

Local Narrative

Landscape architect Jay Graham gives landscapes a sense of place. **BY CHRISTIANNA MCCAUSLAND**

IT IS A HOT DAY at Wye Hall, the plantation of William Paca on the Wye River. The brick, Colonial-revival mansion (a reconstruction of the original home that burned) rises up on a series of lush green terraces surmounted by boxwood. In smaller gardens, coneflowers, Russian sage, Germander, crape myrtle, and zinnias resiliently face the heat, and wild meadows meander into agricultural fields that disappear into forests and a hazy horizon. There is hardly any sound save for the quiet hum of wildlife. It's as if the home once owned by one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence has been frozen in time, its elegant, understated landscape waiting for Paca to return. And that's just how Jay Graham wants it to feel.

Graham is the owner of Graham Landscape Architecture based in Annapolis, a firm that has built its reputation by creating landscapes that make a statement about place and setting and context without needing to shout. The firm, begun in 1984, builds landscapes that evoke the local vernacular, respect the architecture of buildings, and provide sustainable, seasonal outdoor spaces that are unmistakably related to the Mid-Atlantic region. This interest in natural, place-bound settings is part of Graham's career evolution, which began in 1972 when he graduated with a degree in architecture from the University of Virginia, a campus known by many for its aesthetic loyalty to its Federal-period roots and to its founder, Thomas Jefferson.

"When I graduated from the School of Ar-

chitecture, I started to feel that the spaces between the buildings were more important than what was going on in architecture at that time," he explains. He also excelled at site planning—setting buildings into a landscape. His first job after receiving his master's degree was as a landscape architect at UVA.

Eventually he moved into commercial landscapes, working for a large firm that designed malls, schools, and other institutional buildings. That would prove to be a pivotal time in his career. "There's this notion sometimes that when you land at a mall, you don't know where you are," he says. "I became sensitive to trying to give each project regional character, but when you clear a site, start over, and the mall developers often have the same tenants in almost the same location, it's very hard to do."

That was when Graham, now 61, became interested in what he calls "the local narrative."

"I was very interested in working as a regional landscape architect," he explains. "We wanted to be of the Chesapeake Bay and the central Mid-Atlantic States, to really understand this landscape and express it."

Capturing that regional essence is what has given Graham's work such pride of place. His work can be seen at the Maryland Governor's Mansion, on the grounds of the U.S. Naval Academy, at planned communities throughout the region, and at what was then BWI Airport. As a landscape architect, Graham's firm is responsible for anything related to land, including site planning and

hardscaping (use of non-plant features) as well as planting. Unlike a garden, which is an active, engaging portion of the outdoors, a landscape is a setting, a passive yet evocative construct.

It is in residential landscapes that Graham creates a transporting, magical experience. The process begins with a conversation. "We sometimes say we have two clients—we have the people who have brought us in and we have the land," says Graham. "We want to know what attracted them to the land, what do they see in it? And also, what are their expectations?"

Graham also personalizes his spaces not with exotic, inappropriate plants, but with designs, details, art, and color schemes that express the interests of the client as accessories express the personality of an owner's interior design.

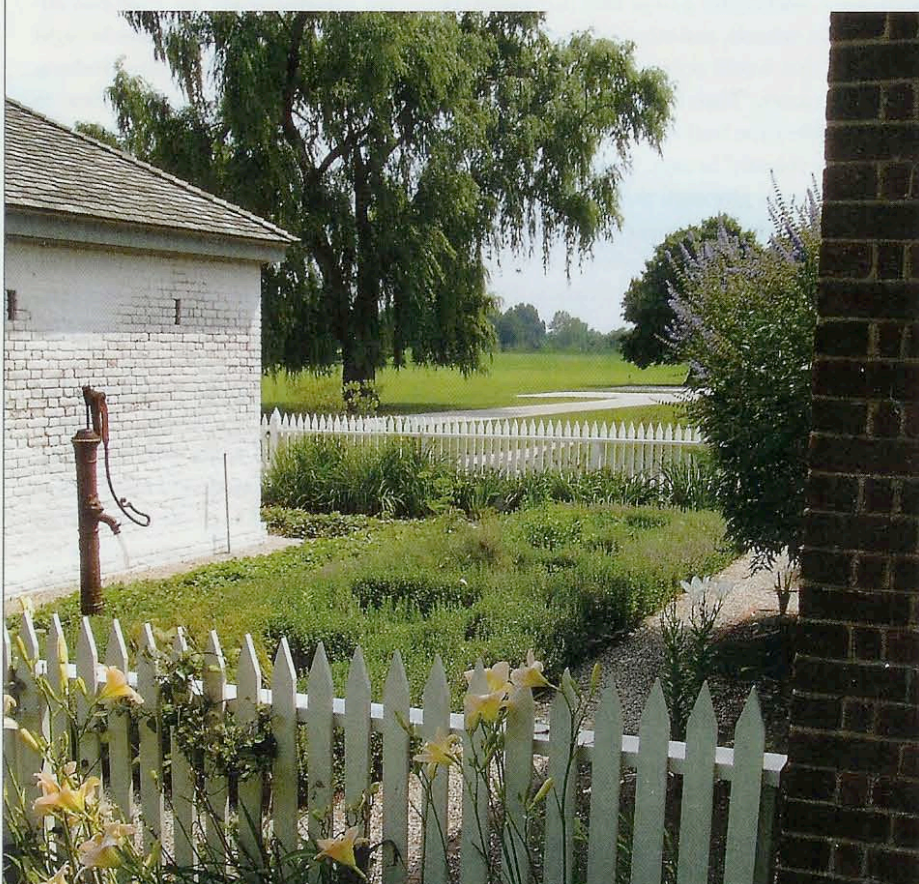
At the Wye River home, which is a few miles south of the Bay Bridge, the owners wanted a second home retreat that respected the home's history. The home sits on roughly 80 acres, although the owners lease additional acreage. To learn more about the property and how William Paca and subsequent generations used it, Graham embarked on an ambitious research mission that included archaeological research with help from the University of Maryland—both on-site and in archives.

"The current client doesn't want to reconstruct or maintain the garden that was there in the Federal period, but wanted to protect it archaeologically. We found it, we

In Good Company JAY GRAHAM



Endless walkway: A view of the grounds from between Wye Hall's grand front columns (above), and a "wild garden" of native species giving color to the west side of the property. What had become acres of lawn that required extensive mowing in the 21st century (opposite page) would have been hayfields in the 18th century; Graham transformed that lawn into a palate of meadows.



documented it, and we preserved it underground," says Graham. "We don't disrupt the archaeological resource."

What he did do was channel Paca's interest in classical proportions and the layout philosophy of the Golden Rectangle. Intimate gardens were placed within the landscape and close to the home, and trees were removed to open a view to the Wye River. In homage to the "wild garden" Paca had planted on the west side of his house, a garden of native plants was placed to blend into a meadow and a field beyond. What had become acres of lawn that required extensive mowing in the 21st century would have been hayfields in the 18th century; Graham transformed that lawn into a palate of meadows. At the owner's request, the Bay buffer area



was extended to help preserve the waterway from agricultural runoff.

His efforts did not go unrecognized: In December, his firm was given the annual Honor Award by the Maryland and Potomac

Chapters of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) for its work at Wye Hall. In singling out Wye Hall for ASLA's highest distinction, the jury cited the project as a "great example of the value of the type of

work landscape architects can do."

Not all homes have the benefit of such a long and well-documented history and Graham's company works with spaces of all sizes and backgrounds, from urban spaces in Washing-

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Other Graham-designed projects reflect his skill with water elements and hardscaping (top) and his attraction to small gardens of native species (below).

ton, D.C., to country estates. For a new construction home on a rolling piece of land in Howard County, Graham worked with the client and the architect to site the home so that it “didn’t look like a funny blip set on top of a gumbrop,” says Graham. “We wanted to make the shape of the land appropriate to the house size.”

The stone home could easily have looked like a monolith, but once nestled into its landscape, Graham proposed walls to flank the home so that it feels grounded in the landscape. “It gives it an inevitable look that this is where it belongs,” says Graham. “That’s what we try to do, we try to tie the house to the land.”

The design incorporates a pool, pergolas, and an elaborate series of patios, terraces, and fountains, a tremendous amount of hardscaping softened by broad stroke landscape plantings, and small-scale gardens close to the house.

“In the best of all possible worlds, being sustainable and being about place are one in the same,” says Graham.

Graham defines a successful landscape as one that is appropriate and well detailed.

“What is appropriate to the client and the specific site, including the region of the country? Some landscape details that might look great in Florida or California could look really strange in Maryland,” he says. He continues that, “part of the craft of being a landscape architect is the detailing. When we take a piece of bluestone for a stair, how do you treat the edge of the stone? Do you saw cut it, which is rather crude? Or do you flame-finish it or rock-face it? There are so many things we can do to give it a finished look that sometimes people don’t know about or think about.”

These details transcend any one style to add richness to a landscape, whether it is a traditional country home landscape or a contemporary urban one. Part of that attention to detail includes a greater interest in native plants and materials, because they are not only of the region, they are well adapted to the fickle weather of the mid-Atlantic. “In the best of all possible



The grounds around a client's historic cottage get a garden design that might have been there when the house was first built.

worlds, being sustainable and being about place are one in the same," says Graham.

Graham recently found himself in the position of being his own client when a tree fell at the home he's owned for 19 years. Suddenly shade gardens were thrown into sun and parts of the landscape were crushed. But landscapes are living, malleable, changing things and Graham is embracing the chance to determine what he wants next out of his own space. The work he has done on large-scale estates and small suburban properties will inform his own choices. For example, the landscape will be as natural as possible to use the least amount of resources. There will be only an essential span of lawn so that watering and mowing are kept to a minimum.

"I like residential work because we're exploring how to help people be better stewards of the land," says Graham. "We can work with the land and also work on the rich detailing of the hardscape and the gardens around the house. We think it's the best of all worlds, and it's really rewarding when your work is built and you see people enjoying it."

