2011 ASLA Design Awards

Cranmer Park Residence
Honor Award
AECOM, Denver

Residential Design Over $100,000 Construction Budget
Cranmer Park Residence: CCASLA submission 2011

Location: Denver, Colorado

Project Summary: Perched on the high point of Denver’s Cranmer Park, the landscape surrounding the historic Italianate mansion responds simply and elegantly to the renowned Jacques Benedict’s architecture. Designed and constructed in three distinct phases over 12 years, the site design organizes spaces and uses in response to all four aspects of its environment, while cultivating functional outdoor spaces that support the owners’ lifestyle and aesthetic. The end result both enhances the aesthetics of the overall property and cements the home as an iconic Denver landmark within Cranmer Park.

Purpose of Project: The purpose of the landscape design for the Cranmer Park residence was to establish enduring outdoor living spaces for the entire property, while responding appropriately to the intrinsic character of the architecture and the natural environment that surrounds the home. Over many years and by many owners, the landscape surrounding the home had been compromised and the present owners wanted the home to feel re-situated on the slightly abbreviated site. The landscape architect’s guiding principal was to renew the grand, elegant vision of the original architect and owners to create an Italian country estate setting.

Budget: Phase 1: $250,000, Phase 2: $75,000, Phase 3: $400,000, Total: $725,000

Role of the Landscape Architect: The landscape architect was hired by the owner to design the landscape surrounding the entire home in three different phases. The objective of the first phase was to meet the owner’s desire to have an elegant and simple Italianate garden to accommodate the family. This phase was completed as part of a renovation of the house and property. The scope included re-designing the entry drive, auto court, and front walkway steps in front of the home to create distinction from its location near park land. To mitigate views to the adjacent homes that blocked the original vistas eastward, the landscape architect worked closely with the renovation architect to design a pergola as a terminus to the rear courtyard space as well as a shady spot to enjoy family meals. An intimate boxwood garden and elegant understated fountain framed by the house loggias were designed in keeping with the style of the historic home and courtyard. The landscape architect also assisted in siting the owner’s large sculpture in the broad sun-dappled flexible activity lawn to the south. Each element was designed for durability, ease of maintenance, and to complement the architecture.

The second phase of the project saw the addition of a new outdoor spa area. It was critical that the new space would provide a level of privacy when in use and would not conflict with the aesthetic of the main house to meet the historic landmark guidelines. To meet these ends, the unused space behind the garage provided an ideal private location that could be accessed easily from the back of the house. Due to the historic designation of the home, the new deck, arbor, planting, fire pit and hot tub were designed to be freestanding. The resulting decks and hot tub “float” above existing stairs and enliven the unused space.

In the final phase, the landscape architect collaborated with the owner and a second architect to define and layout the site program and modern aesthetic for a new pool house. The landscape architect designed and detailed the lap pool, fountain, patio, basketball court, fencing, walls, fire pit, planters, lighting and plantings for a unique gathering space that seamlessly flows from interior to exterior. The pool house and outdoor shower were designed by the architect. The end result provides a new viewpoint overlooking Cranmer Park and the Rockies to the west, and provides a dramatic linear pool and pavilion that boldly contrast and complement the earlier landscape surrounding the historic home.
Special Factors:

- The landscape was designed in 3 distinct phases over 12 years, from 1998-2010. Although the architect and contractors selected each time changed, the owners chose to collaborate with the same landscape architect in every phase.
- The mansion is registered on the National Register of Historic Places and required review and approval by the Denver Landmark Commission for all modifications to the designated site to insure that they were in keeping with the architectural character. After all phases were completed, the site increased to approximately one acre—a large site size by Denver standards.
- Immediately adjacent to a large park, the site has an unusual public setting for a residence. The driveways cross easements through park land. The site design had to address the various levels of privacy on the site for the owners.
- The only existing features that were retained on the site as part of the current design were 3 magnificent American elms planted not long after the house was constructed in 1917. The Elms—one of them a Denver Champion tree, presented a challenge in that the grade and site elements could not substantially disturb the area within the drip line of these trees.
- The owners desired a shower by the outdoor spa space that would work all year round without freezing. The landscape architect worked with the contractor to devise a shower that complemented the delicate trellis structure and allowed the pipes to drain after each use.
- The 83-foot long lap pool extends out of grade to accentuate the linear quality of the added site and to take full advantage of the scenic views. Because the pool is not on the original designated lot, it is not constrained by Landmark guidelines, yet the materials and simple, classic forms, pay homage to the architecture. This was also an area that the owners desired for year-round use, so heated paving and pool cover were integrated for ease of maintenance.
- Inside and out, the owners’ collection of modern art juxtaposes the historic architecture. Throughout the property, the combination of the old and the new artfully complement one another. The Deborah Butterfield Horse sculpture grazes in the front lawn of the Idyllic Italian country farm site that George Cranmer envisioned. In that manner, the new pool and pool house are the owners’ expression of their love for modern art and design side by side with historical art and architecture.

Project Significance: The historic significance of the original home by architect, J.B.B. Benedict makes this a special place in Denver. According to the National Landmark nomination form, Benedict felt that this home was “one of his masterpieces”. It is an Italian Renaissance style stucco clad residence designed and built in 1917 for Denver’s Manager of Improvements and Parks and Recreation – George Cranmer who said that before he bought the property, “we used to come up to look at the sunsets and loved the view of the mountains in all kinds of light.”

The project as a whole displays the evolution of landscape design over time: from the traditional formal lawn surrounding the historic home’s front façade, to the ornamental, drought tolerant planting that the modern pool floats within. The project is timeless at all levels from the lasting materials to the simplicity of form and function. The landscape design exhibits sensitivity and subservience to the powerfully elegant architecture by Benedict. The visibility of the site and historic architecture from the public open space makes it a landscape that people can view in passing, admire the history of Denver and learn more about Benedict. Lastly, the strong juxtaposition of the old and the new make both sides of the site more powerful and more interesting.