

## Sculpture that Creates a Splash

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People who want to update their outdoor space are usually satisfied with a fountain or a couple of sculptures. But some want to take their garden a step further, using it to experiment with colours, sounds and light.

It can be difficult to find inspiration for interesting outdoor design. Residential landscaping remains fairly traditional, maybe because the same clients who spend generously on avant garde living spaces often lose their creativity once outside. Occasionally an exhibit or competition yields fresh ideas.

One such competition is the Young Architects Program at the PS1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens, New York, an affiliate of The Museum of Modern Art (Moma). Every year PS1 asks emerging architects to turn its concrete courtyard into a venue for its summer Warm Up dance series.

Designed to fulfil a few basic needs, such as creating shade, providing seating and personalising a barren courtyard, the competition tackles some of the same challenges faced by homeowners. In previous years, winners have built bamboo pavilions, reflecting pools and dunes made of cedar planks.

This year, the architects Benjamin Ball and Gaston Nogues have created installations rich with ideas for outdoor enthusiasts willing to stretch their imagination.

In "Liquid Sky" six towers made of telephone poles that are covered with loose triangular canopies of pink and orange Mylar, a strong polyester film, form a circle in the courtyard, to create the impression of an open circus tent. Light filters through the Mylar, casting coloured light on the ground. Sprinklers over the canopies mist visitors and nets tied around the base of the poles form hammocks.

In "Droopscape" the Los Angeles-based duo have created a more surprising water project. The title refers to a sagging canopy of bulb-shaped, fuchsia-coloured Mylar cutouts that swings and rustles in the wind. But the highlights are two wooden towers that hold large rectangular buckets. Periodically the buckets fill with water and then tip over, drenching whoever happens to be standing underneath.

Ball and Nogues say they were motivated not by utility but by offering visitors a shared experience. "Our project wasn't so much about the form but about the light," says Nogues. Pointing to the colourful overhead glow created by the canopies and the light patterns they cast on the ground, he adds: "Part of the idea was to create a daytime nightclub or a carnevalesque atmosphere."

While such installations might be too experimental for most homeowners, certain elements would fit well into a private garden, says Barry Bergdoll, chief architecture and design curator at Moma who helped run the competition. Using telephone poles to erect canopies, for example, or nautical rope to make hammocks, makes sense for homeowners who are seeking durable, accessible materials.

The Mylar petals that flap in the wind, meanwhile, provide visual stimulation, says Signe Nielsen, a professor of architecture at New York's Pratt Institute, who owns a landscape design firm. She often recommends kinetic art to her clients. "Inserting a canopy between you and the sky makes a certain space feel more human-sized," she says.

In some ways, "Droopscape" would translate more easily into a residential installation. Children in particular would probably love the spontaneous showers and the sound of thunder that accompanies them when the metal buckets vibrate as they empty.

Jenna Didier, head of engineering firm Fountainhead, which designed the mechanism, points out that water has been used for centuries to cool private gardens and the buildings that surround them. The company designs and builds a variety of elaborate water installations for wealthy clients in Los Angeles.

While the "Droopscape" shower relies on the very low-tech principal of gravity, Didier often uses more sophisticated technology to create effects. In one recent project her company installed stepping stones attached to surveillance cameras and a computer system. Stepping on the stones makes the water around them ripple, giving the impression that they are floating when they are in fact fixed. In another project, titled "Here There Be Monsters", jets of water shoot out of a pond when visitors make various gestures.

Didier was one of dozens of designers, architects, engineers and artists who collaborated with Ball-Nogues for the Young Architects Program. Sheila Pepe, an experimental crochet artist, created the hammocks and the firm Endres Ware Architects designed and built the canopies. MoMA's budget was \$70,000.

Whether a homeowner would want to replicate the installations at home is up for debate. Use of experimental architecture in residential outdoor spaces is still fairly rare, says Alexander Reford, director of the Reford Gardens in Quebec, which hosts an experimental design competition at its International Garden Festival each year.

Private clients, even those who favour modern design for their homes, prefer old-fashioned gardens, he says. "We wouldn't want to live in our grandmother's house but we're very happy having our grandmother's garden." Nature too makes it difficult to be innovative, he adds, since gardeners typically stick to a narrow range of plants.

Plus, wealthy homeowners in large cities such as New York or London who might pay for creative interior design often have limited outdoor space to experiment with and prefer to keep it uncluttered.

Sometimes clients buy scaled-down versions of outdoor installations. The team Ben Aranda and Chris Lasch, who designed "Camouflage View" for Reford's International Garden Festival, recently sold a miniature version to a Michigan couple.

The original piece was a screen 6ft tall and 20ft long, made of stainless steel strips intended both to mirror and conceal the surrounding landscape. The couple who bought an 8ft-long version installed it in their private sculpture garden, says Lasch.

Ball and Nogues say they're happy to help clients design their outdoor space, as long as their sensibilities match. "We're looking for someone who is interested in exploring new territory," says Ball. "Someone who is interested in creating a unique experience."