



THE MIDCENTURY MODERN LANDSCAPE

ETHNE  
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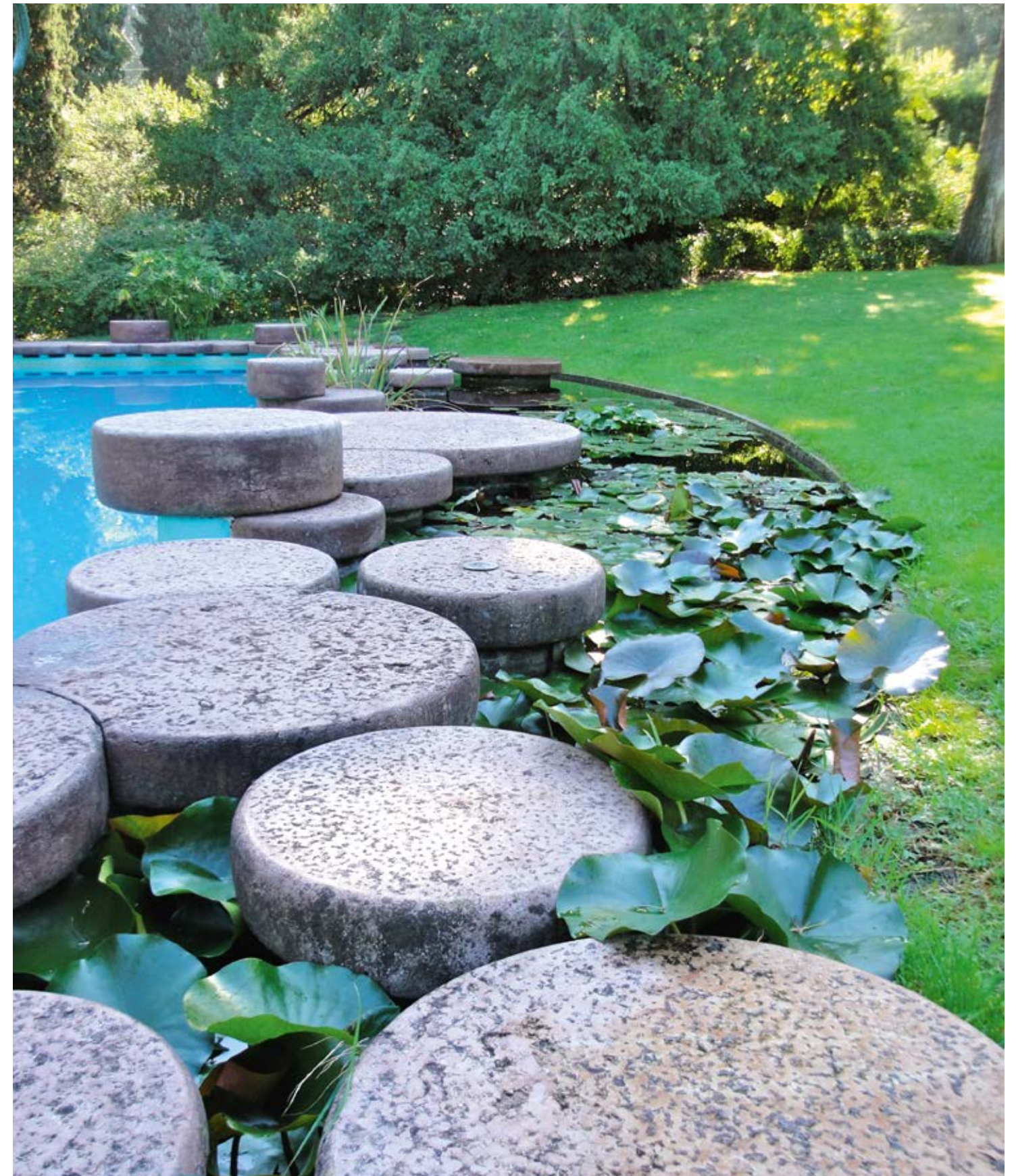


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### Plants naturally

Some years ago, in my book *The Autumn Garden*, I quoted Jens Jensen, who wrote that the building blocks of the garden were “the contours of the earth, the vegetation that covers it, the changing season, the rays of the setting sun, and the afterglow, and the light of the moon.” Jensen, as described earlier, took his inspiration for the projects he developed directly from the site, so much so that his hand is hardly discernable in the landscape. A number of landscape professionals working with architects during the midcentury held to this ideal. This approach is most

adaptable to larger pieces of land, or so you might think. But in the late 1970s a new “natural” approach to garden design was evolving out of the pre-war work done in Germany by Lange, Foerster, and later, Richard Hansen at Weißenstephan. It was promoted to the world at large by international garden festivals, still hosted today, by a different German town each year. These festivals provide the opportunity for growers, designers, artists and craftspeople to display their talents; for growers it is an opportunity to introduce their newest plant cultivars. And when the festival ends, the park remains a public asset!



Midcentury landscape design and architecture certainly put people in the center of frame, but it would be wrong to think it was done to the exclusion of plants. In fact, the relaxed groundplans and affinity for native and site-appropriate plants extolled in the post-war years continues to inform gardeners now. *Opposite*, in a Californian garden, succulents, cacti and other plants from semi-arid regions are woven together through a matrix of clump-forming grasses.

Architecture and plantsmanship intersected when Flavin Architects worked with Zen Associates to design and build a freestanding conservatory as a bonsai studio. The result bears strong influences of Japanese design filtered through Philip Johnson’s famous Glass House.

Assess the virtues and shortcomings of the site; get out the pencil and paper and list, sketch and dream. Brookes was targeting the owner of a small garden that was probably part of a new development. Given the never-ending need for housing and expansion on both sides of the Atlantic, what he wrote then, rooted as it was in the new midcentury modern way of life, has relevance to today’s homeowner.

Reading Church’s *Gardens are for People* along with Brookes’s books it is clear that they shared many of the same design principles when it came to planting a garden. Brookes warned against “do-it-yourself design packs [...] mass-produced screen walling [...] plastic carpets—like grass and false flowers” (did he,

in 1960, see the big box DIY stores coming?) For his part, Church advised, “The garden owner is being constructive about his problems when he analyzes what he really wants as disassociated from what tradition may have convinced him he ought to have [...] There are no set rules, no finger of shame pointed at the gardener who doesn’t follow an accepted pattern.”

Both were for a sensible use of plants, recommending most strongly that they not be pushed up against boundary lines, or squashed along the foundations of the house. “The relationship between the house and garden is maintained and emphasized by light, air, and visual space flowing freely from one to the other.”





At the end of the Second World War there was expectation in some quarters that the United States would descend into recession as it had after the First World War. Government expenditure at the end of the Second World War dropped 80 per cent, from a 1944 high of \$135 billion to \$25 billion (in 1951 prices), and demobilization happened quickly, yet there was no recession—this time the government was prepared. Not only was there was a speedy repurposing of industry and manufacturing, from creating weapons of war to arming the public with a vast new array of consumer goods, but veterans could draw unemployment compensation while they job-hunted, or receive grants to complete their education. Government-guaranteed, low-interest bank loans available through the G.I. Bill were available to veterans so that they could set up businesses or buy houses. Individuals' savings were high while their private debt was low, and this, combined with a desire to spend on now readily available and affordable products (chiefly automobiles), soon put manufacturing on a road to peacetime prosperity, creating jobs which in turn encouraged an increase in consumer spending.

Austerity was a thing of the past, and growth was the goal, although economic forecasters urged caution, worried that employment would not keep up and spending would suffer. They were quickly proved wrong. Once the wheels of the peacetime bus started turning, consumers piled on board, as one economist observed, "buying whatever they could lay their hands on." With little to spend their money on during the war years, people's savings grew.

## WEST COAST MODERNISM AND OUTDOOR LIVING

*Opposite*, a low-slung ranch house makes the most of the West Coast's balmy climate for outdoor living. Located in West Los Angeles and designed and built in 1956 by Cliff May for his family, it blended the best attributes of old Spanish colonial ranch houses with new concepts in easy living. The surrounding gardens were designed by Thomas Church to specific purposes, including a dining terrace, a social terrace and children's play area, all of which related to the layout of the rooms of the house. It has been the prototype for houses like it built all over the world.





The design tropes of midcentury style hold enormous appeal, even in climates that are cooler than those in California or the Mediterranean. The remodel of an Eichler-designed home, *above*, with its wall of glass, is a contemporary model for the blurring of interior and exterior space. The spaces are equal but separated by design: the Cubist-like geometry of the courtyard décor on this page distinguishes it from the softer, warmer mood of the interior.

Extending the roof to cover the patio, *opposite*, is another way to unite the living spaces; sections of the roof, both inside and out, are left open to flood the rooms with sunlight; the interior one is glazed, but the exterior is not. This was a favorite design feature in Cliff May houses.







Clutter is a thing of the past, and midcentury modern's simple lines and easy-going practicality suit today's style of living. Knoll's canvas butterfly chairs, *right*, take pride of place next to a Donald Wexler pool; an aluminum table and upholstered chair from the Eames Group lift a small balcony space, *above*; and the simple outline of perennially popular wire frame furniture pieces compliments the pool terrace of an Eliot Noyes-designed house, *opposite*.



# MAKE IT MIDCENTURY, BUT MAKE IT YOURS

The invention of the wheel changed the way people lived. It was the first stop on the road to the industrial revolution, but its main impact was to take the grind out of daily tasks—from moving building materials to a new site to delivering food to market. One can only imagine how having a wheel signaled to your neighbors that you were part of the new generation. It might seem a stretch to say that the wheel had similar significance in the midcentury modern period. Mobility equaled modernity, and pieces of furniture wheeled and thus easily movable were all the fashion, particularly for anyone adopting the outdoor lifestyle. A drinks cart on wheels was a must-have item and, like the car in the driveway with its white-wall tires, sent a signal of having arrived at the good life.

Outdoor furnishing and decor has come a long way since the early days of midcentury modern outdoor living. In the period of optimism and experiment following the end of the Second World War, it wasn't just the building trades that benefited from the material developments borne of the war effort. Many factories and producers turned their attentions to interior and, naturally enough, exterior design, and to furnishing the new homes being built. Here was a ready market, and it was a hungry one, with a huge appetite for fresh, new designs that underlined the new sense of confidence and a readiness to have fun.

Today, when we look at midcentury modern period furnishing, there is humor and wit in the design. Relieved of the ornate,

Make it midcentury, but make it yours





*Opposite and overleaf*, British landscape designer Kate Eyre breaks the open plan space of a London garden into definite spaces for entertaining or relaxing, making a confined, urban space appear larger. In a Dutch garden, pavers laid widthways visually expand a long narrow garden and by repeating the shape and rippled surface of the canal outside the garden perimeter also extend it into the near landscape.



## DEFINING SPACES

“[A]s most of the comforts and all the elegancies and refinements of life consist in attention to numerous small matters which are, in themselves, insignificant, but which together compose a beautiful and agreeable whole, so the expression and character of a garden will be cultivated and tasteful or otherwise according as its minor features are well arranged and well-executed.”

By the mid-twentieth century, not much had changed in the thinking of garden designers since Edward Kemp wrote these words in his 1850 book *How to Lay Out a Small Garden*. Truthfully, not much has changed as we approach the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

Every garden design begins with a plan, one that is more than “I’m going to make a garden here,” but one to which you bring your checklist of needs and your expectations. As in: I need a space to entertain/to relax/to give the children a playspace/to collect snowdrops... and I expect that I will give all/some/very little of my free time to its upkeep. Doubtless somewhere on the list will be your wish for a garden that makes best use of the site and which complements the house. When I was growing up, I was repeatedly told to do one thing at a time and do it well. Tough on a child possessed of a wide-ranging curiosity, but something that midcentury garden-makers seemed to understand. Tommy Church was one of them: “Do one thing well and let all others be subordinate