

## ASLA Awards 2011: Category 4B-residential under \$100,000

**Project Name:** *Re-defining Family Landscape*

**Project Location:** Denver, Colorado

**Brief Project Summary:** A young family with two small boys built their dream home in an up-and-coming neighborhood near downtown Denver. The convenient location and amenities is what drew the family to the area, but neighborhood didn't come without drawbacks, including high density, popular nightlife spots close by and transient residents. Not only did the 6,800-square-foot lot need to do everything expected of a dream home, like provide ample outdoor entertainment space, play areas for small children and gardens, it needed to create a refuge for the homeowners from the city around them. It needed to define the property, yet blend in with the neighborhood. It was a tall order for a small slice of Denver.

The architect brought the landscape architect on board during conceptual design to create a master plan that was to be executed over 3 years. The clients loved the plan so much and with the help of creative and cost-effective design solutions, the clients were able to complete the project in one phase and can now enjoy the space with family and friends.

**Purpose of Project:** The landscape architect was given a long list of program elements for this standard city lot, accommodating a young family, while gracefully disguising erosion and drainage issues and implementing ideas of urban agriculture. The couple wanted the house and site to accommodate their young family for entertaining, play and relaxing. It was also very important that they were able to harvest their own seasonal food. The landscape architects expanded on the idea of urban agriculture to include a small orchard, vegetable garden, perennial cutting garden, herb garden, and work spaces for drying, prepping and containing the harvest. Given the existing site constraints, the design also needed to respond to difficult urban drainage conditions that left the empty lot eroded from years of neglect. The landscape architects provided an effective, cost-efficient and environmentally sound approach to reducing storm water and improving on site water quality.

Because of all the requirements expected of the site, the entire site came into play – not just the front or back yard. In the end, the project would redefine what a front yard could be and what a family space looks like.

### **Client Requirements:**

- Outdoor kitchen, herb garden and entertaining “rooms” to accommodate parties of various sizes,
- Play spaces and opportunities without use of traditional play equipment,
- Use of materials and plantings that tie the landscape to the site and architecture,
- A site design that included front yard and streetscape, dining terrace and outdoor kitchen, spaces to expand for large gatherings, seating areas for more intimate events, low maintenance water feature, storage and entertaining needs, perennial garden, vegetable garden and planters for annuals,
- Meet a tight construction deadline after two years of design, planning and house construction.

**Scope:** The landscape architect worked with the clients, from budgeting and planning to design and construction. The work included:

- Site analysis and drainage concepts that accounted for on and off site water volumes.
- Initial concept and budget development.
- Consideration for urban agriculture and incorporation of urban permaculture and seasonal harvesting.
- Landscape design concepts for all areas of the site.
- Creation of bid and construction documents, construction administration.

**Implementation:** The 6,800-sq-ft lot is tucked in between an old monastery to the east and an eight-unit condo complex to the west, leaving many poor site conditions that needed to be resolved, including creating safety and privacy within a high density neighborhood; designing with existing walls and fences and drainage conditions that left this once deserted site stripped of topsoil because of continuous erosion and runoff. The site accommodates the main house as well as a detached garage located to the north, which anchors the lot and creates an intimate interior yard. The streetscape design needed to fit into the neighborhood context while establishing boundaries between private/public spaces.

*Redefining the streetscape:* The clients have young children and had some worries about the transitional nature of the neighborhood. The landscape architects designed a raw steel fence to delineate the private/public space while maintaining transparency and a relationship to the street. The curves of the concrete banding reflect the steel curve in the architecture while the raw steel fence blends beautifully with the horizontal wood accents on the house. The use of sedums, yucca and Himalayan Border Jewel form a rich tapestry of color and texture replacing the traditional sod and aims to create an alternative standard for urban streetscapes using low water and low maintenance plantings – a design that is appropriate not only in the neighborhood context but also for the Colorado climate.

*Entertainment and Play:* Immediately outside of the house, a patio and outdoor kitchen is aligned with the interior kitchen and uses similar materials to create a continuous transition from indoors to out. The kitchen and dining areas are flanked by the herb and perennial cutting garden, providing both functional and aesthetic qualities to the area. A recirculating, contained water element is centered in the herb garden which adds to the auditory and sensory experiences of the space.

The landscape architects were tasked with creating multiple play and seating areas for kids and adults using non-traditional solutions. Two sod terraces framed with a concrete band and graceful steps for easy circulation were created to give interest to the long, flat site and provide a sod lawn for play. Tall planters and a gabion seat wall extend into the sod lawn on the west while an Ipe wood sand box edges the east. The space terminates at the garage wall, which was once massive and had little interest. The fireplace creates a colorful and artfully designed focal point while the large Ipe deck provides intimate seating for entertaining. The powder coated cor-ten steel is recessed behind the wood detailing and reflects the large open sky above. The pattern in the steel is the constellation *Perseus*, which is found in the exact location during summer months when the family enjoys the space the most.

*Storm water and water quality:* Colorado's weather allows for year round outdoor enjoyment and the clients wanted to maximize the site's ability to accommodate intimate family gatherings, play spaces and large parties. The design intent of the rear yard creates a seamless extension of the house by creating an elongated view. Detracting people's attention from the side yards became an important factor, since the side yards were designed to be more utilitarian, meeting the site drainage needs and agriculture desires of the homeowners. Low maintenance, permeable materials such as pea gravel and river rock was used throughout the site as a cost-effective groundcover. A two-foot band of river rock parallels the existing concrete walk and covers a french drain, which collects garage roof runoff and sod and irrigation runoff from multiple properties located to the north and west. The drain day lights into a basin planted with horsetail rush. The rush not only provides a basin for runoff, it cleans the water and adds a strong vertical architectural element to the plant palate. Narrow trench drains were formed into the patio to minimize the impact of pervious surface runoff. A rain garden off the kitchen collects and filters the property's east side runoff and house roof drains. The rain garden provides another opportunity to purify the water before day lighting into a small basin filled with creeping willow and eventually into the city storm system. Because the property is kid-friendly, much of the water had to be piped but the design incorporates opportunities to highlight the bio-retention areas as aesthetic and functional focal points.

*Urban Agriculture:* The clients wanted to harvest seasonal fruits and vegetables from their yard, the design team incorporated multiple principles of urban permaculture to maximize the site's productivity. *Companion planting* groups take advantage of plants' natural needs and functions to benefit one another while *vertical planting* maximizes the height of the space to increase yield without taking up bed space. A *perennial cutting garden and herb garden* were used both as functional and aesthetic features off of the kitchen area while a small orchard was planted with a mix of apple varieties.

The space between the fence and retaining block wall (both existing) was recognized as the ideal spot for the vegetable garden because of full sun exposure, raised beds and narrow bed depth, allowing the client easy access for maintaining and harvesting. The beds also catch additional runoff from the lot to the west. A functional work space was incorporated into the west side of the house where the utilities sit. This turns an otherwise unusable space into a work area for the owner to prep planters, preserve vegetables and prepare planting mixes from their compost pile. The area is defined by an allee of pear trees continued from the front yard and the fence is covered in clematis vines that cool the area and provide shade and privacy from the condos to the west.

***Philosophy and Intent:*** Four elements guided this project: 1. creating a family-friendly space for entertaining, play and relaxation. 2. implementing urban agriculture concepts, 3. providing an effective, cost-efficient and environmentally sound approach to reducing storm water and improving on site water quality and 4. redefining what an urban lawn looks like and how it relates to a house and surrounding neighborhood. Each of these four elements played an important role in the overall philosophy that guided the homeowners and the landscape architect team.

**Role of Landscape Architect/Contractor:** The landscape architect planned, designed and managed this project from conception to final walkthrough. The landscape architects worked with the clients to organize and prioritize their ideas. The clients expected a lot of the space and had a limited budget. The landscape architects helped the clients realize a landscape that compliments their lifestyle, architecture and context.

**Special Factors and Significance:** Denver has a dry climate compared to much of the rest of the country, but large sod-filled front lawns still dominate much of the city. Add to that the image of water-friendly landscapes in most residents minds being that of sparse plantings in sandy soil, and people don't stray too far from what a front lawn is traditionally supposed to be. This project deliberately set out to show what a xeric urban landscape could be: family-friendly, agriculturally responsible, and aesthetically pleasing. The result is a landscape that stands out from its neighbors, yet completely blends in with its surroundings. It's a place that is purposeful, yet never appears so.