

Inside: Stephanie Rose on Small Projects

WATER SHAPES

Design • Engineering • Construction

Volume 7
Number 5
May 2005
\$6.00

Earthly Dreams

A master watergardener
shares his sense of enchantment

Classic Composure

Residential watershapes
as 'inground sculptures'

Also:
The inside scoop on
what can make pools crack

Classic Lines





By Stephen Wilson

Resplendent with large, classically styled homes, the city of Houston offers great surroundings for classic swimming-pool and garden designs. But this is also an area, says Stephen Wilson of Star Pools, where the ground is flat, the yards can be small and there's not much by way of distant views. The result, he says, is that his company's designs lean heavily on clean lines, rich materials and the understated watershapes he calls 'inground sculptures.'

It's often said nowadays that water-shaping is the art of fitting our work into the surrounding environment. In many ways, what we do at Star Pools in Houston is a prime application of that powerful yet basic concept in how we tackle both the opportunities and limitations of the residential settings we encounter.

Houston is dotted by affluent neighborhoods teeming with homes in classic Mediterranean and Tuscan styles. *Stately* is a word often used to describe these homes, and because we've based our design philosophy firmly on the idea that the swimming pool and garden areas should look as though they were designed as part of the home itself, our work is largely a manifestation of these pervasive stylistic sensibilities.

For a long time, we achieved this connection by working in conjunction with local landscape architects; on occasion, we still do. In an effort to create complete master site plans and take our work as watershapers to a more advanced and sophisticated level, however, we brought the lion's share of landscape-design tasks in-house by hiring Greg Perry, an amazingly talented designer.

Through his work, coupled with our extensive experience in designing and building high-end swimming pools and my own background and college-level training in the visual arts, we've been able to expand our canvas to include entire environments – an evolution that has pushed our projects in new and exciting directions.

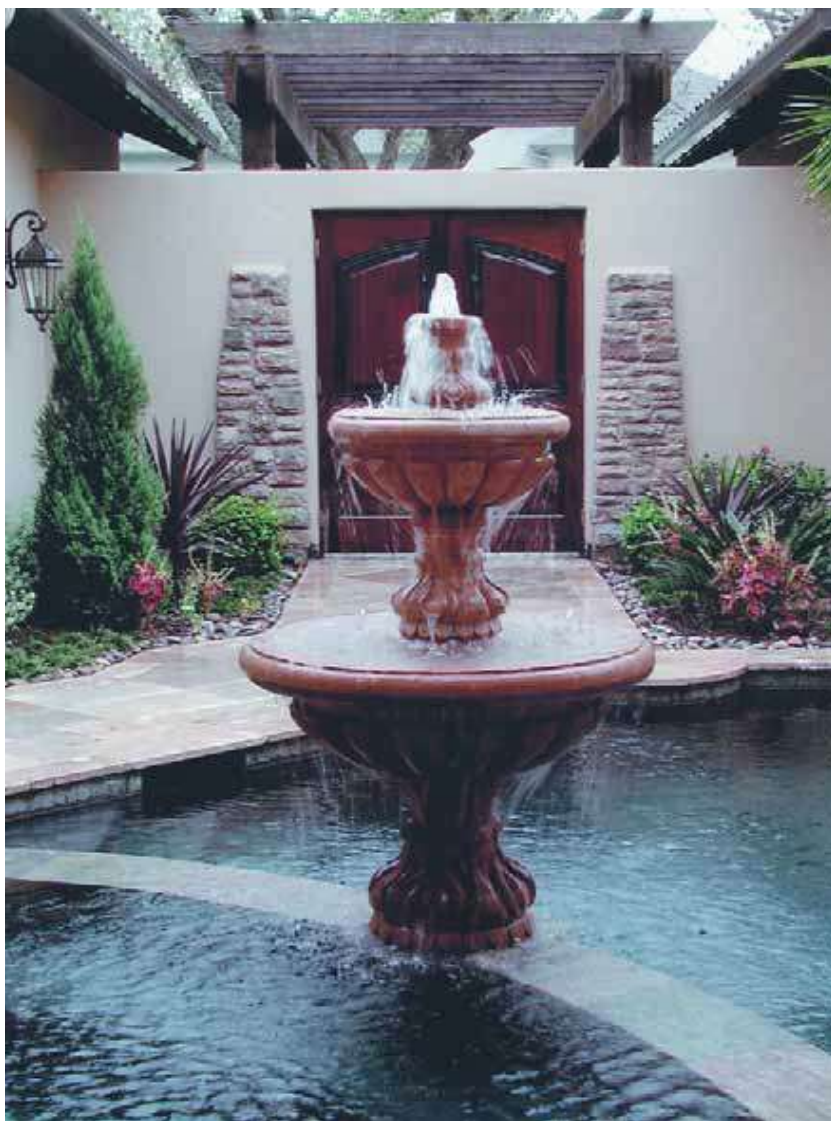
Internal Bearings

In our current work, we often adapt finishes used in the home to the outdoors to blend watershapes and hardscape with the overall context. For decking and coping, for instance, this has meant using large quantities of tumbled travertine, various slate materials and limestone, each with its subtle (yet rich) color palette.

These natural materials complement and soften the geometric/architectural shapes and styles of the majority of our pools. We also make a point of picking up key architectural details – a window shape or a façade treatment, for example – to find additional touches that visually associate the watershape with the home.

To some, this might seem a design gimmick that would tend to produce a narrow range of "looks." In a way, that might be true. We don't ever consider free-form rock designs, for example, because there are no supplies of indigenous rock material to draw on in our area. We also don't have the advantage of elevation changes (Houston is basically flat as a pancake), so we don't see opportunities to do too many vanishing-edge designs or have the ability to draw distant views into the composition.

We've found nonetheless that, by working within these clear stylistic and physical constraints, we have rich and varied opportunities to make the most out of the spaces and the settings we're asked to design. Indeed, we've come to view our pools and spas as inground sculptures



Courtyard Diamond

A small entry courtyard is the setting for this diamond-shaped pool. Done up with Old World style and finishes, the setting features a tiered, Cantera-stone fountain that has been placed (with seeming precariousness) on the spa's dam wall, where it aligns with the doors that provide access to the courtyard from the street. This also places the fountain on the courtyard's central axis, where it is seen from many interior views.

The shape was intended to provide as much pool as possible while still allowing for access, patio/deck space and plantings. The use of tumbled travertine coping, slate waterline tile and black plaster lends a softening sense of age to the setting and neatly complements the look of the residence.

and entire settings as tapestries of plants, hardscape and water.

Given the homes and styles with which we work, it shouldn't be surprising that our designs lean on geometric forms with raised walls, pilasters and classic scupper details that create sheeting waterfalls. We also incorporate pottery, traditional fountains and water-in-motion effects using laminar jets or architectural cascades.

In our view, what keeps this from becoming cliché-ridden gimmickry is the fact that most of our clients are looking for something unique. This desire heads us off from any inclination to repeat key elements from project to project. In fact, this yen for uniqueness constantly challenges us to think in new ways and com-

binations and to develop new solutions for every setting.

Gentle Control

As you'll see in the photographs that accompany this text, much of what we do in developing these unique solutions is about controlling where the observer's eye moves within a scene. This is critical where there are not distant views to carry the observer beyond the immediate setting; it's also a big factor where lot sizes are typically small and the focal points are all within immediate visual and physical reach.

Indeed, one of our main design tasks is to focus attention within the four walls and on the relatively low visual plane on which we're working – low

enough to distract observers' attention from the big neighboring homes that may rise above the backyard walls on two or even three sides.

In many respects, this is the opposite task from hillside design, where you very much want the eye to move past the watershape or hardscape and into the beautiful distance. What we do instead is create visual compositions that are often contained within the property lines – a much more intimate and, we'd say, more visually complex design adventure.

The work is always challenging, but I can honestly say that operating in such a self-consciously artistic way has made the tasks of watershape and garden design into a labor of love.



Linear Elegance

The owners of this historic residence were looking for a simple pool with a timeless quality – something that would effectively link the main residence to the cabana while responding to and reflecting the views from both structures.

The resulting pool features a spa set flush to the water level inside a long, rectangular form and three raised pedestals with scupper fountains spilling into the pool. Special attention was paid to getting proportion and scale of this reflecting pool just right and to ensuring that all design elements were in character with the residence.

The blue flagstone coping, gray porcelain water-line tile and gray plaster were selected for their softening presence. As accents, there are custom pebble mosaics at the coping's corners.



Careful Cascades

A country residence on a wooded site provides the setting for this offbeat design. The pool features a raised spa with seating that lets the homeowners and their guests take in views of the nearby lake. Angled, flagstone-veneered waterfalls lend visual interest and soothing sounds to all areas in and around the pool.

Although the cascade *appears* to fall from the spa, it is actually fed by a reservoir on the top of the spa wall and runs independently. Large steps and generous in-pool benches give bathers lots of space to sit back and relax.

The dark-slate spa walls mimic the colors seen in the tree bark and provide an interesting contrast to the limestone coping and colored-concrete decking. The medium-gray plaster creates a deep blue that draws the eye to a private paradise.



Fire and Water

This spa offers a point of visual interest as well as a place for hydrotherapy and relaxation. The raised sundeck features a bubbler pool that cascades down to the spa's level and is flanked by scuppers in angled wing walls.

A deep space in the center of the spa allows the client to stand while being completely immersed in the soothing water. The main terrace connects to the back of the home and wraps around a fire pit as it flows outward to the spa.

Bold, wide, limestone steps accentuate the horizontal lines and create a sense of spaciousness and destination. The fire pit in the foreground provides a strong visual complement to the spa as well as a place to warm up and enjoy the outdoors during the cooler months.



Scalloped Rectangle

This new home was styled and detailed for an Old World look, but it was limited to a smallish back garden dominated by a large oak tree. We put the pool in a far corner to provide for tree preservation and lawn space and built a slightly arched 18-inch wall to house a hand-carved stone waterfeature with a scalloped rim.

Split-face flagstone adds richness and texture to the wall face along with a sense of antiquity. Opposite the scalloped bowl is a sun shelf and steps with a set of bubbler fountains. The irregular flagstone decking and coping met the homeowner's request for a distressed, aged look.

Continued on page 67



Lane Lines

For this project, the clients wanted a traditional-style pool for a large family with exercise and play uppermost in mind.

The pool's long axis is dominated by a pair of 75-foot-long lap lanes and is intersected by an area designed for volleyball. The arched, 13-foot-long waterfall is positioned to maximize views from inside the residence. Pencil-jet fountains in the play area fill the space with sound while framing and setting up the view of the waterfall.

Tumbled limestone coping, walls and decks add soft visuals while contrasting with the blue water.

Continued on page 68

Lakeview Luxury

This gorgeous lakeside residence is the perfect setting for one of our rare vanishing-edge designs. The large, raised spa draws people to the pool and the ideal position to take in views of the lake above the arching pencil-jet fountains and raised pedestals. Between the pedestals is a classic, water-on-water/vanishing-edge illusion, with the pool and the lake appearing to blend together from many of the most significant viewpoints within the yard and from the home.

Wide limestone coping and steps are used to create a sense of a grand scale. Natural stone on the pedestals and spa facing provides a rugged, Old World look, while the medium-green plaster lets the pool mimic the lake water's color.



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A black and white advertisement for PoolFog. The image shows a pool deck with a large fog machine creating a misty atmosphere. The text "Create your environment." is at the top, followed by "PoolFog™" in a large, bold font. At the bottom, it says "Complete systems from \$1500." and "toll free 866-POOLFOG • www.poolfog.com".

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