



The Big Idea

We've all heard of conceptual art, even land art, but what about conceptual gardens? Landscape designer Franchesca Watson explains the principles behind it

CONCEPTUAL LANDSCAPES

start with an idea, which underpins the visual motif and informs every aspect of the design. This concept is paramount and the old notion of nature as the guiding force for the design is abandoned. Thus, the central idea, inspired by the site's history, ecology or intended use, is seen as more important than its decorative appeal, although it generally integrates functional or social requirements. This results in spaces that are not stand-alone art pieces but areas that are used by people.



‘We no longer expect just beauty from our gardens but also meaning. A landscape can be about anything’

LITERAL CONCEPT

These are not vague ideas, such as modern design. Instead, the concept is applied in a strong literal and obvious sense, and aims to be close to the visitor's consciousness and experience of the garden.

Some conceptual designers may choose not to take their cues from the spirit of the place, finding this irrelevant and caught up in romanticism. They may thus seek to erase or overlay all traces of what has gone before – a powerful starting point for creativity, like the San Diego Children's Hospital.

Others may deliberately take inspiration from what they first find

on site, acknowledging the land's history, such as The Garden of Australian Dreams in Canberra.

Most conceptual designers have nuances of ecological considerations contained in their work and may favour native plants and local materials.

CREATING A VOICE

Above all, these designers seek to create a space that will speak to the people who use it and provide a personality or emotion for the space.

They may use imagery or metaphor to bring to mind memories of previous activities on the site, like The High Line

in Manhattan, or they may try to reflect the current identity or use of the site. This kind of approach possibly explains the spread in popularity of conceptual landscapes – it can be a type of branding.

Generally, conceptual gardens are characterised by the use of colour, witty commentary and innovative (frequently artificial) materials.

SOMETHING FUNCTIONAL

The difference between a conceptual attitude and an ecological one is that a conceptualist believes that a man-made landscape is never going to be natural – they are not out to create a wilderness

fantasy. Instead, they want to make the space relevant to its users.

This is an embrace of urbanism, where the conceptualist designer is celebrating cities and the urban way of life, not trying to create escapes for 'disadvantaged' urbanites.

This does not mean that conceptual garden designers do not have a deep understanding of ecological considerations. In fact, this type of design is very much part of the environmental movement, just not in an unrealistic or romantic way, and thus functions as a useful balance to contemporary ecological piety.

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