

Water in landscape

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Water is not just a vital element in our lives, it can also be experienced in a whole variety of ways. It creates different kinds of atmosphere and moods that appeal to our feelings.

Water is a universal landscape element. It is the vital element which can bring life to any landscape; immediate life, constant life. Water's wonderful contribution to this world has been to shape the hard landscape through its immense forces of erosion and to create the soft landscape through its gentle nurture of vegetation.

In itself it is the fundamental soft element. It is a sculptural medium unsurpassed in its potential to make the most of its form, transparency, reflectivity, refractivity, colour, movement and sound. It is a most desirable medium for a landscape designer. But such bounty is not gratuitous. It demands knowledge and understanding for effective use.

Knowledge can be acquired through study, both theoretical and practical.

There is an abundance of theoretical knowledge available. Most of this is for industrial, civil or naval application and thus has little direct relevance to water as a landscape element. While it may be of little use in creative design, however, it is of utmost value in analysing how interesting water effects occur. Knowledge is necessary to be able to incorporate such water effects in design concepts and to sustain them in finished works.

Practical knowledge comes from experience acquired through observation, photography, sketches, written description and physical contact. The physics of ripples are demonstrated by the appearance and disappearance of fine silvery texture on the water surface which can be seen when a zephyr brushes a still lake. The forces inherent in the motion of large waves can be felt by swimmers. The circular pull up and down, and to and fro, can be felt by standing still in the swell of passing waves.

Understanding comes from knowledge, through thought and an open mind.

Fountains are usually created as a response to a design brief which includes the client's budget, time limitations, desired life, durability, maintenance availability, water supply and, especially, the chosen site. The site can be a rich complex of properties of space, scale, climate, existing environment, character and people's activities. These can be seen as constraints or can be thankfully accepted as opportunities by a creative designer. Knowledge and understanding of water and sensitive appreciation of its character are helpful with these projects.

Water can create an atmosphere which stirs almost any emotion.

In nature many factors contribute to the character of water:

Setting Consider a bronze bowl brimming with water. How it would seem on a dry dusty desert plain as compared with immersion in the lush green growth of a rainforest gully? It would conjure up quite different feelings. Think of the same bowl high on a rocky snow covered mountain, in a city surrounded by tall buildings or in a suburban garden.

Containment Effects vary with the containment of the water body. Open expansive freedom when edged by a gradually shelving sandy beach. Restriction between high rock walls in a river gorge. Scattered, hardly defined at all, almost lost among the reeds of a swamp. Globules of dew, shaped by surface tension, on a soft green leaf. Wetted surface of pavement, free of binding surface tension.

Movement Water is never more beautiful than when it is still. Motionless, a small pond or a vast ocean instils a sense of peace of mind. The tranquility of water is conveyed to anyone who cares to stop. Steady gravity flow in rivers and canals or currents from tides in the sea, cause surface undulations or swell. This gentle activation of the water surface conveys a related mood change in people. The feeling varies according to the water mass and velocity of the lazy-smooth or writhing-sensuous undulations.

The description 'blackwater' applies when the surface is unbroken, no matter how active or massive the movement. This is an apt term to be applied because the water itself can hardly be seen. When the surface is broken, air bubbles are taken in. These bubbles form a multitude of spheres which reflect light and so make the water much more visible, especially in depth. This is called 'whitewater': cascades, waterfalls, tsunamis.

Lighting In the dark, the presence of water may be sensed by sound or smell. Even when it cannot be seen, its presence is felt. It is not always necessary to light water. Sometimes the gentlest light from the moon accentuates mysticism. This is so when the smooth sensuous surface of oozing blackwater is highlighted by bright reflected images of the moon. This beauty owes a debt to the small, relatively intense light source. The effect of disbursed, low intensity, light from a dull winter sky on an exposed stretch of water may make people feel more depressed and even cold because that is how the water appears.

Man made water elements are often best lit by existing area lighting which makes them coherent with the environment. Sunlight is desirable when water action and excitement are to be maximized. The brilliance of sunlight shows as sparkle on reflective surfaces, illuminates each curvaceous bubble and penetrates clear water to show pool bottoms or make