This section of the book offers a philosophical framework for residential site design. There are numerous approaches and theories to residential site design that range from minimal site development to the elaborate garden settings that are oases from the bustle of urban and suburban living. Further, some design approaches stress plant materials and the gardening aspect of a residential site, whereas others emphasize a sought-after lifestyle.

Within that array of possibilities, it is the underlying notion of this book that sound residential site design is based on a respect for the environment and the need to create outdoor living spaces that extend a client’s lifestyle into the exterior environment. Chapter 1 is a critical analysis of the typical single-family site found in all geographic areas of the United States and provides a point of departure for offering a better way to design the residential landscape. Chapter 2 describes the fundamental building block of residential site design: outdoor space. The ideal residential landscape should be composed of well-defined outdoor spaces that provide settings for various activities and functions. Chapter 3 outlines numerous strategies for creating and maintaining a sustainable landscape that is in sync with the environment and its ongoing processes. All three chapters give the reader the background for designing a thoughtful, comfortable, and environmentally sensitive residential landscape.
1

The Typical Residential Site

INTRODUCTION

Those who deal with the design and development of residential landscapes are concerned with three important and distinctive aspects of each project: (1) the client, (2) the site, and (3) the home. No two clients, sites, or homes are the same. Each client has his or her own unique personality, tastes, desires, wishes, lifestyle, etc. Likewise, each site is different from the next because of orientation, topography, views, vegetation, surrounding site conditions, etc. In addition, each house possesses its own particular architectural style, floor plan, decorations, furniture, and accessories.

The site surrounding a residence is the most important environment. It serves numerous utilitarian, aesthetic, and psychological functions for the residents as well as for visitors, neighbors, and passersby. As a setting for the house, the residential site is the context within which one views the architecture of the house. As the location for outdoor living, the residential site is an exterior extension of the functions that occur inside the home. Socializing, eating, cooking, reading, sunbathing, recreating, gardening, or simply relaxing are all activities that take place on the residential site. In addition, the site is an expression of the lifestyle and values of the residents. It reflects their personality and attitude toward their own environment, and it offers refuge from the routine and pressures of daily events. The sound of birds in the trees, the fragrance of a flowering plant, or the sight of a picturesque tree provide the mind and emotions with pleasurable thoughts and feelings.

Consequently, it is critical that the residential site be designed with the utmost care and sensitivity so that it fulfills its vital role in the overall residential environment.

Toward that end, this chapter examines the typical residential site found in most single-family neighborhoods in the United States. It provides an overview of what a common residential site looks like. It also analyzes the visual and functional qualities of front yards, backyards, and side yards of the conventional residential site. This analysis provides the foundation for subsequent chapters that present a recommended design process along with techniques and principles for improving the quality of the residential site.

THE TYPICAL RESIDENTIAL SITE

A drive or walk through almost any single-family residential neighborhood in the United States reveals a number of commonalities among the houses and their surrounding sites. What is usually seen (Figure 1–1) is a...
one- or two-story house surrounded by an expanse of lawn and various plantings. Regardless of the size of the site, there are four elements that comprise the entire property: (1) the house (home), (2) the front yard, (3) the backyard, and (4) the side yards. The placement of the house near the middle of the site creates front yards and backyards of similar sizes, and narrow side yards.

Houses are designed in a wide range of shapes, sizes, and character. Although some architectural features are repeated in a neighborhood, it is hard to find two houses that look exactly alike. Even if you were able to look inside two houses that have the same floor plan and house character, you would undoubtedly experience two different homes—you would see distinctive wall coverings, paint, carpet, tile, furniture, wall hangings, curtains, etc. Different people have varied personalities, occupations, hobbies, preferences, monetary resources, etc. The relationship between an owner and a house gives rise to a home, a unique place for a unique individual or family. Guidelines for integrating a house’s architectural character into a landscape design are addressed in Chapter 5: Meeting the Clients, Chapter 7: Site Analysis and Design Program, and Chapter 10: Form Composition.

The front yard is the public setting for the house. A lawn, often manicured to create a lush green carpet, occupies most of this area with a driveway situated along one side of the site. In arid regions of the country, the lawn is sometimes replaced with

Figure 1–1
The typical residential site.
gravel or decomposed granite. The front yard is often dotted with trees, shading various parts of the yard. Typically, a row of plants extends along the entire base of the house. This foundation planting sometimes consists only of coniferous or broad-leaved evergreens that provide a year-round wall of green color. Finally, a narrow walk extends from the driveway and/or street to the front door of the house.

The backyard is the most varied area of the typical residential site. In older neighborhoods, or those found in western states of the country, the backyard is usually enclosed with walls, fences, or plantings. In these situations, the backyard is the most private area on the site. In newer neighborhoods, especially in the eastern and midwestern regions of the country, the backyard is often very open, with little or no definition of where one property ends and another begins. In these conditions, there is little privacy in the backyard. On most residential sites, the backyard is a more utilitarian area than the front yard and is the location of the outdoor terrace, work space, garden, and open lawn for recreation. It is usually the location for outdoor living activities. On other sites, the backyard provides little or no use to the residents; it is just leftover outdoor space that must be maintained.

The side yards are normally narrow leftover spaces with little use except to provide access between the front and back of the house. Consequently, there are few elements occupying this space except perhaps for scattered plantings, air conditioners or heat pumps, and stored objects such as wood, trailers, and other items that do not conveniently fit in the garage or basement.

Although this generalized description of the typical residential site does not apply to every site, it does summarize common characteristics of residential sites throughout the United States. What is particularly surprising and disturbing is that this “typical site” can be seen in all regions of the country from New England to Arizona and from Florida to California. True, there are regional variations in use of materials (especially plant materials), construction techniques, and attitudes toward the use and style of the residential site. Still, many similarities prevail in terms of size, function, organization, and general appearance of residential sites.

Let us turn to a more critical analysis of the three primary areas of the residential site: (1) the front yard (often referred to as the public space), (2) the backyard (commonly referred to as the private space), and (3) the side yards (usually not thought of as space at all). The conditions noted in the following sections are summaries of observations of single-family residential sites in the United States.

FRONT YARD

The front yard of most residential sites has two primary functions: (1) it is the setting or foreground for viewing the house from the street and (2) it is the public area for arrival and entrance into the house. In terms of its function as a setting, the front yard provides the “frame” for viewing the “picture” of the house from the street. Much attention is given to arranging plant materials along the base of the house and in the yard to establish “curb appeal”; that is, the front yard and house are attractive to look at from the street.

The front yard is also a public area where the main arrival and entry to the house are located. The residents of the house along with their relatives, friends, and other visitors use this public space as an introduction to the site.

Keeping these two functions in mind, let us look more closely at specific conditions of typical front yards.

1. *Front Lawn Lacks Edges.* On many residential sites, the placement of the house near the middle of the lot creates an open front lawn. The scale of this area often
section one  

philosophical framework 

gives a feeling of an anonymous “no-man’s land” because of its openness and undefined edges. This quality is frequently compounded when the front lawn of one site blends into the neighboring front lawn with no separation or division between the two (Figure 1–2).

2. Prominence of Driveway and Garage Door. The driveway and garage door are dominant visual elements of many front yards (Figure 1–3). The extensive area of asphalt or concrete and a large garage door are significant visual features that detract from the overall appearance of the front yard. The house’s front entry is insignificant and secondary by comparison. When cars are parked in the driveway, there is little or no room for people to walk except along a narrow edge or on the lawn (Figure 1–4). This is acceptable in good weather but is an inconvenience in wet weather or during the winter when snow is piled along the edges of the driveway. The narrow quality of the driveway is accentuated even more when the driveway is located in the side yard and lined with shrubs along the property line (Figure 1–5).

3. Entry Walk Too Narrow. The walk leading from the driveway to the front door is often about 3 feet wide. This dimension is too narrow and forces people to walk in single-file fashion (Figure 1–6).

4. Entry Walk Hidden from View. Another problem of the entry walk is that it is not easily seen, especially where it connects to the edge of the driveway (Figure 1–7). In such cases, there is nothing to acknowledge or call attention to the location of the entry walk.
5. **Entry Walk Lacks Visual Interest.** As a person proceeds along the entry walk, there is very little visual interest. A large open expanse of lawn on one side of the walk and a wall of foundation planting on the other side (Figure 1–8) do not provide a memorable experience. And the walk’s pavement material typically lacks a distinct character or appeal. It is simply a rather dull environment to walk through to get to the front door.

6. **Entry Foyer Too Small.** A concrete pad or stoop located at the front door serves as the outdoor foyer or arrival area. It is often so small that no one can stand on it while the storm or screen door is being opened without getting hit in the face or stepping away from the stoop (Figure 1–9).
Figure 1–5
Shrubs lining a driveway located in a side yard accentuate its narrow quality.

Figure 1–6
The typical 3-foot-wide entrance walk forces people to walk single file.
The entry area or foyer often lacks an adequate sense of separation from the street and the rest of the front yard. The stoop is often exposed directly to the street or even to the neighbor’s house across the street so that everyone can easily see the comings and goings of visitors (Figure 1–10). Also, the entry is directly exposed to sun, wind, and precipitation. All of these factors make it uncomfortable for a visitor to stand for very long outside the front door.

8. **Hidden Front Door.** An opposite problem of some outside arrival and entry areas is that the front door is hidden from view. This most often results from overgrown plant materials screening out the view of the front door (Figure 1–11). Not knowing exactly where the front door is an uncomfortable and confusing feeling for a first-time visitor.

9. **Foundation Planting.** The use of plants in the front yard is frequently limited to foundation planting—the practice of lining the foundation of a house with a row of shrubs (Figure 1–12). These shrubs, typically evergreen for year-round green color, are often manicured into geometric forms such as cubes, pyramids, and spheres (or, if you like, footballs, pop cans, ice cream cones, boxes, and so
Figure 1–9
Many entrance stoops are too small, making it awkward to open the door.

Figure 1–10
Many outdoor foyers lack spatial enclosure and separation from the front yard, the street, and neighbors.

Foundation planting has been used in the United States since the late 1800s when it was first used to hide high foundation walls on houses that were constructed several feet above the ground to create basements for gravity-air furnaces. However, most contemporary houses have little or no foundation wall exposed.
Figure 1–11
Overgrown plant materials hide the entry walk and front door.

Figure 1–12
Typical “foundation planting.”

Figure 1–13
Foundation plants are often trimmed into precise geometric shapes resembling footballs, baseballs, etc.
Another problem of foundation planting is that it is seen more by people on the street than by the homeowners. Foundation planting cannot be seen from within the house unless a person is standing at the window (Figure 1–14).

10. Overgrown Foundation Planting. A major problem with many foundation plantings is that they are overgrown to the point of obstructing the windows of the house and crowding adjoining entry walks. On some sites, the windows on the first floor of the house are completely covered with a mass of foliage, thus blocking out light and views to the outdoors (Figure 1–15). Some homeowners permanently close the window shades to block the view of the back of the shrubs just outside.

11. Scattered Plants in Lawn. Randomly placed trees and shrubs located throughout some front yards “fill” the lawn area (Figure 1–16). This makes maneuvering a lawn mower like driving through an obstacle course.

12. Little Enjoyment of Front Yard. One overall characteristic of many front yards is the lack a memorable image or style. Many front yards are bland, unexciting, and similar to the others in the neighborhood. Furthermore, most front yards provide little opportunity for outdoor living or enjoyment by the residents. There are few places in most front yards to sit, have a cup of coffee, talk with a friend, or read a book.
The challenge for designers is to improve these conditions so that the front yard is an attractive, useful, and inviting space on the residential site.

**BACKYARD**

The function of the backyard, on the typical residential site, is to accommodate a number of activities including (1) outdoor living and entertaining, (2) recreation, and (3) utilitarian activities such as gardening and storage. To support these activities, backyards normally contain outdoor furniture, barbecue grills, sand boxes, play equipment, swimming pools, cords of firewood, air conditioners, metal storage sheds, and so on. Although different and sometimes even incompatible, all these activities and elements are commonly placed in relatively close proximity to one another in the backyard. This makes the backyard the most intensely used portion of the typical residential site and also the most difficult to organize and design.

A more critical review of the backyard reveals the following conditions:

1. **Lack of Separation.** The backyards in many newly developed neighborhoods are open and ill-defined areas. One yard blends into the next to form a giant green space accessible to everyone in the surrounding area (Figure 1–17). As a result, there is little sense of identity or privacy. The activity that goes on in one’s backyard becomes the visual business of surrounding neighbors. This discourages the use of the backyard for people who enjoy privacy. With time, these same backyards generally become more enclosed by fences and plant materials to create some separation from neighboring sites.

2. **Walled/Fenced Backyards.** In the western part of the United States, backyards are apt to be totally enclosed by walls or fences (Figure 1–18). Sometimes alleyways are located behind these backyards for access to garages located at the back end of the property. The result is that backyards are isolated from one another with few or no views to the landscape beyond.
Many backyard areas blend in with each other to form an anonymous open space.

Some backyards, particularly in western states, are completely enclosed by walls.

3. **Dissimilar Visual Character.** There is generally a common character to the front yards of homes in a given neighborhood owing to similar size of the homes, similar setbacks, and similar lot sizes. By comparison, the backyards in the same neighborhood are very different from one another due to variations in lifestyles,
interests, personalities, and family size. When the backyards are open to each other, the overall result is visually chaotic (Figure 1–19).

4. Undersized Outdoor Living Areas. The outdoor living and entertaining space, if it exists at all, is often established by a terrace. One problem is that many are too small (Figure 1–20). A 12’ × 12’ area (or between 100 and 150 square feet) is common, especially in new subdivisions. Although this is enough area for several chairs, a small table, and a lounge chair, it is hardly adequate for entertaining several guests.
5. **Lack of Privacy.** Terraces are usually intended for relaxation and entertainment. However, they are often uncomfortable to use because they lack any sense of enclosure for privacy (Figure 1–21). They are open and exposed to the view of the surrounding neighbors. People feel as if they are on public display when sitting on the terrace.

6. **Harsh Microclimates.** Another reason for the discomfort of many exterior living and entertaining spaces is that they are not located or designed with climate in mind. When located on the north side of the house, these spaces are cool and damp much of the time, as well as exposed to cold winter wind (Figure 1–22). When located on the west side of a house, terraces are very hot during summer afternoons, particularly when not adequately shaded. People do not use outdoor spaces where sun, wind, and precipitation are not been properly considered.

7. **Lack of Appealing Character.** Like front entry walks, many exterior living spaces lack personality or character. They are cold, impersonal spaces that are uninviting to use for any length of time. For many, it is a drab experience to sit with nothing to look at except an open expanse of lawn or the backs of the neighbors’ houses (Figure 1–23).

8. **Weak Relation to House Interior.** Another problem of some exterior living spaces is that they have a weak relationship to the interior of the house. Elevation changes and distance isolate rather than coordinate the indoors with the outdoors (Figure 1–24).
Some back doors exit onto a concrete stoop that is smaller in scale than the front-door stoop. This creates the same problem as illustrated in Figure 1–9.

9. *Unightly Storage Sheds.* Many families possess a collection of maintenance and recreational equipment such as outdoor furniture, barbecue grills, lawn mowers, garden tools, wheelbarrows, children’s toys, bicycles, skis, and so on. A typical two-car garage has little extra space to store all these things. Consequently, many homeowners erect metal or wood storage sheds in their backyards to take care of extra belongings. These sheds are usually different in style and character from the house and consequently can be eyesores.

10. *Vegetable Gardens.* A vegetable garden is often stuck in one of the back corners of the yard. It is placed some distance from the nearest water source yet still close enough to the house to be seen as a brown patch of bare earth in the nongrowing season (Figure 1–25).
The biggest design challenge with most backyards is to combine diverse activity areas with aesthetic considerations. Entertaining, cooking, recreation, and gardening spaces should be carefully located with function in mind while also making the backyard an attractive and nurturing retreat.

**SIDE YARDS**

Unlike the front yard or backyard, most side yards have little use except to provide access around the side of the house. Consequently, most side yards are wasted and leftover areas. (Corner sites or those that do have generous space on one or both sides of the house are exceptions.) They are often trouble spots owing to the lack of direct
access from the house and because of the narrow space that exists between the house and property line. Side yards vary in width from a narrow 3 to 5 feet to a normal 8 to 12 feet or more. The following describes typical side-yard conditions:

1. Dominated by Access. Access through the side yard may be vehicular, pedestrian, or both. For vehicular access, a driveway usually fills the side yard (see Figure 1–5), creating problems similar to those of a driveway along a side of the front yard (Figure 1–26). When cars are parked in a side-yard driveway, the limited space feels even more cramped than the front yard.

2. Preferred Location for Storage. Because side yards are out of the main areas of activity as well as primary lines of sight, they are often used for storing visually objectionable equipment and materials. Larger side yards are apt to be storage areas for cars, boats, recreation vehicles, and so on (Figure 1–27).

3. Damp and Dark Microclimate. Some side yards are dark, damp, and humid owing to their narrowness and lack of sun exposure. This is especially true of regions that receive significant rainfall.

Figure 1–26
A driveway located in the side yard leaves little room for people to walk.

Figure 1–27
Side yards are sometimes used for storage of cars, trailers, boats, etc.
4. Wasted Space. Expansive side yards are unused as activity areas owing to poor accessibility from within the house. This can amount to a sizable wasted area that still has to be maintained.

5. Views Between Houses. The narrow size of some side yards allows the windows of one house to directly face the windows of the neighboring house, thus minimizing privacy (Figure 1–28). To solve this problem, most homeowners keep the curtains in these windows closed all the time. A more extreme solution, which is a common occurrence, is the construction of houses with no windows facing the side yards.

Figure 1–28
Narrow side yards minimize privacy between adjoining houses.

SUMMARY

The typical American single-family residential site is commonly composed of the front yard, backyard, and side yards, each with a number of challenges that are encountered in almost all regions of the country. The house itself may have a distinct architectural style or it may possess a commonplace character similar to others in the neighborhood. Sadly, the typical residential site is an undistinguished setting that needs help.

It is easy to be critical of most residential sites and to feel discouraged by the lack of good design. Yet, most residents do care about their landscape, often taking great pride when it is attractive and functional. The typical residential site provides a rewarding opportunity for the landscape designer to create an appealing and stimulating setting that enhances both the client’s lifestyle and the quality of the environment. Landscape designers should not underestimate their ability to dramatically affect people’s lives. The chapters that follow provide the foundation for accomplishing this.