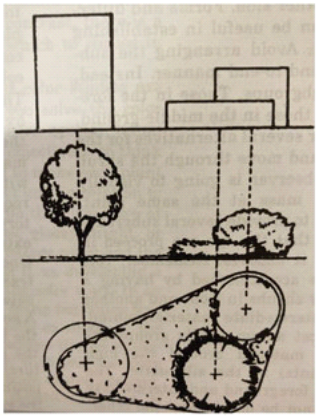
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Features

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Controlling Visual Energy Via Form

Dr. Richard Ludwig





Selecting plants for the landscape is an exciting, but often challenging, part of the design process. Truth be told, my favorite strategy is running down to the wholesale nursery and picking out my favorites. I'm like a kid in a candy store! However, that approach often has disastrous consequences.

Once I'm at the site, finding a place to put all of them is a serious challenge and often a waste of money. Though the individual plants look great, they rarely look good together. Sure, the lone parts look good, but the composition is often unsightly. Key point: It's not the parts that create beauty, rather it's how they work together.

Figure 1. A simple elevation drawing can help you see what the forms look like as if you're standing on the ground.

Also pictured: An example of the eye-catching ability of an upright form in the landscape.

In her book, "The Nature of Landscape Design," Nan Fairbrother said it this way: "At the design stage, the choice of plants is unimportant, except that they serve as material for the composition. A collection of choice plants is not a landscape any more than a list of choice words is a poem."

Ouch, that stings! In order to get harmonious combinations, Nan suggests we make our selections based on the artistic qualities of the plant materials: their forms, textures and colors.

"Form, color, texture are characteristic features of the material used, and indiscriminate mixtures cancel each other out like the music of a fairground or two radios playing together. When the mixture is not indiscriminate, some of the subtlest and most satisfying effects are produced by combinations of plants with different shapes and growth patterns, which enhance each other like the superimposing themes of contrapuntal music."

Creating Form

So what's a plant aficionado to do? How do we make sure our selections are striking AND look good together? Let's take an in-depth look at the first element of design—form—as it's the most enduring aspect of our plant material. It's basic to all landscape spaces and to whatever is planted or placed in those spaces.

Of the three elements of design, form is the first thing our brains register when we view something. And, therefore,

probably the most important consideration of the three.

In William R. Nelson's text "Planting Design: A manual of theory and practice," he centers his primary design paradigm on form. Form should be the primary consideration when creating space and what fills up the space. However, the form often takes a backseat to color and texture. It's very easy to get caught up with flowers, leaf size and color. When I ask clients about their favorite plants, it rarely has anything to do with the shape or form. Their plant wants almost always stem from flower color or up close and personal previous plant experiences. Caution: If a designer minimizes form and chooses only to use color and texture, the design can end up with a very dull, uninteresting mixture of shapes and, therefore, an unappealing composition.

Viewing Multiple Angles

Why can it be a challenge to put interesting forms together? If you've been trained in traditional methods of landscape design, you've done most of your work in plan view. In other words, as if you're looking at it from a hot air balloon above the property. Plan view is popular because it's the most efficient way to design, as you can complete an entire property in scale on one page. It also serves well in determining the number and size of all your plant materials/consumables. The problem with plan view is it's very challenging to visualize the form, height and structure of the elements you choose.

Sketching an elevation or using abstract blocks to develop your form compositions will help you create interesting form combinations. In William's text, he encourages the designer to sketch out an abstract composition of block forms in elevation to create interesting form masses (see Figure 1). These simple elevation drawings can help you see what the forms look like as if you're standing on the ground. If you line them up with a plan view, you can also get an idea of how they'd be planted as well.

A few tips on putting those forms together. The more contrast between shapes, the more visual energy. Upright, next to rounded, next to horizontal is eye-catching. A dramatic silhouette of shapes arrests the eye and holds our attention. These groupings are great focal points and need to be placed where you want attention to be drawn.

Consider Emotion & Energy

Most clients aren't plant dweebs. Rather, they want to know what the plant material and the hardscape will do to make their property more attractive, as well as improve the quality of their lives. Successful designers understand the importance of emphasizing the function/purpose of all plant choices and how they benefit the client. In terms of form, different forms evoke different emotions. Selecting shapes based on how they make your clients feel, as well as the amount of visual energy created, is one of the first steps in making great plant choices. To do this, you have to understand how various forms make us feel and react.

Upright forms—forms that are taller than they are wide—evoke a strong emotional response. On a scale of 1 to 10. Upright forms rank an 8, 9 or 10. I asked an eye doctor what exactly is it about upright forms that causes us to stop and pay attention. His response was fascinating. He said most of the muscles in our eyes are on the sides and the natural movement of our eyes is back and forth, side to side. Whenever we see something that causes our eyes to move up and down, it sends a different message to our brain telling it to stop and pay attention. Upright forms are like an exclamation point in grammar. Use them judiciously. Unfortunately, and too often, we see folks using them on the edge of their property to define the space. If the most important aspect of the landscape is the property line that's fine. Otherwise, use them where you want attention to be drawn; an upright form near the front door, next to a pond or as part of seasonal color are great locations.





Rounded forms evoke different emotions and create less visual energy. A visual energy grade might be a 4, 5 or 6. Rounded forms are great team members. They complement with most other forms and serve as great transitional elements to create gentle sequential change. In many ways, they're the most common plant form. Massing is always recommended as individuals placed apart appear as "green meatballs"—not a natural look!

Pictured: Rounded forms in the landscape.
• A clean swatch of grass creates a resting place for the eye and sets off the rest of the landscape.

Finally, horizontal forms are the ones with the least visual energy offering a 1, 2 or 3 rating in terms of eye-catching ability. They create restful, peaceful, calming emotions and are wonderful fillers to create a more substantial planting without drawing too much attention to themselves. Key point: Don't underestimate the importance of low visual energy elements in the landscape. They serve a vital purpose in good design when they act as a foil. A foil is something that's dramatically different from everything else around it. The best example of an important horizontal form is turf. A billiard table green lawn area offers a resting place for the eye. A clean, uncluttered simple area of turf, mulch, water or gravel is essential in creating a resting place for the eye and part of a drop-dead gorgeous landscape.

So focus on form. It offers the viewer interest year-round. Determine what type of emotions you wish to evoke and how much visual energy you want your plants to provide. Take a few minutes to sketch out an elevation or two to see how these forms come together and I believe you can put together some wonderful form compositions. **GP**

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