

# TAKING THE LONG VIEW



BY ADRIAN HIGGINS / PHOTOS BY ROGER FOLEY

The gardens of Georgetown present particularly thorny design problems for landscape architects.

Unlike the well-documented features of Revolutionary-era estate gardens and plantations, the urban yards of Washington's oldest and most famous neighborhood come with scant record of their early form or use. As in other city settings, the designer must deal with issues of privacy and stressful environments for plants. And the elongated yards—as narrow as 20 feet, as long as 120 feet—provide a vexing canvas.

Over the years the solutions have come in many forms, from stiff formality to herbaceous jungles. Whatever the incarnation, the object was to soften and mask the basic enclosure.

Samuel H. Williamson, a 36-year-old Harvard-trained landscape architect, has taken a daring and different approach to a client's garden in the heart of the colonial port settlement. Instead of seeking to hide or subdivide the backyard of the client's attractive 1806 Federal row house, he has produced an axial landscape that reinforces the property's longitudinal character. Parallel paths straddle a sunken water canal and together the lines of brick and water stretch the space between the irregular envelope of the house and a distant woodland terrace at the garden's far end. The mood is faintly minimalist and firmly architectural, yet this starkness is tempered by forms and materials of the Early American town garden. This paradox, in turn, stimulates the senses. "There is a tension between something contemporary in character but traditional in feel," he says.

After Williamson completed studies at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, he worked in the Cambridge-based practice of Michael Van Valkenburgh. Aspects of the Georgetown garden—its strong axiality, paths coursing through terraces—are



reminiscent of Van Valkenburgh's work, and Williamson acknowledges his influence. But the greater stimulus came from the site itself, and the need to connect the garden to the house as part of the systematic renovation of both.

When the new owners came to it from Manhattan, they renovated the house and built a multistory addition that includes a modern kitchen and breakfast room on the garden level and, above, an office opening to a rooftop terrace. A second terrace was built one story higher, above the office.

The term "yard" was too kind a description of the landscape: It was a sea of scrub and weeds, including poison ivy. Williamson was engaged as plans for the house were finalized. The architect, Martin Jay Rosenblum, of Philadelphia, wanted the addition to form a strong bond with the garden, with an emphasis on circulation and access. The dining room was fitted with French doors, as was the new breakfast room. Moreover, Rosenblum wanted to create a link between the office-level garden and the ground-level terrace. This was achieved by placing brick stairs off the office terrace. The stairs turn to connect with the garden outside the breakfast room. Here, at the end of the house, the ubiquitous brick fabric is replaced with a creamy stucco finish and classical arches. The chamfered wood piers flow together to form a groined ceiling above a brick landing outside the breakfast room door.

This treatment was devised to evoke a garden pavilion and provide a decorative finish to what has become the important private, garden side of the house. The pavilion allusion provided the point of departure for Williamson. Here, he placed one of the two garden paths.

The second path travels along the other side of the garden,

PREVIOUS PAGES: PARALLEL BRICK PATHS AND A SUNKEN WATER CANAL CONNECT THE HOUSE WITH A WOODLAND TERRACE AT THE FAR END OF THE GARDEN. INSET: TRICKLING FOUNTAIN SUGGESTS A MOUNTAIN SPRING. BELOW: THE BREAKFAST TERRACE. OPPOSITE: THE PLAN, DRAWN BY SAM WILLIAMSON, IS ORIENTED NORTH-SOUTH.



WILLIAMSON'S GARDEN PLAN:  
 A. DINING ROOM B. KITCHEN  
 C. HERB BORDER D. BREAK-  
 FAST ROOM E. RIVER BIRCH  
 (*BETULA NIGRA* 'HERITAGE'),  
 UNDERPLANTED WITH NAN-  
 DINA, RUSSIAN OLIVE, TRIL-  
 LIUM, WINTERBERRY, INK-  
 BERRY, SWEET WOODRUFF.



*IRIS SIBIRICA*, AND *HOSTA SIE-  
 MOLDIANA* F. WATER CANAL,  
 FLANKED BY NEEDLEPOINT  
 AND GREEN GEM ENGLISH IVY  
 G. AMELANCHIER, MOUNTAIN  
 LAUREL, SWEET WOODRUFF,  
 HOSTA H. WOODLAND TERRACE  
 WITH HERITAGE RIVER BIRCH

0      10      20



OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: STAIRS CONNECT OFFICE TERRACE WITH GARDEN. IRIS FOLIAGE SPIKES THROUGH SWEET WOODRUFF. HERITAGE RIVER BIRCH, SWEET WOODRUFF. HOSTAS ADD CONTRASTING TEXTURE.

on axis from the dining-room doors. The parallel paths frame the water runnel before ending at the raised brick woodland terrace. Draped behind this terrace, a new rear wall is decorated with a series of six latticed panels between brick piers. Their transparency and light color brighten the back of the garden and allow breezes to cool it.

The waterway grew out of a desire for a sunken feature between the paths. It is fed by a trickling fountain that flows from stones set as a focal point at the far end of the runnel. The natural forms play off the man-made geometry all around and with their spring-like allusion reinforce the woodland mood Williamson sought to capture in the garden's hinterland.

The owners were New Yorkers, but it was their country property in Maine that inspired Williamson in Georgetown. An existing black walnut tree and a mature flowering dogwood on the garden's west side were under-



planted with other native or woodland trees and shrubs, among them amelanchiers, mountain laurels, more dogwoods, and Eastern redbud. Opposite, a different understory plant palette was used to allow for the east border's sunnier aspect, among them

nandinas and Russian olive. In both borders, Williamson has used a variety of ground covers and perennials to create textural combinations, including trillium, ferns, hostas, irises, and, with much extravagance, sweet woodruff. The canal is planted with *Hedera helix* 'Needlepoint' and 'Green Gem,' two delicate-leaved varieties of English ivy. The predominant plant, however, is the handsome and popular 'Heritage' river birch. It was chosen because of the clients' northern associations and because the creamy apricot coloring of its peeling bark blends with the pinks and browns of the brick. Seven form a thicket behind the woodland terrace (to be thinned in due course), and another six are placed at regular intervals along the east side, tying the remote woodland space into the side garden. Williamson has also used bold clumps of the coarse-leaved *Hosta sieboldiana* as accents along this border.

Just as designers in New England must know wood and those in the Southwest adobe and tile, the landscape architect in Georgetown, inevitably, is drawn to the world of bricks. From the facades of its Federal and Victorian houses to the

decorative sidewalks, brick is the material that defines the old Potomac seaport.

Rosenblum directed the making of hand-formed bricks in a rosy-brown to build the addition, selecting a hue somewhere in the middle of the house's wandering color band. Williamson recycled paving bricks from the old garden, using them in the terraces in a dry-laid, diagonal herringbone pattern. For the paths, he used a redder brick as contrast, in a running bond pattern. They are wire-cut, giving a much sharper edge than the molded brick of the terraces. The terraces are allowed to float free of their surrounding walls. "I wanted them responding to the architecture rather than an extension of the architecture," he says. "Just the idea of it not quite touching seemed to make the space more coherent."

Such touches give the garden a degree of complexity and detail that is not immediately apparent. Romantics, no doubt, would assail the design for its lack of visual layering and mystery. But the strong linearity makes the far terrace a magnet, a place that is used instead of just devised. Williamson could not have placed it closer to the house without the four-story structure over-



powering the eye and harming the sense of journey to the terrace. And in spite of its simplicity, the garden yields some very different moods. From the office terrace, the aerial view reinforces the axuality of the design. On the ground plane, the axes lengthen the garden. Looking back to the house from the woodland terrace, the linearity is all but erased. This is not a real woodland, of course, but its remoteness brings you closer to nature: to the sound of the water, to the ornament of the birch trees, and to the silent flitting of an electric-blue dragonfly.

No row-house yard would have been made this way when the house was built, but the garden is true to the hallmarks of the Federal style—classic and restrained and deriving beauty from simplicity.

"There's an architectural quality to the garden that we enjoy a lot," says the mistress of the house. "And then there's a sort of sculptural quality: size and shape and color and texture. Very, very pleasing."

*Adrian Higgins is a Washington writer whose book, The Secret Gardens of Georgetown, will be published next year.*