



This award winning project shows that craftsmanship is in the details.

Photo courtesy Nature's Way Waterscapes, Inc.

Craftsmanship in the landscape

By *Barbralu Cohen*

From designing storm water runoff to digging a hole, craftsmen pay attention to detail and balance—and translate skills into art.

Whether he's pruning a tree, sculpting marble or weaving cloth, whether she's edging a flowerbed, designing a patio or sewing—you know a craftsman when you see one.

In fact, it's probably easier to see than to describe. The *Oxford English Dictionary* isn't much help. It defines the noun as "a worker skilled in a particular craft." Gee, thanks.

For the landscape industry, **Nancy Eastman, *On the Prairie Landscape, Lakewood***, has a more specific definition "Craftsmanship suggests an artist who lavishes painstaking care on the construction of his or her work and is consciously concerned with fine details," she says. "The craftsman masters technical difficulties and displays an artistic skill. A superior technician masters skills, but the craftsman translates those skills into art.

"Craftsmanship is really having the knowledge of what tools to use. This knowledge only comes from the art of doing," she adds. Craftsmanship is only achieved through time and trial. It requires apprenticeship and "practice to think beyond and yet be in the present of your craft."

She continues. "I can recognize craftsmen in the way they handle a shovel and what shovel they use. The way a person prunes a tree, constantly moving back to look at the tree from all angles like sculpture, knowing all about that tree in its properties from science and also as an art,

allowing the purest beauty the tree can express. Edging is crafted, knowing when the bend is too much or that you cannot bend, that the edging looks flimsy vs. having strong lines. Also planting and cutting perennials and tending to a garden with care, knowing the properties of each plant and what to do year around are all a craft."

Words like "artistic spontaneity," "balance," "harmony," "aesthetic distinction," "intuition," "attention to detail," dot her conversation about craftsmanship—whether it be the craft of designing a landscape, planting a tree, digging and filling a hole or placing support poles—and even irrigating and deadheading. "Working artistically and carefully gives a well crafted quality," she says. "Craftsmanship is the bones of the landscape. It's like good health—it just radiates."

Craftsmanship appears in every step of landscape design, installation and maintenance, and every worker on a project contributes. For example. Eastman says, the designer may call for particular edging lines, but the installer "in the field can actually see how to refine the edging and create balance," she says. Similarly, "Even the smallest grade in a back yard can have an aesthetic pleasure by the way it shows off the plants." The designer and installer together can create that perfection.

On big-scale projects, the craftsmanship still is in the details, says Greg Dorolek, landscape architect and project designer for Wenk Associates, Inc., in Denver. In a 100-acre park, concealing where a storm water pipe appears as an overlook is a stellar example. “The viewers will never know we made a design feature out of a utility,” he says. Craftsmanship begins at the grossest design level and “continues to be richer and richer, working on every, different level.”

So, can we more clearly define craftsmanship? Management consultant Tim Bryce, based in Palm Harbor, FL, is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Empowering Managers in Today's Corporate Culture* (MBA Press). He writes that craftsmanship has three requirements:

1. The knowledge and skills to perform the work

Craftsmen are students of their profession and are constantly looking to improve, through continued education, routine certification, studying books and trade publication and participating in industry associations. Adds Bryce, “Craftsmen do not need to be told they need periodic training to sharpen skills. Instead, they take the personal initiative to stay on top of their game. [They] have no problem with a periodic job review; in fact, they welcome it for it might bring out a weakness in a skill they need to sharpen.”

2. Attention to detail

“Craftsmen understand and respect the process of building/delivering a product or service. They are intimate with all details of the scope of work,” he says. “Although many of their tasks may be repetitive, it doesn’t mean they easily fall into a rut. Instead, they are constantly looking for new tools and techniques to improve the work process. They demonstrate patience in their work. Again, wary of cutting corners, craftsmen must possess such patience in order to produce the product the right way.”

—*Barbralu Cohen is editor of Colorado Green.*

March/April 2008 Colorado Green

3. Pride of workmanship

Bryce says, “Craftsmen, wanting to satisfy the customer, put forth their best effort to produce it. In other words, craftsmen take their work personally.”

Ten years ago, Eastman says, the landscape profession was not considered a craft. Then, public perception of this level of quality work began with hardscape and rockwork. These days, “more people can see landscape work as beautiful and appreciate the workmanship. Today’s award recipients speak of attention to detail, mastery of technique and an intensifying of beauty. You sense that harmony, that balance.”

The 2007 Excellence in Landscape Awards reflect aesthetic distinctions in the type of plants, the combinations of plants, the more complicated interweaving of hardscape, rock walls, patios—interior and exterior. New irrigation technology, lighting and plant material all contribute, as do a higher level of design and “more understanding of what we need to do in terms of sustainability and water conservation,” Eastman says.

“The award recipients are showing more resourcefulness and responsibility in terms of good craftsmanship of a landscape appropriate to its site conditions,” she says.

Adds Mark Tabor, ASLA with the National Park Service and former president of CCASLA, “When I’ve been on a jury, what I have looked for is a continuity, a distinctive connection with the locale, a fit, a creative use of standard and typical materials,” Craftsmanship, he says, is “the appropriate use of materials in a design, the best materials to realize that design. The design must use the site and the materials effectively.”

Concludes Eastman, “It is a joy to watch the men and women I have worked with craft the landscape. Craftsmanship is really knowing how to move through all aspects of our work.”