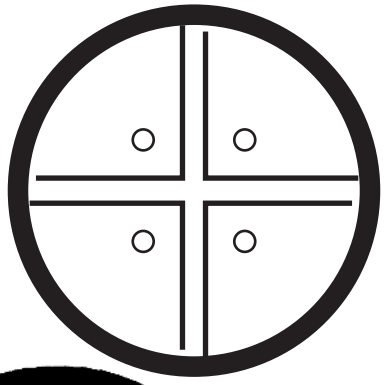
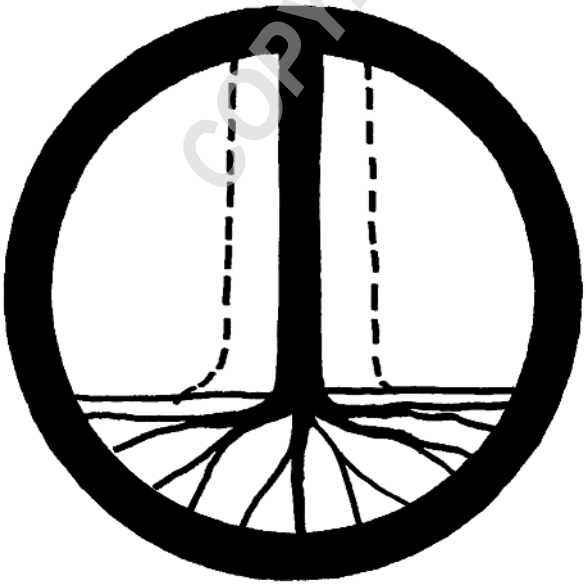
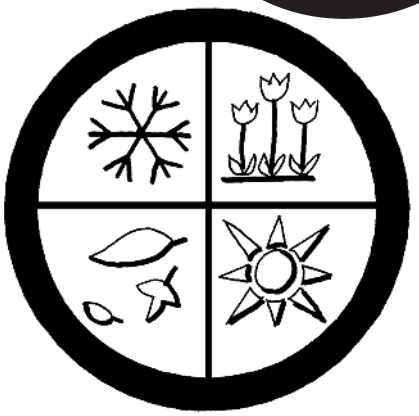
PART

I

DETAIL PATTERNS







SECTION

1

AESTHETICS

A landscape should please the eye. Its details play a large role in this important function. Every truly great landscape has great details: details that contribute to the aesthetic themes of the site, that complement one another, and that create beauty out of the ordinary materials and necessities of construction. A landscape with a splendid thematic idea can fail as landscape architecture if it has poor details: details that are badly matched to its primary aesthetic, that do not relate strongly to one another, or that fail to lift their materials above the ordinary.

The detail patterns that relate to aesthetics are few in number, but each is powerful, far-reaching, and requires greater effort and insight to implement than any of the patterns relating to function and constructibility. The foremost aesthetic requirement for detailing is that all of the details of a landscape should contribute to its formal and spatial theme. Aesthetics drive what one should detail as well as how that detail will be developed. That development is based in ideas. Without strong and clear design ideas, the detailer's work is much more difficult. There is little basis for deciding how to configure a detail. Should the space feel enclosed, or expansive? What elements are the most important and which ones are subordinate? Should the joints between materials accentuate their differences or downplay them? Aesthetic features of individual details should be as appealing in future years as when they were built. These requirements are developed in the following detail patterns:

Contributive Details (p. 5)
Timeless Features (p. 7)

Details may be elaborated to feature certain inherent characteristics, or they may be decorative for purely visual effect:

Hierarchy of Refinement (p. 8)
Intensification and Ornamentation (p. 10)
Active Details and Recessive Details (p. 12)
Continuous and Discontinuous Details (p. 14)

Lastly, details may be developed whose role is solely to unify and give order to the visual composition of landscape elements that otherwise might seem disjointed or unrelated. This role is introduced in the following patterns:

Formal Transitions (p. 15)

Composing the Detail (p. 17)

These eight patterns serve to focus the detailer's attention on some important aesthetic issues that arise in detailing. They constitute a small part of a much larger field of study, visual composition that will amply repay as much time as the detailer can devote to its study.

The body of built landscape from antiquity to the present provides evidence of the importance of the link between art and craft. Classical Greeks originated the notion of *techne*, derived from the Greek verb *tikto,* meaning to produce. This term means the simultaneous existence of both art and craft, deliberately avoiding distinction between the two.

Landscape architectural details can convey to the observer in literal terms the facts about the form and how it is made. They can also reveal what is latent within the form—features so subtle that they are not consciously noticed by the casual observer. In these patterns, the term "aesthetics" will be used to describe features that recognize the inextricable link between art and craft, between the ideal and the circumstantial, between the concept and its tangible embodiment. In landscape architectural detailing, ideas must be made real.

The detailer is challenged to find solutions that solve the specific technical requirements of a given detail, while also showing affinity with the landscape's central aesthetic themes. Some details may seem to have no solutions, others may have many. The best solutions are functional, convey meaning, and reward the senses.

Although the emphasis in this section is on the visual qualities of a landscape and its details, the detailer should always look for opportunities to delight the other human senses. Tactile qualities of materials are important: the feel of decomposed granite underfoot; the shiny precision of a stainless steel and glass railing; deep, luxurious cushions on a bench; or the rough texture of a split stone wall. Auditory qualities are also vital: Should a particular space seem hushed and quiet? Should it be vast and echoey? Should one's footsteps resound throughout a space, or would it be more appropriate for one to tread softly, as if floating noiselessly? Would it enhance the users experience if one heard the sounds of splashing water, of birdsongs, of wind in trees, or of children chattering, in lieu of traffic noise? And consider the opportunities for olfactory delight in a landscape: the fragrance of thyme underfoot, the perfume of flowers, the freshness of mown grass, the moist breezes off a pond. Once again, the designers of the greatest landscapes have considered these possibilities and have often used them to their advantage.

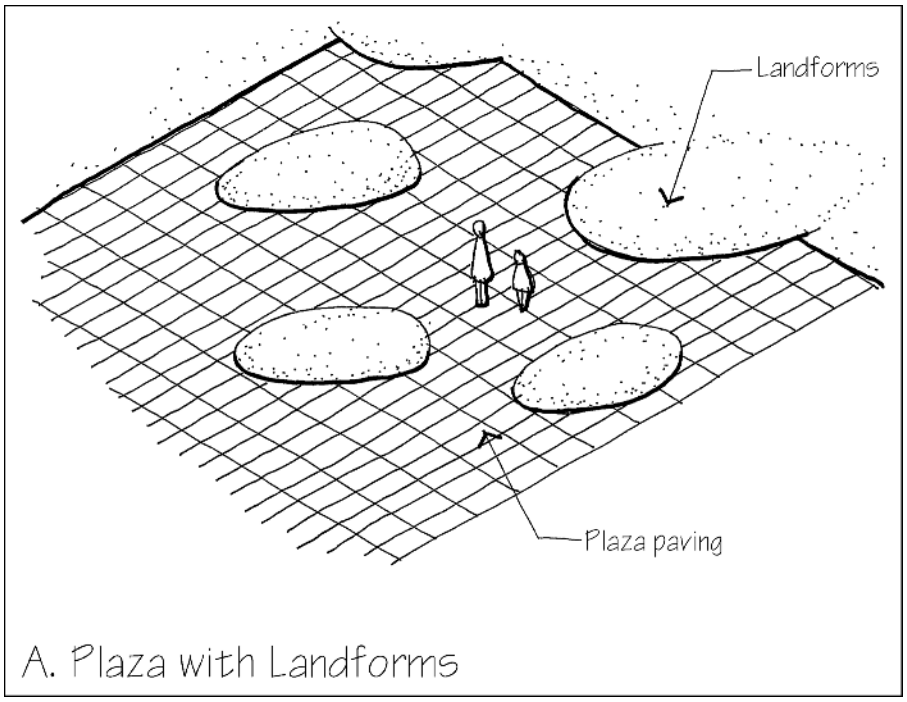
CHAPTER 1

Aesthetics

Contributive Details

All of the details of a landscape should contribute to its formal and spatial theme. They support and embellish the main design ideas in a landscape.

1. Many details are associated with a style. The style may be the incidental byproduct of practical actions, as might be found in good vernacular design, or the intentional expression of a particular body of work such as the California Modernists of the 1950s and 1960s. The flowing concrete patios and walls, redwood decks and fences all contributed to the "look" of the modern gardens of that time. They were a departure from the symmetry and ornament of the Beaux Arts that preceded it, and the detailing complimented the new aesthetic. Styles in landscape architecture are not always as well defined as in architecture, but the aesthetic sensibilities of a time are reflected in landscape architecture as well as the other arts.



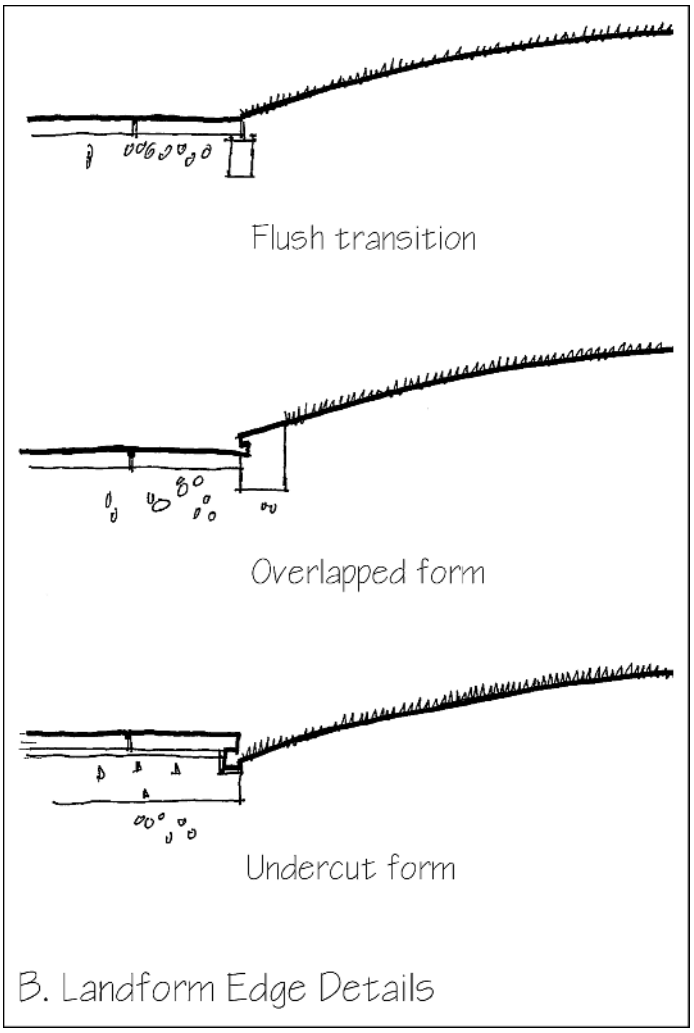
A. Plaza with Landforms

2. In similar fashion we can analyze the details associated with any landscape architectural style: Baroque landscapes, which used highly finished materials with ornate profiles that were unified in balanced symmetrical compositions directly contrasted with Contemporary design, where elements may instead juxtapose machined and unprocessed materials in asymmetrical unresolved compositions with overlapping forms.

3. Every designer of landscapes works in his or her own manner or style. It may not have a name, but it has a consistent personality, sensibility, or a guiding ethic. This personality or ethic stems from an approach to space, form, light, color, and to details. The style of the details must be integral with the style of the landscape. As a designer's manner evolves and changes with each project, so must the details. The details must contribute their proportional share to the character and content of the landscape. For some landscape architects, a particular material or detail is the seed from which the landscape's design grows. Even if not the source of the central design concept, details are the voice of the concept, the means through which the concept is expressed. They are evident in the earliest conceptual drawings and must be developed as the design evolves. ▷

4. A landscape's details should be all of a family. It will not do to copy one detail from one source, another detail from another, and patch together a set of details that function well but bear no visible resemblance to one another. The designer should develop a matched set of the most important details as an ongoing part of the overall design process. This set of key details should then serve to guide the preparation of every other visible detail in the project. Details may become related by sharing a common compositional approach, which may be evident in their proportions, materiality, alignment, and orientation.

5. Dissimilar elements and architectural palettes can also be joined. Special attention must be given to their technical and compositional compatibility. One paving pattern may spill out over another. The details of the edges are the key to expressing either a low-key harmonious transition or to accentuate the tension and drama of the contrast between two different patterns and forms. Landforms marching across a plaza should have an edge detail that makes it clear that the landforms are dominant and overlapping the plaza below as opposed to rising up from below (see A and B). ■



B. Landform Edge Details

Timeless Features

Details embody all that we know from the past, they respond to the certainty of the present, and they will serve an unknown future. They should be designed with this broad time frame in mind, not focused too narrowly on the present.

1. Nothing grows wearisome faster than a trendy detail or material treatment. The longer the life expectancy of the project, the more timeless its materials and details should be. It is usually inappropriate to detail a park or institutional landscape which will have a long life in the public realm, in the fleeting fashion of the day. However, it may be appropriate to do so in a hotel or retail project that will be continually renovated to stay new, or for an individual's garden where the aesthetic expression is personal and specific to the changing preferences of the owner. Well-designed details, made using durable materials and installed using appropriate workmanship, have a timeless quality.

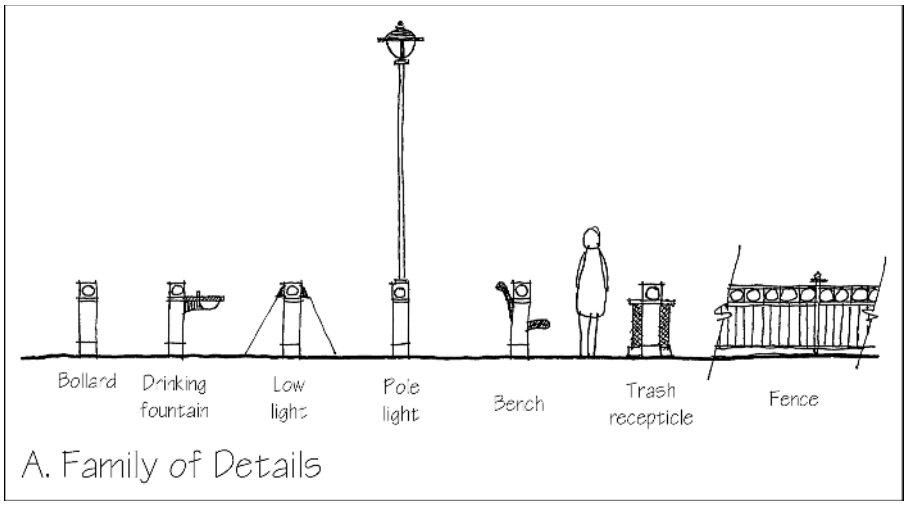
2. Timeless details are more likely to be understood and appreciated by people in the future, much as good literature or music is appreciated by successive generations in a culture. A landscape with well-proportioned forms and spaces, a logical plan, and meaningful and well-made details will live a long time, almost certainly longer than the initial program. Owners in the future will become the landscape's stewards, maintaining it, introducing new elements with care, and being respectful of its basic ordering principles. Such landscapes should not be made with features that become aesthetically obsolete in a short period of time.

3. To be timeless, a detail does not need to have been done previously, or selected from a catalog of stock solutions. Innovation remains essential. New details and materials will always be part of a landscape architect's work. New details should be based on sound compositional principles, contribute to the overall themes of the design, have a grasp of the relevant physical phenomena, and should not waste human or material resources. If this is done, the details will likely achieve this timeless quality.

4. The means of production and "best practices" *du jour* often become a date stamp on the project. As industry introduces new materials and processes, or as new methods of construction are introduced at the construction site, eager designers explore their technical and aesthetic possibilities. Each designer nudges the envelope of authentic insights regarding the new material or process. Initial uses of new materials and tools are often ersatz imitations of their predecessors. Insight follows imitation: plastic was first used to imitate ivory products, such as billiard balls and piano keys; only later were the unique possibilities (and limitations) of plastics discovered. As light sources have become smaller and more energy-efficient, the design of light fixtures has expanded the range of lighting options tremendously. Detailers should actively participate in the exploration of new materials and construction processes, striving to distinguish between formal possibilities that are timeless and those that are merely today's fashion. ■

Hierarchy of Refinement

When designing a project, landscape architects usually establish a hierarchy of importance for spaces and elements, reflecting the importance of each part of the landscape in relation to the other parts. The level of refinement of details within the project should be consistent with this hierarchy.



A. Family of Details

1. Important spaces are often finished and detailed more lavishly or specially than other spaces of lesser stature. The front entrance of an office building is more extensively detailed than the loading dock. Plazas and squares are more refined than the pathways leading to them.

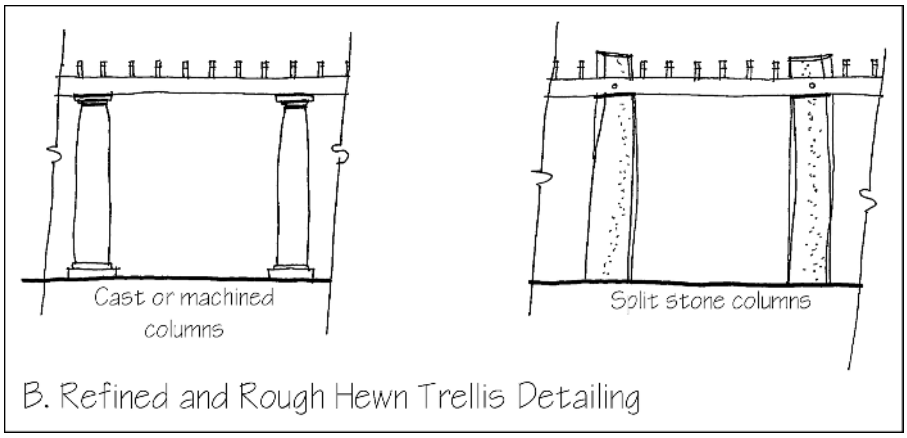
2. Details that will be viewed at close range are generally more refined than those that will be seen from far away and may also be designed for tactile olfactory qualities. The details of pedestrian ways are inherently more intricate than of vehicular ways, acknowledging differences in distance and speed of the viewer.

3. In elements with layered forms of construction, the visible outer surfaces are typically detailed with much more refinement than those that are concealed within the assembly, where only technical issues are relevant. A concrete block backer wall that supports a veneer of brick or stucco need not be aesthetically pleasing because it will be concealed by a visible outer finish. See *progressive finish,* p. 180.

4. No detail should fail to meet its functional obligations and all details must be constructible, but the degree of refinement may vary in order to enhance the detail's symbolic or experiential content. Some details are to be celebrated in the landscape, while others are quietly competent, functional but simple. Resources that are conserved in making the routine details are then available for the special ones. Pathways paved with asphalt and edged with simple concrete curbs can subsidize an intersection with stone pavement and decorative curbing.

5. Differences between details should be thought of as variations on a basic theme. This will make all the details part of a family, and will make it easier for the observer to detect the intended relationship between them (see A).

6. At one time, refined building materials were wrought from raw materials; stone details were carved from rough blocks; a squared wood column was laboriously shaped from a log with an adze and plane from a log. High refinement was the mark of a skilled craftsperson, bestowing honor and respect to the artifact. With injection-molded plastics, aluminum extrusions, and computer-controlled laser cutters, we can now produce precise, refined pieces with unprecedented ease. We may ask: How much precision and refinement is enough? If every surface and detail is equally refined, none is more important than another. Meaning is diminished when there is no differentiation of refinement. Architectural philosopher John Ruskin advocated in his *Stones of Venice,* first published in 1851–53: "There should be no refinement of execution where there is no thought, for that is slave's work, unredeemed. Rather choose rough work to smooth work so only the practical purpose be answered, and never imagine there is reason to be proud of anything that may be accomplished by patience and sandpaper." Our attraction to precision, crisp details, and smooth surfaces may be a vestige of the pre-industrial and predigital ages, when the means of production made such refinements rare and expensive. Many times it is the rough and un-machined elements that are now expensive and rare. A site element can be detailed utilizing machined or rough hewn material such as the trellis above. The effect of the material choice is integral to the design. The detailer should continue to reserve the most special, custom-made details for the most important elements in the landscape, and make other details in a manner consistent in quality and cost with their level of importance (see B). ■

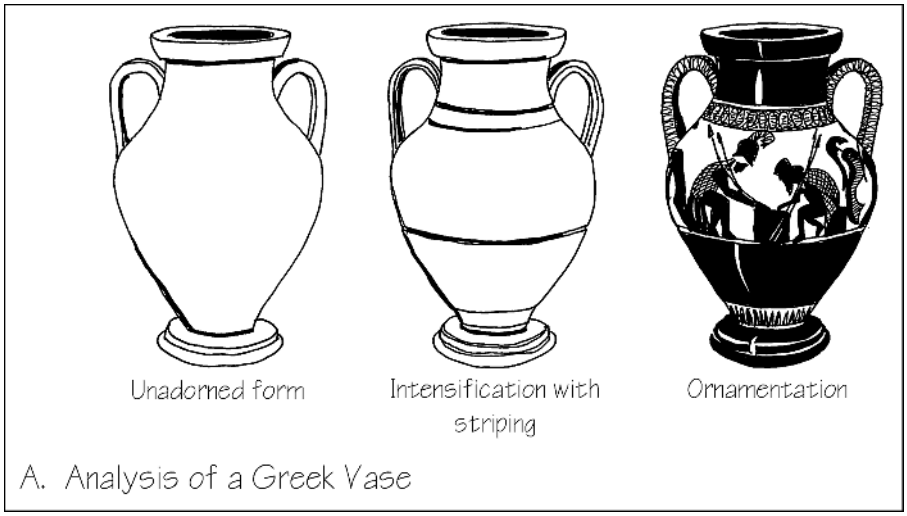


B. Refined and Rough Hewn Trellis Detailing

Details can be embellished to add to the visual richness of a landscape.

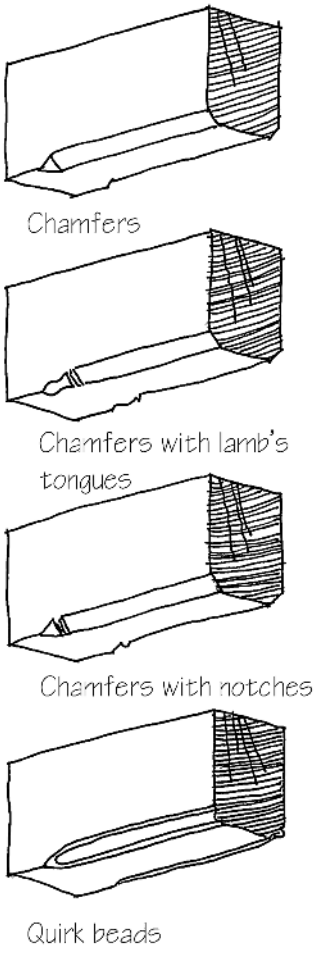
1. Since the beginning of civilization, makers of things have evidenced love of their work by adding nonfunctional elements to their forms. Weavers have added textures, colors, and patterns. Tile makers have added brightly decorated glazes. Carpenters have chamfered and carved their work. Shinglers have added scallops and sawtooth patterns. Masons have laid delightful patterns of headers, soldiers, rowlocks, and corbels in their walls. The results of these efforts are often very beautiful, sometimes because they bring out inherent beauties of material and craft, and sometimes because they are simply beautiful in the abstract.

2. If we examine an ancient decorated Greek vase, we find two sets of patterns painted on it. One set is made up of circumferential stripes and bands that were created by holding a paintbrush against the clay vase as it spun on the potter's wheel. These stripes generally were applied at locations that were significant in relationship to the curvature of the vase—a change in the radius or direction of curvature. This practice might be termed intensification, because it is purposefully related to the process of making the vase and to its form, and thus it intensifies the vase's aesthetic. The bands and stripes express the pragmatic and formal qualities of the vase. The other set of patterns consists of scenes of animals, warriors, athletes, gods, and goddesses—whatever suited the mood or mission of the potter. These bear little or no relationship to the manufacture or form of the vase, and might be termed ornamentation. Both intensification and ornamentation contribute to the beauty of the vase, but they sprang from different inspirations (see A).



A. Analysis of a Greek Vase

3. Intensification and ornamentation have their places also in the work of the building trades. The carpenter's chamfers reduce the likelihood of splinters along the edges of a post or beam, so they have a function to perform. However, they also bring the long, straight edges more prominently to our view, and their beveled facets add sculptural interest to the timbers. A chamfer could not continue into a joint between members without creating unsightly gaps, so carpenters developed stylish ways of terminating chamfers short of the end of the member, in devices such as sinuous lamb's tongues or various angular notches. In the joints themselves, most of the artistry of the carpenter was necessarily concealed in mortises, tenons, and laps, but pleasing patterns could be created of exposed pegs and brackets. All this might be considered intensification, because it sprang from necessity but went beyond it to create a delight that enhances our understanding of the making of the building. If the carpenter went on to carve scenes or mottoes on the sides of the beams, this was ornamentation, because as attractive and contributive to the overall aesthetic of the structure as it might be, it was not directly related to necessity (see B).



B. Intensification of Beam Edges

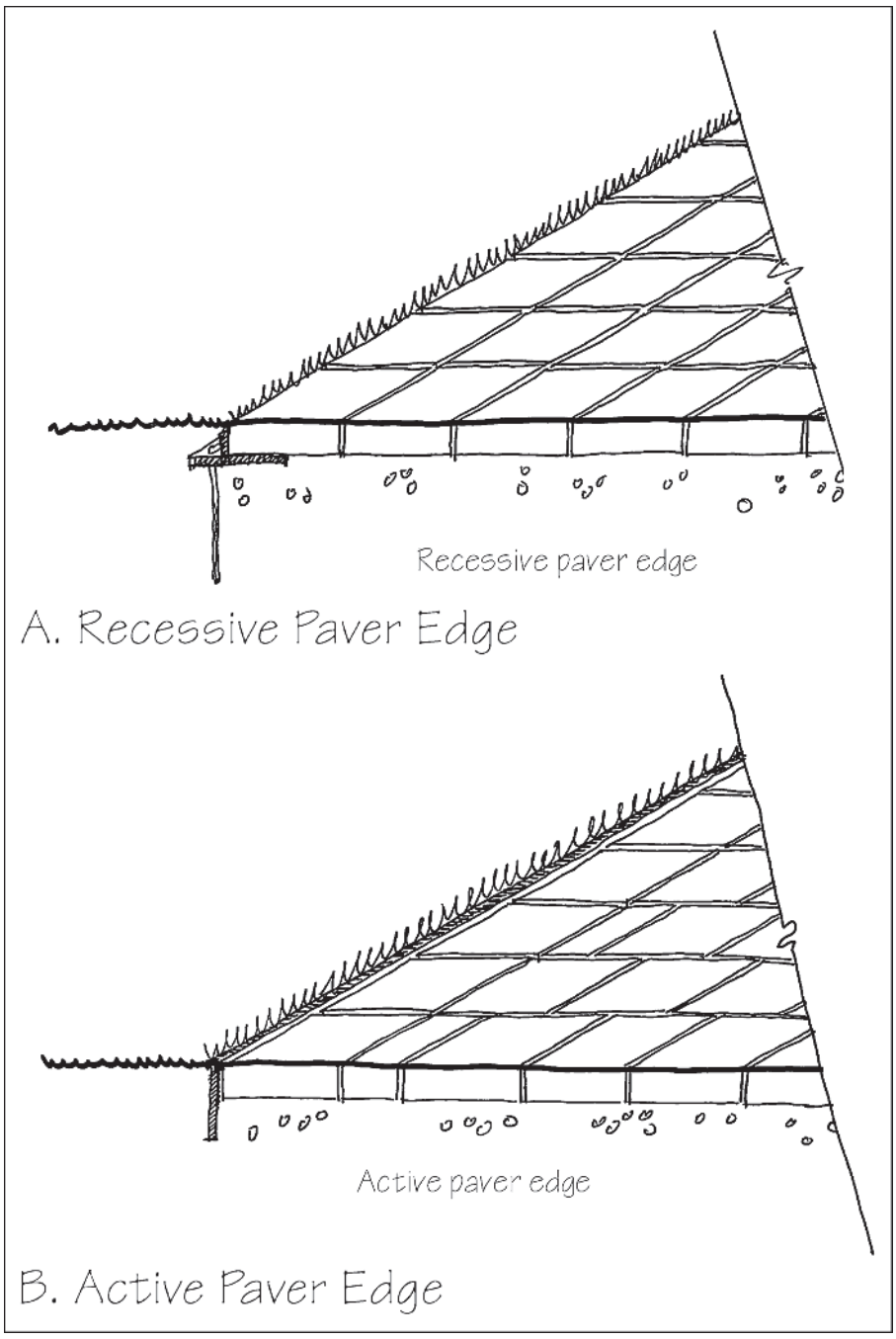
4. The detailer should look first to intensification as a way of enhancing the aesthetic impact of details. The sources of inspiration are many: the need to put control joints into a concrete slab or stucco wall surface; the need to use form ties and rustication strips to create satisfactory surfaces of architectural concrete; the need to add brackets and bolts to connect members of steel or timber; the need to contain modular pavers; the need to install a lintel to support masonry over an opening in a garden wall; or the need to cover the gaps between fence boards to control sound and sight. Each of these is an opportunity to intensify the form of a portion of the project by such strategies as adding lines or moldings to junctions between planes, creating rhythms and patterns of fasteners or seams, exaggerating sizes or numbers of things such as bolts or brackets, or adding contrasting colors. Each such effort is a celebration of the necessary, a virtuoso cadenza, a sharing of the joy of assembling a landscape with the viewer, who was not involved in its construction.

5. Ornamentation can be equally as effective as intensification, but it requires more dexterity and judgment, because it does not arise from a specific, tangible feature of the project but is derived from some other source or is created from scratch. Often intensification alone is sufficient to carry the landscape into the realm of the special, and applied ornament can look superficial, even awkward or tasteless if it is badly done or is at odds with the intrinsic features of the composition. ■

Active and Recessive Details

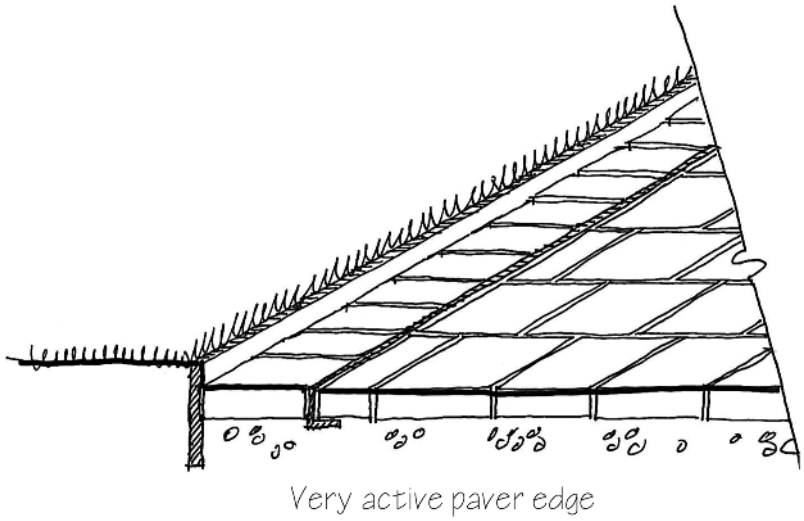
Details can actively contribute visually to the overall form or geometry of the design, visually asserting its presence against the surrounding field, or it can recess and blend quietly into its surroundings.

1. A simple paver edge detail can be either active or recessive. A recessive detail may include a plastic edge restraint that contains the pavers below grade and allows the pavers to abut the surrounding landscape directly. A complementary paving pattern could be a simple field unadorned with headers (see A).



An active detail containing the same elements might also include a plastic or steel edge, but one that expresses itself at the surface (see B). A very active edge may extend above the face of the pavers to allow the paver surface to be slightly depressed below the edge of the surrounding landscape (see C). The paver surface could be further intensified with a header at the edge ornamented with an inscription or be enhanced by an additional decorative layer of stone or other contracting material.

2. The detailer weighs many factors when deciding whether a particular feature should be active or recessive. A largely transparent deck railing overlooking a spectacular view should include visually simple details that recede and don't compete with the view. On the other hand, guardrails and edges of steps and walls should be appropriately detailed in a very active manor to accentuate the differences between these elements and their surroundings and make them more visible. In these locations, the functional need for safety is more important than aesthetic concerns. ■



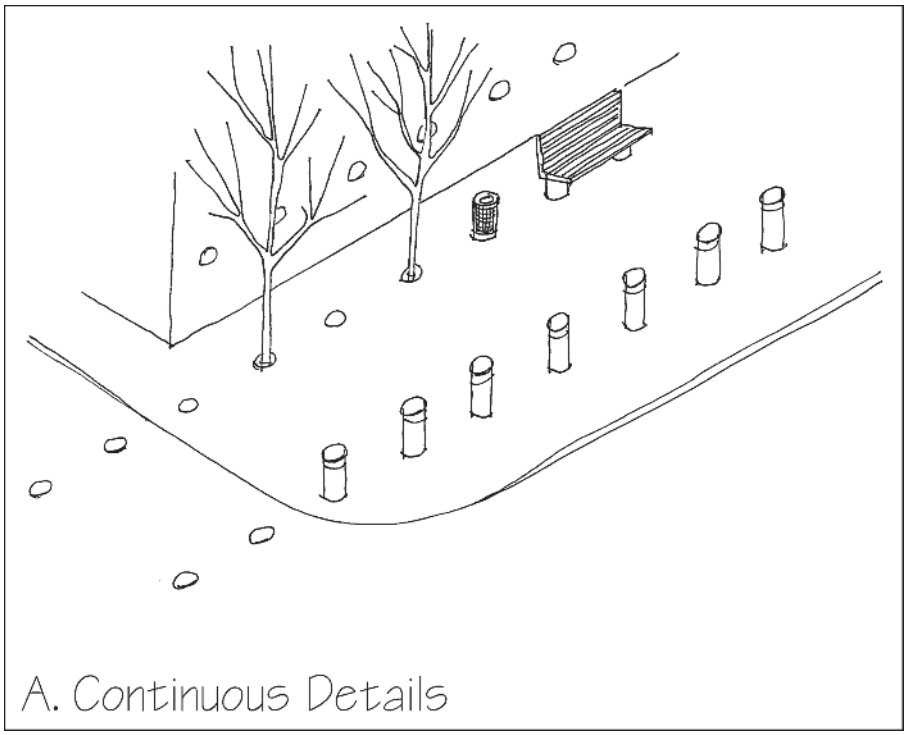
C. Very Active Paver Edge

Continuous and Discontinuous Details

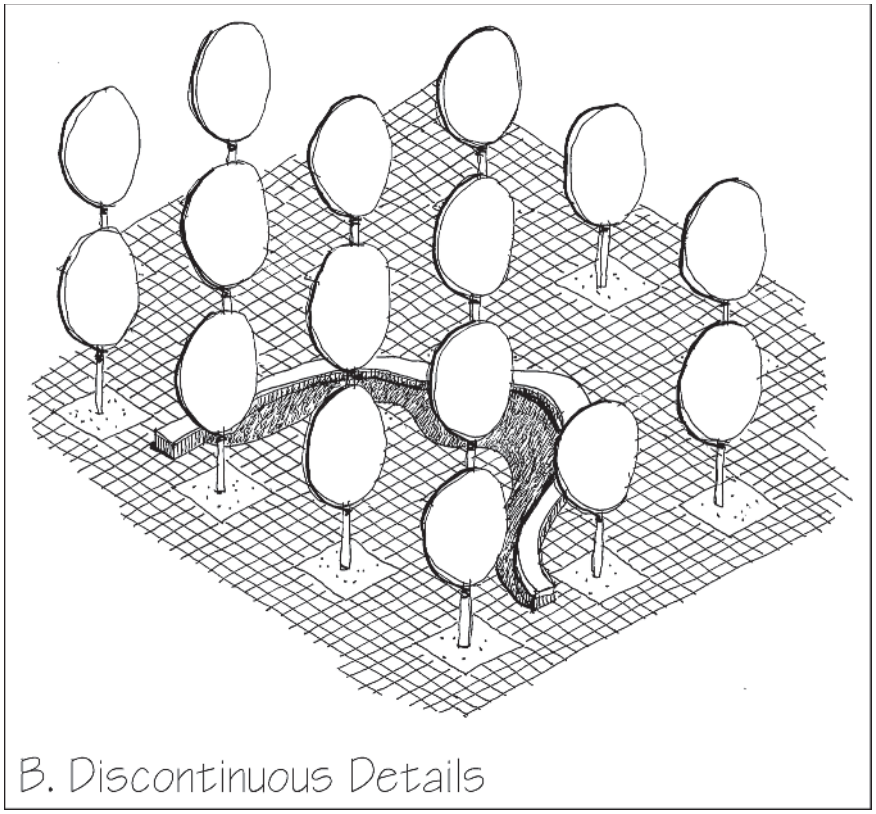
Element profiles or patterns can be repeated in a family of details. The continuity or discontinuity of this repetition can be used to reinforce design ideas.

1. A stone bollard can be mimicked in a paving pattern, in a wall insert, and in bench supports all following an overriding pattern and/or module in the design. As the pattern of stone elements overlays the landscape, they can morph into bollards, benches, light posts, and so forth with all these elements sharing details that are applied continuously over the site (see A).

2. An element can also be detailed to accentuate its differences with its surrounding. Discontinuous details introduce contrast to the landscape, accentuating its difference. When the prevailing pattern of the landscape is not followed, it draws attention to the uniqueness or importance of the discontinuous element (see B). ■



A. Continuous Details



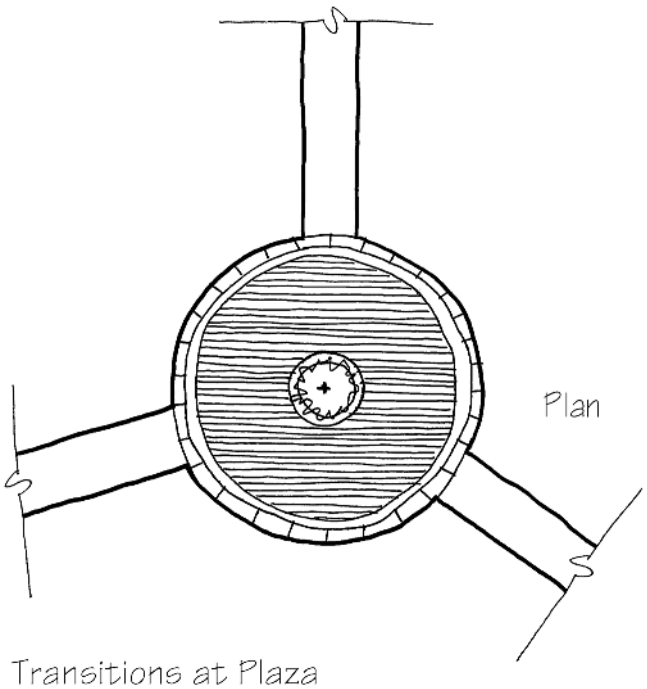
B. Discontinuous Details

Formal Transitions

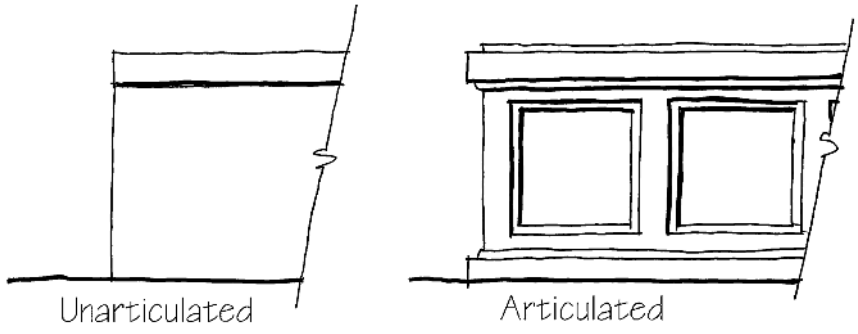
Details can help to unify the visual composition of landscape elements that might otherwise seem disjointed or unrelated.

1. The masses and forms of a well-designed element generally merge pleasingly and require no further attention from the detailer, but occasionally a detail can help to correct the appearance of an awkward junction. A circular plaza at the junction of three paths may be weak as a diagram. Minor changes in the paving and edge detailing can celebrate the forms and focus attention on the shape of the plaza, establishing the prominence of the hierarchy of spaces at the site (see A).

2. An unarticulated transition from a stucco wall to a precast cap appears indecisive. The addition of recessed panels with a decorative border and the overhanging of the cap with a base trim below and at the base of the wall, breaks down the mass of the wall into component parts covered with a unifying top and base (see B). ▷



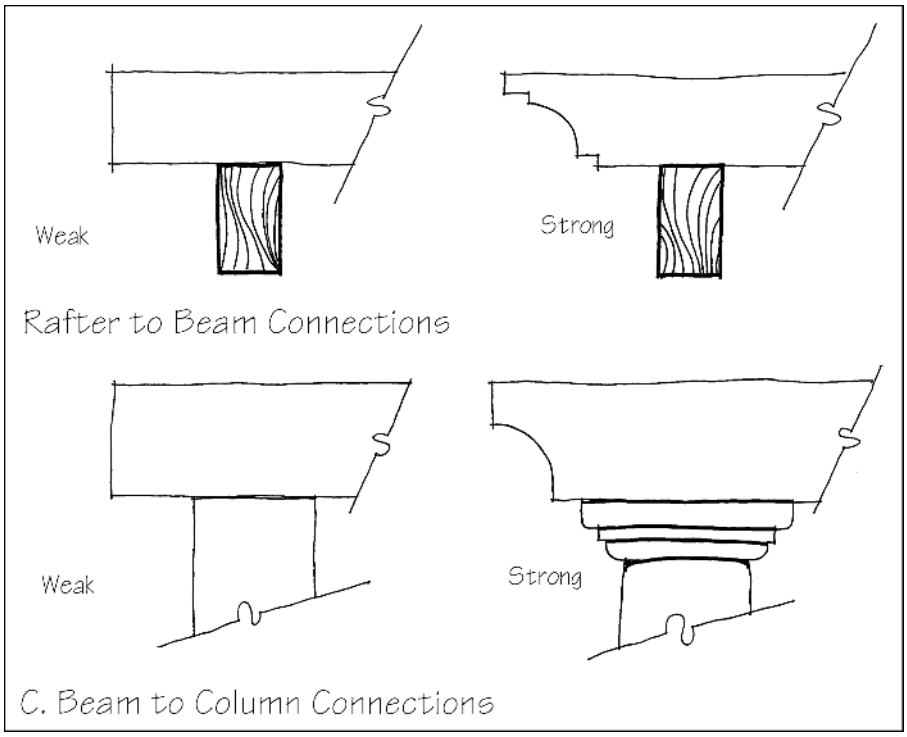
A. Formal Transitions at Plaza

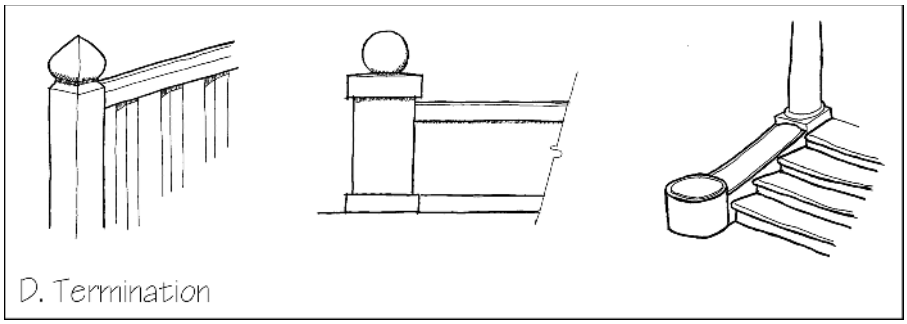


B. Articulated/Unarticulated Walls

3. In wood construction, a square cut rafter that simply extends beyond a supporting beam looks visually weak. A contouring of the rafter end can be a much stronger transition to the leading edge of a trellis overhang. Similarly, the connection of a column to beam can also appear weak and abrupt. The introduction of a capital can visually strengthen the transition (see C).

4. There are many details that benefit from a graceful termination of a form: a finial on a newel post, a volute at the termination of a cheekwall, a pier at the end of a wall. In none of these examples is it visually satisfactory merely to chop off the member that is being terminated (see D). ■



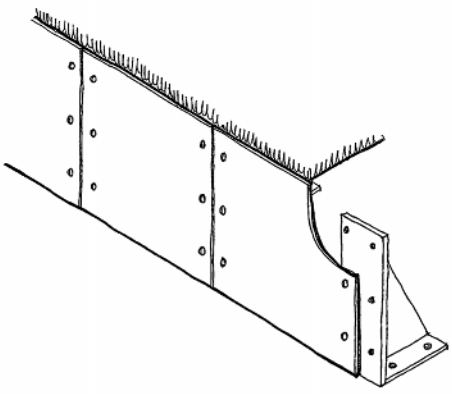


Composing the Detail

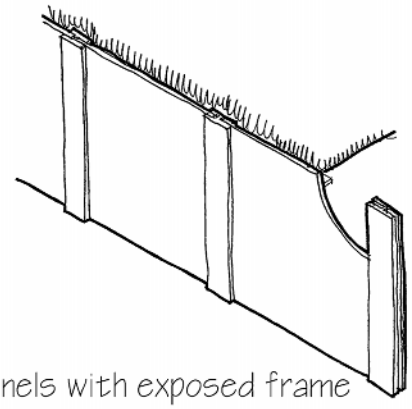
Aesthetic goals are often catalysts for exploration of a detail's technical possibilities. The detailer fuses aesthetic composition and technical exploration to find the best solution.

1. In the best landscapes, the details go beyond the technical realm to convey important compositional qualities and meaning. A well-composed detail can capture the essence of the design in a vivid way and can explain the relationships between the elements it joins. The brick paving that is scribed to meet the irregular face of an existing rock outcrop tells us that the outcrop is the dominant element, anchoring the composition. The detail demonstrates the basic design concept.

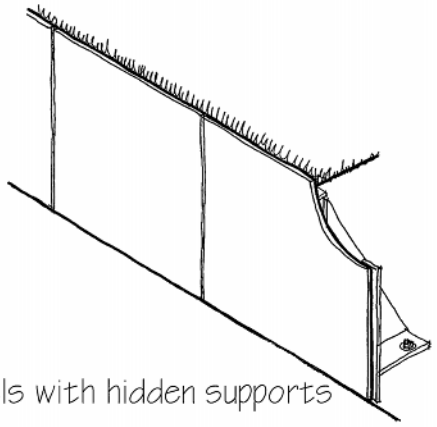
2. Detailers must resolve countless compositional questions such as whether an expressed joint is desired. In a low Cor Ten steel retaining wall, the steel panels can be fit into an expressed frame that is partially hidden, or supported with the most minimally visible frame. What the detail looks like and how the detail is made are inseparable aspects (see A). ▷



Panels with exposed fasteners



Panels with exposed frame

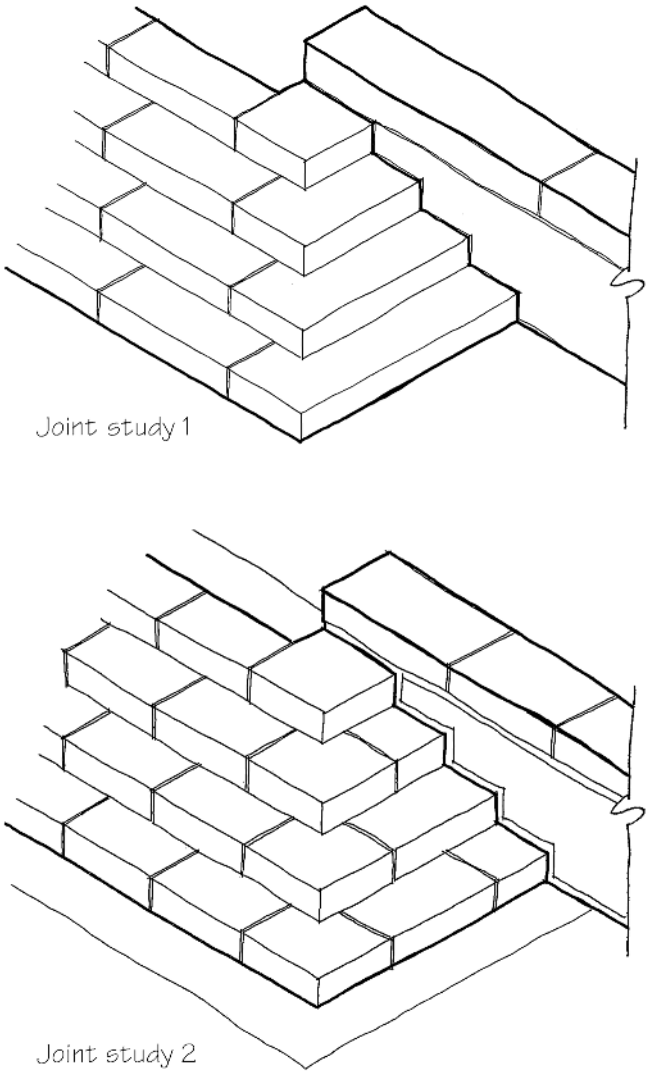


Panels with hidden supports

A. Wall Joint Options

3. Many landscapes have one little feature that people can fall in love with. The potency of the detail as a memorable element of the landscape is sometimes underestimated. Details that are seen up close or touched have the greatest potential to positively influence the observer. Whimsical inserts of castings or tile into paving or walls can personalize a space, making a connection between the designer and the users, inserting a little humor onto the landscape.

4. Details must be visualized in three dimensions. It is wise to develop details in three-dimensional sketches or models to visualize completely their forms and implications. Three-dimensional development also helps to explore how each detail turns the corner or intersects another element (see B). ■



B. Joint Studies