

SOFTENING THE BAUHAUS STYLE

By Kathryn Mathewson

Tom Wolfe, social commentator and best-selling author who wrote From Bauhaus to Our House, claims that since World War II Americans have allowed their artistic tastes to be controlled by a few designers. He calls this group, which includes about 3000 members centered in New York City, “the design compound.” It is a close-knit group, he says, that rarely communicates outside its own boundaries and that gives awards and recognition only to the chosen few who are insiders.

Americans embraced the Bauhaus, or International Style, after World War II as a major style for our architecture, interiors, furniture, and gardens. The style began in Germany as a socialistic movement whose purpose was to create for the middle class to the exclusion of the aristocracy. Such aristocratic ornamentation as roofs, front doors, crafted details, and plants were removed from architectural design and replaced with mass-produced, industrialized materials. Individual differences and comfort were not important to this style Americans embraced it so thoroughly, however, that it became the style for American corporate buildings as well as private residences at all levels of income. It has dominated design for over thirty years, and we are only just beginning to come out of it.

The relationship between this design group and gardens is subtle but important to understand if we are to progress towards gardens that meet our culture’s social and emotional needs as well as regional, climatic, and environmental differences. The compound’s influence is especially evident in the starkness of our urban spaces and public sculpture. No American city is immune.

The thinking that has allowed our society’s quiet acceptance of this style has produced a similar influence in the landscape and garden industry. A subordinate group has subtly controlled the schools and thus the industry, which includes the major landscape architecture and construction firms and the major suppliers. Home owners, designers, gardeners, contractors, nurserymen, salesmen – everyone interested and involved in gardening and landscaping are affected. We need to uncover the intricate web that has been woven by the International Style. It has made it difficult to build beautiful gardens, especially in public spaces. I hope the ideas that follow will help those of us deeply committed to the garden and its importance in our society to redirect the individuals and institutions that have a large influence on our gardens and landscapes. The problems that remain after this long period of design are complex and will take years to correct. For example:

1. Craftsmen have not been able to find work because the International Style has encouraged “clean lines” and industrialized materials rather than hand labor. Therefore, craftsmen have had to find other means of employment; rarely have they passed on their skills to the next generation. It is difficult today to find

- garden craftsmen who can build rock walls and waterfalls, or lay flagstone and brick artistically.
2. Horticulturists and gardeners have been treated similarly. The International Style considered plants an unnecessary aristocratic tradition. Only a few species were used, usually in straight-lines with low maintenance the dominant focus. Horticulturists have been considered the least important teachers in the landscape architecture schools. Classes about plants are isolated from the design classes; therefore, we find few people who combine a knowledge and artistic sense of plants with the ability to design spaces for them.
 3. Drawing and history have been deemphasized in the design schools for nearly two generations. This has resulted in buildings and gardens with few unusual or interesting details, a lack of understanding of proportion and scale, and a narrow historical perspective. Students are encouraged to emulate the living professionals rather than to look to the past for models of excellence.
 4. There is not enough collaboration, understanding, and respect for the various skills needed to create a garden or a landscape that will last for generations. The engineer, architect, landscape architect, landscape designer, general contractor, landscape contractor, craftsman, horticulturist, gardener, nurseryman, and supplier are isolated from each other because they each exist in a professional hierarchy. Building a garden is like making a movie; the talents of many people are needed. Each needs to be treated equally and given fair recognition.
 5. There is too much emphasis on designing for fashion and on impressing one's own professional peers. Designs are often built for awards rather than for the beauty, needs and comfort of the users. Gardeners, consultants, artists, and engineers rarely are rewarded or even recognized for their contributions. This is one of the reasons their contribution has been minimal in our landscape and gardens.
 6. The designing and building phases of creating a garden are not understood by the groups that control each portion of the landscape industry. The design group is the only one that crosses over the professional hierarchical lines and brings various skills together. Somehow our society has forgotten that the best gardens in the world were built when the designer was intimately involved with the construction and when the garden was built over many years.
 7. The schools do not cross hierarchical boundaries to offer multi-disciplinary courses and degrees. There are too few schools for gardeners, landscape contractors, designers, and builders.

In the early 1980s one of the leaders of the design compound, architect Philip Johnson, designed a major building that helped to break the hold the International Style has had on this country. The AT&T building in New York City was designed with a six-story arch over the front door. Following the construction of this building, we have begun to see new architecture in every major city with such classical elements as columns, arches, roofs, moldings, and detailed front doors. The AT&T building announced the beginning of the end of the International Style. But because this is a time of transition for artistic styles and since no style has yet led the way, it is an important historical period for all our arts including the art of garden design. Now is the time for designers to demonstrate the

courage of their own convictions by creating new regional and individual designs and not accepting what the compound dictates.

My small company in San Francisco has tried to do just that. An early project was working with the First Church of Christ Scientist, one of the oldest churches in our city. It has a Mediterranean style of architecture with gardens that have never reflected the style of the building. For example, a *Pittosporum tenuifolium* hedge pruned to three feet was planted on both sides of the front entry and had remained there for over seventy years until an automobile accident removed half of it. The church's board recognized that the hedge brought the entry a feeling of coldness, which contributed to the perception of an unfriendly and uncaring church.

My company suggested that the hedge might be replaced by a variety of perennials and shrubs including *Euphorbia* (*Euphorbia characias* var. *Wulfenii*), *Dracaena Palm* (*Dracaena indivisa*), Italian Cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*), various *Phormium* cultivars, Princess Shrub (*Tibouchina urvilleana*), Sweet Olive (*Osmanthus fragrans*), *Bougainvillea* 'Rosenka' as a groundcover, *Westringia* (*Westringia rosmariniformis*), *Artemisia* 'Powis Castle', *Sedum* 'Autumn Joy', Torch Lily (*Kniphofia uvaria*), *Chrysanthemum* 'Silver Lace', Iceland Poppies (*Papaver nudicaule*), and artichokes for texture. This change was instituted, but when the plants began to grow, the garden was difficult for many members to accept because it was a new visual experience for them. Flowers in the city's public spaces had meant annuals that were completely removed two or three times a year, retaining the same design; this, however, was the city's first public perennial bed located on a busy corner where thousands of people could view it daily. It took several years for the church members to appreciate the perennials with their daily changes and the bold forms and colors that complement the Mediterranean architectural style.

It is far easier to work on residential gardens to bring about these visual changes because one is working with the attitudes of only one or two people. But even two differing thoughts can bring challenges; the masculine versus the feminine or the engineer versus the artist must be addressed in design forms and plant choices. Individual differences such as these were never addressed in the International Style.

A number of years ago we remodeled a 1960s garden designed by a landscape architect in the International Style. It was a stark garden with few varieties of plants; it has plastic under gravel so no weeds or groundcover could grow, and angular and linear shapes. The husband was a Nobel Prize winner in biochemistry and the wife was an artist who had been living for over twenty years with a garden style that was the opposite of her natural inclinations. When they were having their first garden built there was no alternative to the International Style.

Our design created two gardens: one kept the linear lines of the old garden but gave it bolder accent plants, and the other side of the area became a romantic woodland garden focused on a brick patio with stones and rocks mixed in unusual patterns. Now when this couple has parties it is interesting to observe that the scientists gravitate toward the

garden's linear side and the artists drift to the garden's woodland side. Our public spaces should also have a variety of styles to meet peoples' various emotional needs.

The International Style placed concrete walks and patios next to buildings and left no room for foundation plants to soften the linear roof lines and the edges of the buildings. When we first tried to change this, architects and contractors were especially opposed to the idea. They said that the concrete protected the building from termite damage. However, we kept trying to find a client who would listen to our rational –straight lines make small spaces appear smaller and curved lines make them appear larger. Also, there are many old, historically important buildings that have survived hundreds of years with foundation plantings.

When we did find a client who would allow us to remove a concrete walk next to the house, we found severe termite damage in the foundation. The fact is that water seeps through concrete, and there is no way that concrete can waterproof and protect a building. In fact, the concrete had hidden from the owner a problem that he might not have discovered until after it had caused severe damage to his home. We used aluminum flashing to protect the wood siding and foundation from termite and rot damage; then we were able to put in a curved path of stepping stones and showy foundation plants to make the narrow space appear wider and to utilize the space for walking.

The plants along the path are Long-leaf Yellowwood Pine (*Podocarpus henkelii*), Box Leaf Azara (*Azara microphylla*), Japanese Maple (*Acer palmatum*), Evergreen Pear (*Pyrus kawakamii*), Sweet Olive (*Osmanthus fragrans*), Camellia (*Camellia sasanqua*), Heavenly Bamboo (*Nandina domestica*), Flowering Maple (*Abutilon hybridum*), Leatherleaf Fern (*Aspidium capense*), Mother Fern (*Asplenium bulbiferum*), Cineraria (*Senecio x hybridus*), Alpine Geranium (*Erodium chamaedryoides*), Baby Tears (*Soleirolia soleirolii*), Irish Moss (*Sagina subulata*) Violets (*Viola odorata* 'Rosina', Wild Ginger (*Asarum caudatum*), Forget-me-not (*Myosotis* spp.), Strawberry Geranium (*Saxifraga stolonifera*), and Foam Flower (*Tiarella cordifolia*). Now it is a pleasure to walk along this path.

Garden and plant lovers for the most part have been isolated from those who subscribe to the International Style, even though the International Style has strongly affected our environment. In one instance, a man poured concrete on his entire garden floor, ending with many thicknesses and textures. When he sold his property, the new owners, thinking that everything was literally "in concrete," resolved the problem by placing a wood deck over it and using planters on the deck. There were no trees only flowers. Consequently, the space remained unbearably hot, and the token flowers didn't really create a pleasant environment. Until the owners consulted with us, it had never occurred to them that they could remove the concrete. This was done, and a woodland space with a spa and trellis at its edge replaced it.

Six months after this garden had been planted and as it was beginning its first spring, the owner was so inspired that she wrote a poem about her new garden and the miracle of its birth. The International Style has not inspired this kind of expression, because its hard lines have left out nature, a fundamental source of inspiration for poetry, music, and art.

There appear to be positive changes on the horizon but we all need to help wherever the blemishes remain. It will take years to recover from this forty-year famine. May we have more beautiful gardens, and with them more poetry and music at all levels of our society.

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