

KATHRYN MATHEWSON
SECRET GARDENS
SAN FRANCISCO, CA

By Lee Geistlinger, Assistant Editor

Kathryn Mathewson says that she did not go into business for herself so much because she wanted to as because she had to: “There was no one doing what I felt people needed and wanted – evolving, nurturing gardens.

“Our military society has not had room for women’s strengths to blossom and has not developed balanced people. Therefore, our outdoor spaces are more like war zones than healthy, tranquil spaces.” But **Mathewson** feels the pendulum is swinging and women in the industry are in an excellent position to contribute to this more peaceful society.

Mathewson formed her own companies, **Kathryn Mathewson Associates** Landscapes (landscape design) and **Secret Gardens** (Landscape construction) in 1979 after jobs that included teaching landscape architecture in Harlem, NY, and a year in Singapore designing urban landscapes. Returning to the U.S. in 1978, **Mathewson** shouldered the responsibility of coordinating construction for San Francisco’s Pier 39, a specialty-store and restaurant complex.

Here **Mathewson** developed a taste for all kinds of construction. “I realized the contribution women could make with construction. On the site the egos of the men would clash, and little would happen,” she recalls. “So I would just hang in there and attempt to build a consensus. Women can bounce more emotional balls at one time, and they work well with people. Men tend to push and go in a straight line – the bulldozer approach.

But **Mathewson** remembers that she had to fight for acceptance by her new peers. “As a woman, it was difficult in the beginning,” she says. “Men in construction are kind of a club, and they keep women out; construction is much more difficult than horticulture in that respect.” Yet, **Mathewson** quickly learned the rules of the game and used them to her advantage, gaining admittance to the “inner circle.”

Mathewson believes that women must learn to assert themselves in the workplace. “Women are trained to not have people dislike them. But this is the way things are, and you have to accept it. You have to put on personalities that vary with the person you are dealing with; it is like putting on a different set of clothes.” She feels that earning the respect of clients and employees is more important than gaining their favor. This attitude is consistent with her design approach, which places the needs of the space and the client before the ego of the designer.

Mathewson likens her design philosophy to her career path. “Generally, men take a straight career route and feel they have to show some signs of success early, but my path has been much more curved and questioning.” Her career wanderings have convinced her that one of the most important aspects of the business is to help others in their own

development. “Every person is a garden and needs to be nurtured and developed,” she says. “If that is not happening, then what are we doing? People are more important than plants.”

Suppressing your ego and helping others has enormous rewards, she notes. “I attended the funeral of a client whose garden I had designed and built,” she recalls. “The man’s son gave an eulogy that said how much the garden meant to his father, how it was a culmination of his desire to give the best to his friends and family. I just sat there, almost in tears. I had touched someone’s life, helped them realize their potential. How many people have these kinds of experiences? This tells you that you are moving in the right direction.”

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