



Good landscapes create harmony and balance, and they can reconnect our homes to their surroundings.

a soft spot for hardscapes

by karen king & lisa burns

All of us; designer, builder, architect, homeowner or passerby, at some time in our lives, have been transfixed and captivated by a great landscape. Whether prepared by nature’s grand design, or by our own man-made creation, we have stepped into a place in the out of doors that has impressed or inspired us. Manmade landscapes enrich us and connect us to our environment. Hardscapes can often help integrate our buildings into the overall landscape. Hardscapes are typically the basic foundation for our landscapes and can be defined as the structural or constructed elements usually made of hard material; such as stone, wood, metal or the like. The purpose can be singular, finite and monolithic. It can also be symbiotic, connected, harmonious and dynamic. Whatever the design choice, the emphasis is one of strength, durability and, usually, visibility.

“Form follows function.” You may have heard this before, but if you aren’t sure how the expression becomes relative to landscaping, this may help put it into a more understandable light.

For the sake of this article, we’ll skip a lengthy anthropology lesson and go with our abbreviated version of what may have been the first hardscaping endeavor of humankind. Undoubtedly, one of man’s first building materials was stone; it was readily available and it was cheap! Imagine the first Neanderthal “cavescraper” (all covered with hair) who, after a long day of hunting and gathering, inadvertently entered the wrong cave (they looked a lot alike back then). He probably received a “hard” thump for his mistake from the resident cave dweller. Being a progressive thinking man’s man he deduced the need to create a marker that wouldn’t wash away in the rain to distinguish the entry of his own cave. Thus, he resolved to balance one rock on top of another in front of his cave, until he had created a most obvious and indelible marker. Whereupon his fellow cave dwellers gathered around the marker and exclaimed “WOW!”. Talk about a millennium moment! And so began the wave, a sea of modern landscapers—some still covered in hair—stacking rock upon rock in a glorious effort to discern one modern “cave” from another and still, the neighbors gather around and exclaim “WOW!”.

Having endured this colorful tale of origin, let us fast forward to our modern hardscapes and some of the embodiments that punctuate its appeal and its hold over us today. If we dispense for the moment with the most obvious and practical side of hardscape structures, such as retaining walls, stairways, and sidewalks and probe a little deeper into the character of today’s hardscape, we may find that “function” is not necessarily a prerequisite to “form”. We wonder, is it really form that follows function or more of an individual artistic expression, perhaps a flair for the abstract, or to better create a match between form and function, house and home, designer and builder, nature and natural. One is no more venerable than another. But, is it art? Is it validation? Is it communion? Or it is, simply, the “WOW!” factor?

What are some of the traditional drivers of the structural parts of our landscapes? For many of us, most important is extending our outdoor living space. Another consideration is a material’s durability; that



A dual purpose hardscape was designed by the author to redirect excess water away from this home while creating a naturalized woodland environment.

which is timeless and enduring. Something that outlasts ourselves can be validation of our place in time. Another is emotion; a sense of rhythm, balance and energy that resonates in the core of our being for both the builder and the admirer of such works. Another might be dimension; a perspective, proportion and scale that is relative to the space.

Stone, as a building medium, embodies all of these qualities while being readily available, though no longer cheap. The construction of stoneworks, whether it be a wall, patio, walkway or a sculpture, are a labor of love and the work of artisans. A quality construction is paramount if durability is desired. A wall, whether freestanding or retaining, if poorly built, will not stand up over time. A walkway, in our northern environment, will heave and separate if the underlying surface is improperly done. The same is true of patios, whether you are utilizing large pieces or consistent same-sized brick or pavers. As with all construction, preparation of the foundation is everything!

Our vision of hardscapes wants to be self expressive as well as substantive; after all it's hard work. Yet, too often, we choose hard over soft, stone over plantings; perhaps that is somewhat genetic. We understand more about construction, as a general rule, than we do about horticulture. The sensitive living elements of a landscape can be more intimidating to some people than building a stone wall, but plant selection can also be very important to frame and accentuate our structures. Installation, size at maturity and proper care and maintenance are all important to the overall project and, in conjunction with one another, can add life, livability and value to our modern world. Perhaps the perfect marriage of form and function is the union of a living landscape with a lasting hardscape.

Karen King and Lisa Burns are co-owners of Cabins To Castles, Inc., an award winning, internationally recognized company specializing in all aspects of site consultation and permitting, comprehensive landscaping and stoneworks, erosion control and reclamation, design and installation; "Naturally".



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