

Land and its Context

Landscape designer Bernard Trainor shares his insights into the natural elements of design

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I feel extremely lucky every time I visit a new site – what a gift it is to be sought out to design a garden refuge for a family. Watching people connect to their land more fully through our design is the joy of each new project.

Every site has a unique context, with variations in scale, habitat, climate, and topography, along with its own set of challenges and opportunities. Because of these challenges, design is often described as “problem solving,” but while a necessary and an important part of the process, problem solving only goes so far in the pursuit of beautiful place making. Another way to consider it is “opportunity gathering,” or perhaps even “opportunity exploitation.” A site with extreme summer droughts leads us to design with climate-adapted plantings that in time will become self-sustaining.



Vast ranch land with wide-open space lends itself to the creation of smaller, nested gardens and courtyards through the placement of walls and trees. A gritty cut of shale offers contextual opportunities, and, when set unorthodoxly close to the house, becomes an integral feature of the landscape.

Challenges become inspiration for creativity and surprise. In my work, I search for the *genius loci*, or spirit of a place, in order to reveal its essence more fully.

My first site visits are very special; nothing is as important as – or can ever replace – really being there, fully immersed and ready to receive new information. I try to take in everything, from the slant of light as

it hits grasses on a hillside to the movement of the wind in the trees to the scents of indigenous plants underfoot.

This way of reading of a site, particularly through the plant patterns and geology, is fascinating to me. Through observation and study, I can often see the predominant wind patterns, the movement of rainfall runoff, and soil types. Even the animal trails tell me a lot about how to comfortably travel across the grades of the site. The repository of meaning available within the existing site information and the local patterns is not "free," but it is there for the taking, if I am willing to immerse myself and stay open.

I am not sure why exactly, but I have a unique ability to read the meaning of patterns on a site from the moment I arrive. It happens very naturally for me. Our very best designs meld this site reading with the input of the fabulously talented people in my studio. Our work is formulated through a process of filtering and editing content, unearthing the simplest and most essential design solutions.

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In the following video, Bernard Trainor discusses landscape design for unique mid-century modern Eichler Homes found in California.

Created by Codegena.

Images courtesy of Joe Fletcher