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Author:
Van Valkenburgh, Michael R.

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Eudoxia, a New Civic Landscape

Michael R. Van Valkenburg

Eudoxia is guided by my conviction that landscape design is both personally expressive and socially motivated. I believe that any design idea requires an interpretation of its form's precedents and natural processes, whether or not these are explicit in the final design. Inspiration for imagery arises from these and other, unexpected sources—dreams, fleeting thoughts, memories.

Architecture and landscape architecture share the task of making functional and memorable places. Yet landscapes are open to the sky. Without a differentiation between inside and out, a landscape must be judged in spatial and sculptural terms. Indeed, this paradox is ubiquitous to the field and is a central concern explored in this project.

The name Eudoxia is taken from the Arab Caliph’s Inviscible Cities, which, in its vision of the city, prompted this proposal. It was particularly taken with the following passage:

“An oracle was questioned about the mysterious bond between two objects so dissimilar as the carpet and the city. One of the two objects—the oracle replied—has the form the gods gave the starry sky and the orbits in which the worlds revolve; the other is an approximate reflection, like many human creation.”

The garden proposed here is a rich, woven, dense landscape like Calvino’s imaginary carpet that captures a city’s essence. Calibrated in its forms, exuding in its intent, Eudoxia is not a scenic landscape but a geography for contemporary life.

This garden is intended for an urban, corporate headquarters and is located between a pair of new, three-story buildings. The garden cuts through an entire city block with street frontage at the north and south ends. It provides a journey of ceremonial entrances and places for meeting and contemplation, and is open to the public.

Eudoxia’s composition is in the spirit of early 20th-century modernists: abstracted geometric forms and spaces are linked by a broken axis and are balanced by proportion rather than symmetry. Influences include Calvino and the paintings of Moholy-Nagy. The hedge composition departs from the modernist aesthetic of the modernists in the organism of its materials and reliance on the seasonally changing color matrix of a palette of deciduous plants. Hedges derive from the typology of planted forms by Lutyens and Jekyll and from Vita Sackville-West’s Sissinghurst. Embodifying a new landscape type, Eudoxia uses elements of private gardens while relating to the city in scale and complexity.

The garden joins an urban exterior to an intimate interior. Beginning at the south end, an arc of trees bows over the sidewalk edge to establish a landscape style inviting entry. A twelve-foot stone screen wall, set back from the sidewalk, is reiterated in a parabolic evergreen hedge. Windows in the wall and hedge frame the landscape composition within and two doorways frame the major entry points.

The building entrances are located at the street ends under continuous, double-story begonias that extend the length of the buildings at the east and west sides, establishing covered passageways from the buildings and the garden. A labyrinth of corridors formed by hedges offers a series of pathways between the two buildings. Users of the garden may revise their daily walks to include different plant fragrances, colors, and densities. Each hedge is composed of one plant species. Some are evergreens, others deciduous; some have unpruned tops, others have pruned surfaces. A sixteen-foot-high, eleven-colored purple hedge at a jogged axismetrically within the composition and is interset by lowering the ground level five steps. From the ground, it is seen as a vanishing ellipse. Viewed from above, the hedge composition mimics a large partner, along each axis, a hedge niches provide sites for sculpting and offer places for conversation or rest.

Near the center of the garden, isolated in a narrow kiss, is a long, rainwatercatching border of blue-flowered Siberian Iris. The image is inspired by Rothko’s paintings, but here the tonality responds to the season’s light rather than the edge of the canvas. In November, the withered brown foliage tactfully anticipates the stark beauty of winter. Beyond the flower border, pressed deep into the earth, is a court of stone and water. Eleven water trays, filmed with water and separated by paths are cut into the
center. Each tray empties into a main pool at the base of a gently curved, twenty-five-foot high wall of rock, bound at each side by cut stone pillars. Water pipes—like those found in cleft rock springs—pierce the wall at the top, pouring water in summer and accumulating ice in winter. The ice and water wall is shadowed and quiet, separated from the city's noise. It is a room for the sounds of water and the fragrance of moisture. The north-facing water-wall reflects the color of the sky and prevents the warming rays of the winter sun from disturbing the thick, blue ice. The north wall is a twenty-foot hemlock hedge.

Access to the water court from the south is provided by a pair of partially walled stairs. Beneath them, recessed sitting chambers offer secluded vantage points. From the north, a staircase directly descends the geometrically terraced slope through a grove of columnar evergreens that heightens one's sense of vertical change.

Throughout the garden, movable wooden lawn furniture can be pulled into areas of sun, or into pools of shady solitude.