a horizontal plane that settles the building and entrance into the landscape.

Celebrating diversity.

Diversity in plant selection, construction materials, architectural elements, and uses can enrich a space and broaden the experience of being there. Container plantings can be decorative and functional, as can retaining walls and garden borders, when they are planted with edible plants, herbs, and cut flowers. A small space is typically viewed or experienced in close proximity. Therefore, creating a unique experience with detail such as a lushly planted urn placed by a front door can mark a special welcome home. Lawn and other foot-tolerant ground covers do not have to be in and of themselves—when used in tandem with other landscape elements, they can create a quiet space that sets off gardens and landscape areas, while still functioning as a play area or sunbathing spot. Extending retaining walls and raised planters out into the landscape where they can intersect with walkways allows for the experience of walking through gardens while going to and from building entrances.

With creativity and a willingness to think outside of the box, it is possible to transform even the most sterile small space into a highly functional and enjoyable one.



before & after



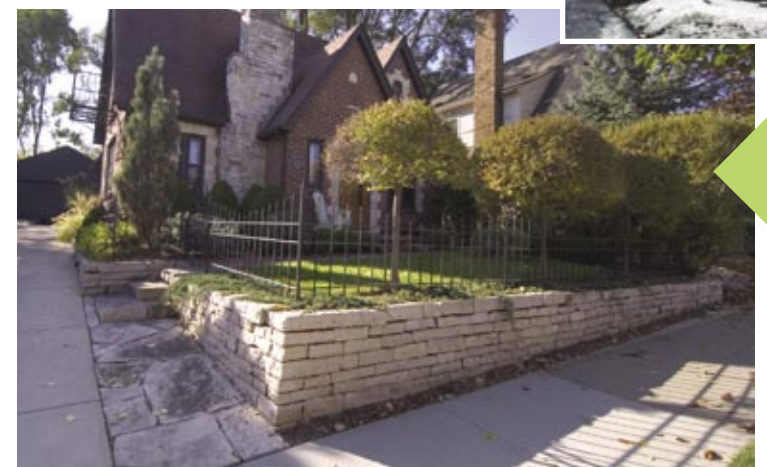
before & after



MaraLee Olson is a registered landscape architect and associate, and Steven G. Ziegler is a principal landscape architect for ZDA, Inc., Landscape Architecture, 4797 Capitol View Road, Middleton. Call (608) 831-5098 or visit zdainc.com. Photographs submitted by ZDA, Inc.



before & after



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