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Places

Title

The Popular Yard

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4mc5h97p>

Journal

Places, 4(3)

ISSN

0731-0455

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Publication Date

1987-10-01

Peer reviewed

The Popular Yard

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If I were to write a history of American vernacular landscape architecture, I would mention Olmsted for one reason only: he belonged to a generation of designers who redefined the role of landscape architecture. Before their appearance, a garden or a park or even a whole estate was seen as a work of art based on well-established aesthetic principles. By the second half of the nineteenth century, landscape architecture had in part become the art of designing public parks or gardens accessible to all citizens in search of relaxation and sociability in a setting of picturesque greenery.

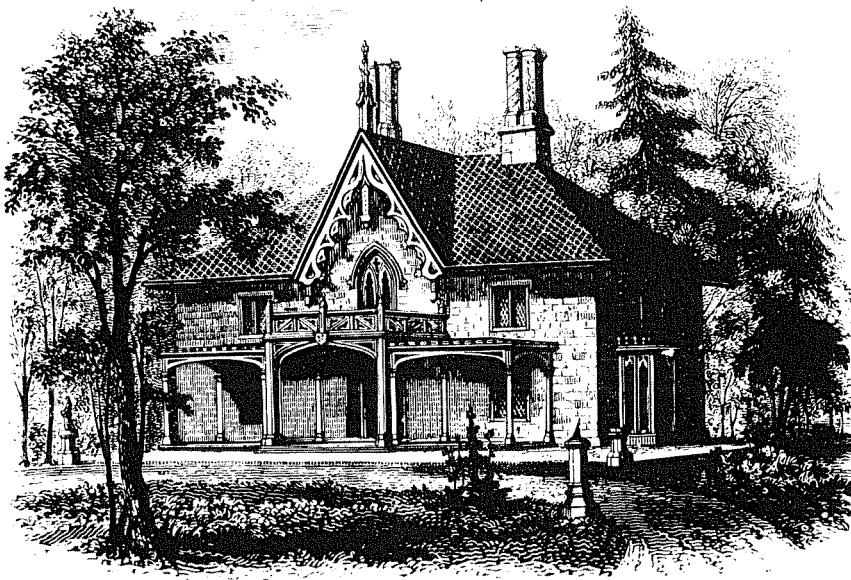
The transition, easy to understand and applaud, took time. Downing, even though he was one of the early

advocates of public parks, still thought of them in terms of art: places where the public could be educated by seeing sculpture and painting and formal garden design. The switch in the definition of the role of landscape architecture first affected the private garden, which had become an environment for informal pleasure before the public park had come into existence.

To people of every age and class, the private garden has always been something to take care of, to study, to design, and to be proud of, and its produce—fruits and flowers and vegetables and herbs—have always been important to the household. Yet I believe that before Andrew Jackson Downing became influential, most Americans took their

garden very solemnly. They saw it as a laboratory and a workshop and a chapel: a secluded place where they spent hours of concentration, labor, reflection, and reverent study. It was probably in the 1830s that Americans first began to derive a new delight from gardening and to think of the garden as an outdoor room, an extension of the house.

There was a difference in how each class reacted to the discovery of the recreational garden. As we know, Downing was fascinated by clients with money and taste. The large villas or houses and the elaborate gardens he designed were for wealthy families who did a great deal of entertaining. The rooms were for the display of handsome furniture and works of art, and the



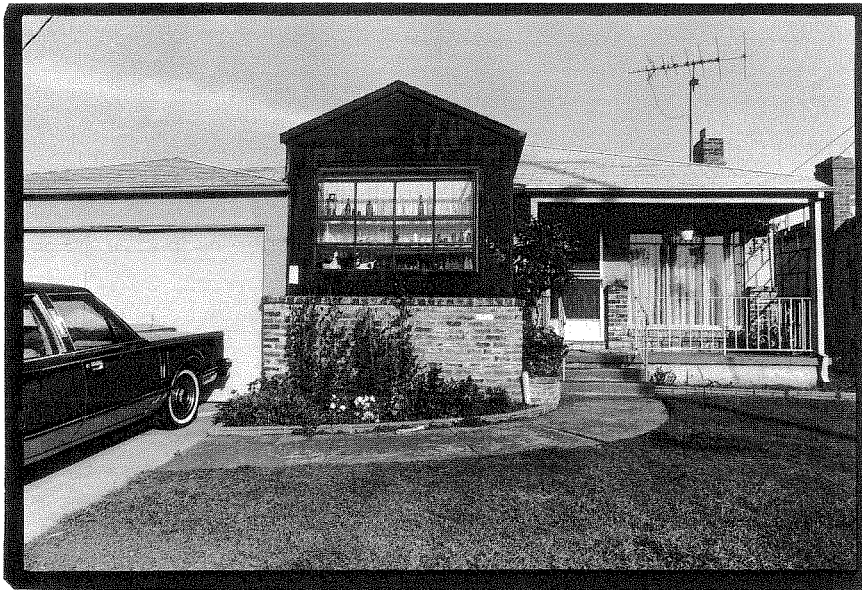
I From a Pattern Book by A. J. Downing; The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum Library: Collection of Printed Books. Courtesy of Dell Upton

romantic landscape, with its wide lawns and exotic plants, was to impress guests with the wealth and refinement of the host. The landscaped garden, for all its would-be natural appearance, was no longer a simple work of art. It had become a kind of botanical museum, a collection of curiosities and surprises that the guests discovered as they admired the view or wandered along the winding paths. Part of this new emphasis on entertainment was the introduction of the games that we still associate with the private lawn: croquet and archery and tennis and bowling and badminton. All these amateur sports appeared in the landscaped gardens of the rich long before they were allowed in public parks.

This ongoing adjustment to circumstances is to be seen in the evolution, over the last hundred years, of the blue-collar home environment. It has been buffeted and transformed not only by changes in taste but by economic and technological factors over which few of us have any control. Let me remind you of what has happened to that very utilitarian, unsightly back yard. The horse has gone, the cow has gone, the chickens have gone thanks to the advent of the automobile, the laundry did away with the clothesline, and the accumulation of trash and garbage has been replaced by the neat black plastic bag deposited at the curb. As a

result of these and other developments, the American back yard for a period of a decade or two ceased to have a definite role: it lingered as an empty, neglected space where the abandoned automobile was stored and the dog was allowed to run.

The front yard also underwent radical change. Street life, once so entertaining and neighborly, lost its charm: too much traffic, too much noise, too many strangers, street lights too bright and harsh, all combined to drive the family out of its garden, off the porch, and into the air-conditioned house. Then the newer houses built since World War II had two-car garages and concrete driveways that took over half of the front yard. The gas company ripped up what was left of



2 Photographs by Miwon Kwon

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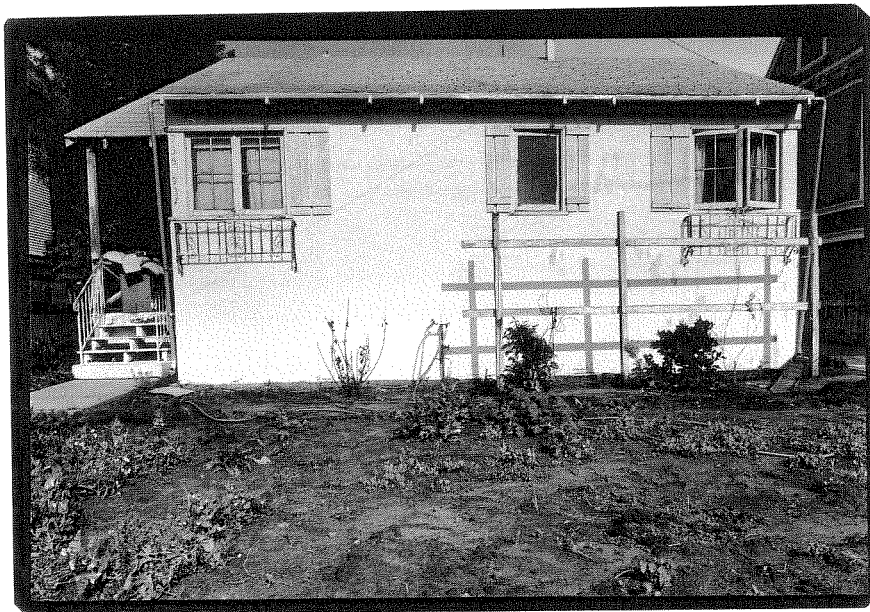
the lawn, and stray newspapers and wrappers and Kleenex littered the flower beds.

The family eventually responded to these changes by turning its back on the street and devising a new kind of space for relaxation in the back yard. A seven-foot fence or wall was built in back of the kitchen. There was a deck and an arbor and a constantly changing composition of bricks and railroad ties and outdoor grills and masses of flowers bought at a low price from the nearby supermarket. Plants dangled overhead, and there was a profusion of shade and color and greenery. And only rarely was there a stretch of lawn, brought in the form of rolls of turf and installed in the course of an after-

noon. Someday we will chronicle this miraculous transformation: a thoroughly vernacular event inspired by nursery advertising, by the influence of immigrants from other parts of the world, and by a new concept of outdoor leisure. I am not sure that the landscape professions are even yet aware of the extent of this revolution and of how imaginative many of these low-income back yards have become.

What happened to that remnant of the front yard is even more dramatic. Over the last two generations we have seen houses on a residential street or in a subdivision come closer together, and as they approach the street and each other, they seem to enclose the street and give it an architectural quality, even

though it is often planted with rows of trees. All that is left of the traditional front yard is a small plot of ground between the house and the sidewalk either covered with sod or a layer of heavy gravel. Where I live many families plant a typical local shrub or tree—a juniper or a chamisa or a Russian olive; sometimes they place large volcanic rocks in the midst of the gravel or a sensational specimen of dead wood retrieved from the mountains or the desert. The effect is often attractive: a view down a curving street of new houses with these unobtrusive plantings has variety and neatness, no weeds are allowed to grow, and only rarely is a car parked on this patch of land. By comparison with the old front yard, however, these new spaces are totally impersonal.



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No one sits there, no personal objects are left lying around, and beds of flowers are few.

How to explain these discreet ornamental displays in front of every self-respecting house in the American subdivision? My belief is that the front yard has now become a space dedicated to showing that we are good citizens, responsible members of the community. What goes on in the back yard is strictly private, and the palisade around it protects the family from inquisitive eyes. But the space in front is the image we present to the neighbors and to the public at large. It is once again a form of communication.

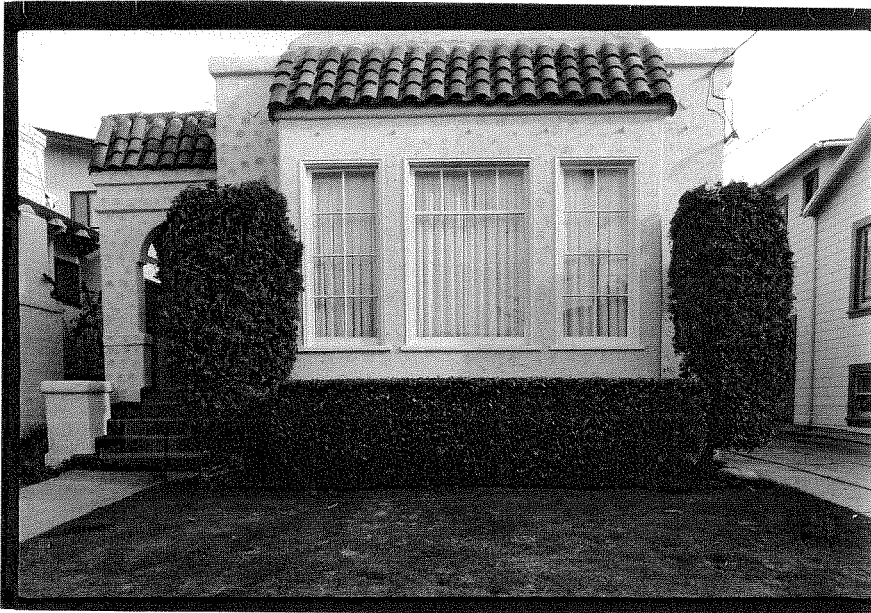
As I have suggested, the vernacular dwelling always has a close

relationship with the street and its activities. The larger houses of the well-to-do seek to detach themselves from the street and often surround themselves with walls or a barrier of vegetation. But the wage earner's dwelling depends on the street in many ways. Its broad concrete driveway, its garage, and its conspicuous house number make it clear that it considers the street a public space, and so its small vestigial front yard is now no longer used for domestic purposes but for identifying with the neighborhood. This is where a family's name sign is placed or election placards are staked. This is where owners show their loyalty to the local environment by reproducing a small-scale desert or a growth of indigenous vegetation. In some

neighborhoods there are religious statues. The symbols vary according to the region and its history: ox yokes, wagon wheels, out-of-date plows suggesting the pioneer background of the community. New England has its own front yard symbols, so has the South.

Much of this contemporary front yard landscaping is the work of builders and developers in collaboration with wholesale nurserymen and represents an attempt to give the new development an orderly and lived-in character to attract buyers. Nevertheless, it is widely imitated by individual home owners, for the style reflects the taste of many Americans. All of us have heard the denunciations of middle- and working-class residential

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districts, their monotony and sterility and lack of any colorful street life. I myself see nothing objectionable in the quiet and peaceful tone of the average residential street during the hours of work and school, and many critics ignore the existence of the back yard as a place for recreation and sociability. We are all aware of how the automobile has altered every aspect of our environment, from the location of the place of work to the design of the dwelling. What we sometimes fail to recognize is how successfully we have often responded to those changes. I mentioned that the generation of Olmsted taught us how the park and garden could be redesigned for public accessibility and participation. Our own

generation has tackled another problem: how greenery, sometimes on the most modest scale, can restore a human quality to the increasingly artificial urban environment of work and living. A strip of lawn, a row of flowering fruit trees, a bed of flowers, these are small elements in the overall city landscape, not to be compared in beauty and importance with the parks and playgrounds and recreation areas that landscape architects are creating. Yet such green accents are becoming more and more common. We see them in parking lots and drive-ins, we see them in office buildings and outside of factories and stores, and their cumulative effect is impressive. To me they produce a new and welcome symbolism in our cities:

greenery as a way of communicating with others, which tells the public that we are thinking of them, thinking of the community and its appearance, and asking for goodwill and approval. That is why I like these vernacular touches of nature, small and temporary though many of them may be. Those miniature, somewhat standardized front yards are valuable: they allow the home owner to pay his or her respects to public opinion, just as they allow the commercial or industrial establishment, the shopping center, the condominium to contribute to our visual pleasure. As landscape architecture in America continues to expand and to take on the design of larger and more imposing projects throughout our environment,



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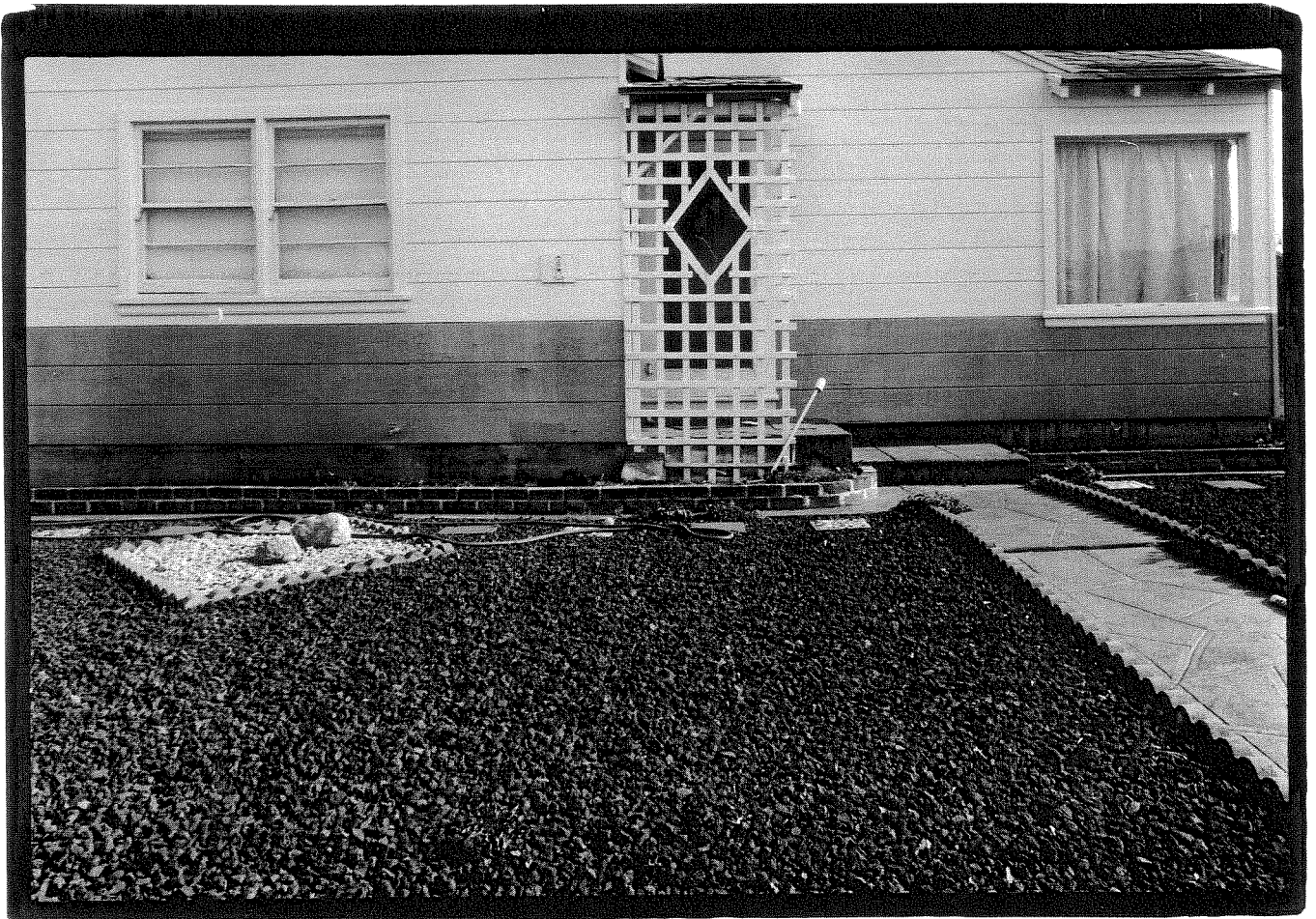
I hope it will protect and foster the smallest and most intimate places for greenery: the individual dwelling. Mass-produced architecture has eliminated all individually designed communication. Landscape architecture, of a very new and informal kind, can restore it. It can give our houses and streets and cities a humanity they badly need.

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