

# THE POWER OF PLACE



## DESIGNING LANDSCAPES TO REFLECT SITE HISTORY AND LOCAL CULTURE

BY REKA BADGER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY RODERICK WYLIE, MARION BRENNER AND HOLLY LAPERE

LIVING ECOSYSTEMS WITH a cultural component, gardens lend green relief to city cores and suburban yards. When well-designed, cultivated landscapes not only define outdoor rooms and enhance local architecture, they also provide habitat for people and wildlife alike.

Historically, garden designers labored in the shadow of architects and builders, their work often considered an afterthought.

Since the adoption of the term “landscape architect” in 1903, however, the craft has been recognized for the high level of expertise it requires.

While landscape architects hold an advanced degree and sometimes specialize in public projects, certified garden designers tend to focus on residential work. Both must master the principles of design and horticulture, as well as the underpinnings

**ABOVE** Reinforcing a sense of place, hardy grasses and native Matilija poppy flank a wooden deck in the Hollywood Hills by Surfacedesign of San Francisco.

San Francisco, and garden designer Margie Grace, owner of Santa Barbara’s Grace Design Associates, approach each

of engineering, climatology and even social science.

Landscape architect James Lord, co-founder of Surfacedesign in





Grace Design Associates creates inviting outdoor spaces that also include water and shelter for wildlife.





project with a sense of discovery as they consider potential designs and the needs of end users. Both are committed to transforming bare acreage, gardens-gone-wrong and urban eyesores into beautiful, healthy landscapes.

"It's the ideal profession to really understand the way we live," declared Lord, who co-founded Surfacdesign with his partner, landscape architect Roderick Wyllie, and architect Geoff di Girolamo.

"What's interesting about landscape architecture is it's a living thing. It's not only about plant material, it's about systems:

water, catchment, microclimates, everything that impacts the environment, both built and unbuilt."

Since its founding in 2006, the company has completed dozens of private installations and such public projects as San Francisco's Lands End Visitor Center and Auckland, New Zealand's airport gateway.

"What we do is culturally sensitive," Lord explains. "It's about listening to people, to their stories. I believe you always want to recall the history of the site."

To enrich the landscape for an iconic building in Hawaii, Lord incorporated

**LEFT** Grace Design creates a natural stone path and a variety of drought tolerant plants to turn a small space into a welcoming oasis.

elements from Hawaiian creation stories. He designed a horizontal water feature that evokes the

ever-present ocean and mirrors the region's sky, trees and luminous light.

"At the site's opening, the [native Hawaiians] gave me the biggest hug," Lord remembers, "and said, 'You actually listened to us. We can bring our kids here and talk about what's going on in the bigger picture.' It makes me tear up every time."

In 2011, Lord's firm tackled what he calls a "glow-in-the-dark project," because of the site's degraded condition. It was in Monterey, Mexico, where an old blast furnace had been converted into the Museum of Steel.

"It's one of my touchstone projects," Lord says. "We treated it as a giant archeological dig. We discovered huge pieces of molten steel and machinery, and figured out how to use them. It was the ultimate in sustainability, because there was no budget for landscaping and materials."

Among the treasures unearthed were chunks of raw ore that Lord grouped together over underground misters. The effect resembles drifting steam, but cool moisture envelops the rocks, offering visitors a refreshing spritz on hot days. Lord also incorporated steel plates that once clad the building into a 218-yard-long fountain built on a diagonal along the route of the factory's train tracks.

"It has this weird optical effect where the water looks like it's running uphill," Lord laughs. "It's an expression of the train... this dynamic piece that references what was going on there originally."

"It isn't until you really get into a landscape that you understand the storytelling," he adds. "That's when the authenticity of a place can move you. That's when we get really excited about what we do."

For Margie Grace, designing a landscape is about creating a habitat where people can play, socialize and contemplate nature, and wildlife can find adequate food and shelter.

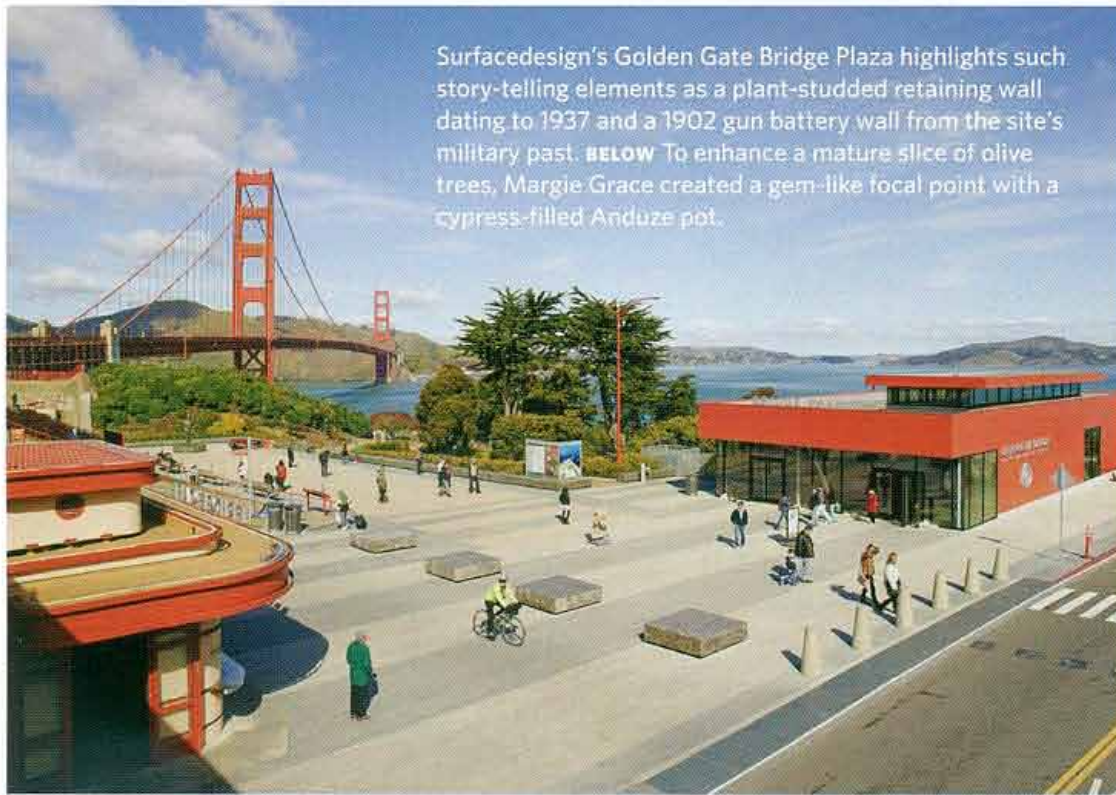
"It's not about us, the designers," Grace says, "it's about the land and those who live there, and capturing a sense of place. We always consider natural land forms and include as many components of the native biome as we can."





A water catchment system doubles as eye-catching architectural elements in this innovative project by Surfacedesign.





Surfacedesign's Golden Gate Bridge Plaza highlights such story-telling elements as a plant-studded retaining wall dating to 1937 and a 1902 gun battery wall from the site's military past. **BELOW** To enhance a mature slice of olive trees, Margie Grace created a gem-like focal point with a cypress-filled Anduze pot.



When Grace assesses a site, she quickly decides what broad strokes the project requires. Reading such environmental cues as sunburned plants, soggy soil indicating poor drainage and the character of the neighborhood, she creates a brief narrative.

"I have a story for everything," Grace smiles. "I can't figure out the details of a project until I get the feel of the place and then I can refine the ideas."

When hired to refurbish an historic estate garden, Grace, who is a licensed landscape contractor, took her direction from elements already in place. She and her crew retiled a sunken fountain and cosmetically restored its associated runnel. To reinforce the garden's original Mediterranean revival theme, they inlaid a Moorish star in the brick courtyard and built an elegant tiled fountain to match.

At the front of the house, a vehicle gate in a barricade-like stucco wall offered the only convenient access.

"We needed it to be more people-friendly," Grace remembers, "so we designed a pedestrian gate of see-through wrought iron. Now you can find the front door and there's separation between the vehicular and pedestrian circulation."

When hired to landscape a new home near a butterfly preserve, Grace welcomed the chance to help mitigate the impact of the development. To support birds and butterflies, her crew crafted shallow, bubbling fountains from slabs of local stone by modifying them to re-circulate water from an underground basin.

They planted native butterfly weed, as well as drought-tolerant succulents and a variety of colorful grasses, throughout the yard. Several months after completing the project, Grace happily counted more than 100 monarch butterfly pupae hanging under the cap of the perimeter fence.

Like most conscientious landscape professionals, Margie Grace and James Lord respect the inherent qualities of a site and strive to create a design that reflects a sense of place. They derive profound satisfaction from seeing their work come alive with people, plants and native critters, all vital elements of a living, leafy ecosystem. **CH**