

# FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

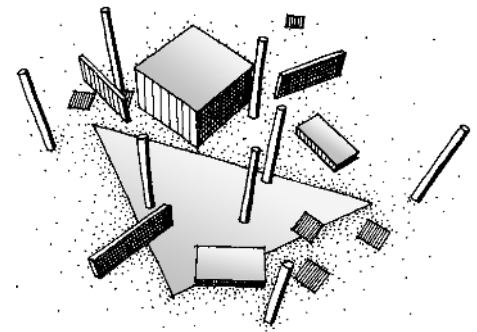
# Landscape Form

# 1

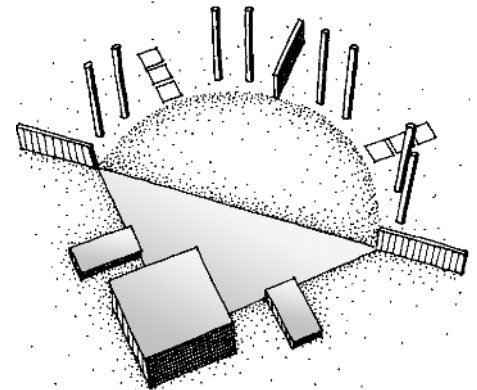
One principal objective of landscape architectural site design is to impart a spatial organization for human use and enrichment by orchestrating a broad palette of elements in an inspiring and coordinated manner. A primary means for choreographing this potpourri of elements is “form,” an armature for assembling the many landscape elements that define landscape space. Without form, space exists as an amorphous void that lacks clarity and legibility (top 1.1). Form is the cornerstone for forging landscape site design and provides the most elemental means for coherently aligning elements so that space is discerned (bottom 1.1). Form is inherent to how landscape architects think and express themselves.

This chapter examines form as the basis for molding space in landscape architectural site design. The definition, typologies, ways for modifying, and techniques for organizing form in the landscape are all examined as the foundation for subsequent chapters. The sections of this chapter include:

- Form
- Primary Shapes
- Form Transformation
- Organizational Structures
- Unifying Principles

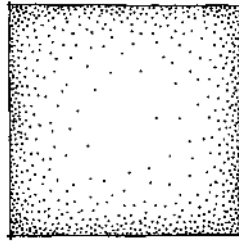


NO FORM PRESENT

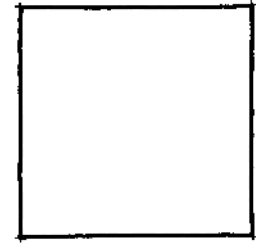


FORM PRESENT

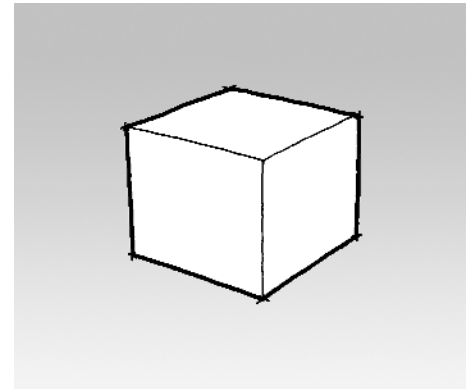
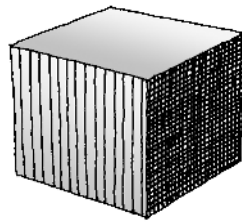
1.1 Form organizes and delineates space.



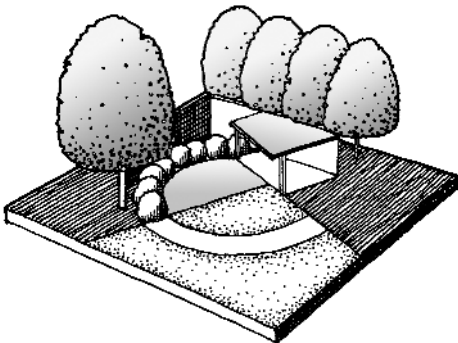
FORM



SHAPE



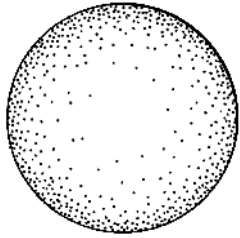
- 1.2** Right: Comparison between form and shape.
- 1.3** Below: Form is the overall arrangement of a design.



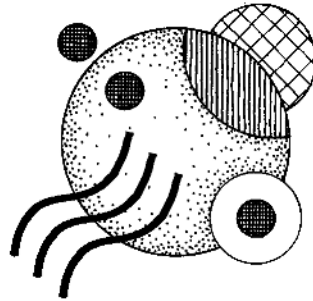
## Form

Form is defined as the “structure of a work—the manner of arranging and coordinating the elements and parts of a composition so as to produce a coherent image” (Ching 2007, 34). Form is analogous to physique, anatomy, figure, formation, format, and arrangement. The term “form” is often interchanged with “shape” although “form” more accurately refers to the three-dimensional expression of volume while “shape” refers to a two-dimensional edge or outline (Bell 1993, 50; Ching 2007, 34). Shape is the silhouette of a form juxtaposed against a contrasting background or material (1.2).

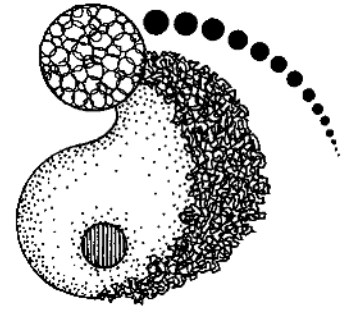
The term *form* is used in this text to mean both the defining edge and internal area of each individual design element as well as the overall arrangement of the design (1.3). The notion of form is not limited to the shape of areas on the ground plane but is the totality of a design that encompasses both flat planes and three-dimensional volumes. Form may be simple or complex, controlled or spontaneous, human or organic, repetitive or variable, symmetrical or asymmetrical, and so on (1.4).



SIMPLE



COMPLEX



ORGANIC

Form is articulated in the landscape by edges and shape. The silhouette of form is easiest seen around structural elements that have mass and extend upward from the base plane like walls, fences, steps, decks, planters, and so on (left 1.5). Similarly, the outline of form is seen around voids that are recessed into the ground like pools, sunken spaces, descending steps, and the like. Less obvious, although just as important, are the perimeters exhibited by softer landscape elements like a line of trees, mass of shrubs, water bodies, and topography.

Form is also evident on the ground plane where different materials meet one another to establish a line (middle 1.5). The greater the contrast between the juxtaposed materials, the more clearly an edge is perceived. A complete form is defined when this boundary encircles an area, thus suggesting the floor of a space. Finally, the boundary of form is forged by elements above the ground like canvas awnings, trellises, and tree canopies (right 1.5). The junction of three-dimensional elements with one another expresses form as well.

**1.4** Form is highly variable in complexity and character.

**1.5** Examples of form in the landscape.



EDGES in VERTICAL PLANE



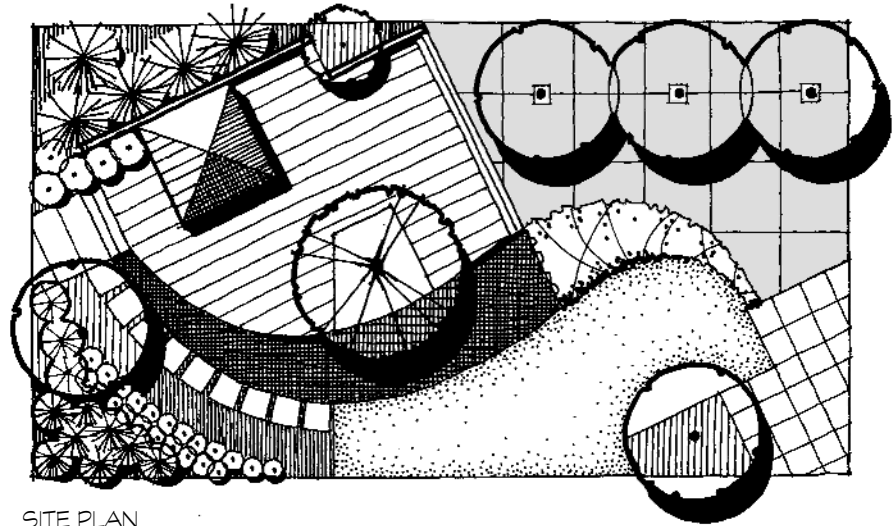
EDGES on GROUND PLANE



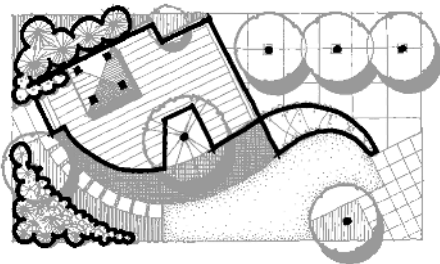
EDGES in OVERHEAD PLANE

In summary, form is created any time a line circumscribes an area whether it be on the ground or in the third dimension. Consequently, a landscape site design is composed of a multitude of lines and forms, all intertwined in a carefully orchestrated network (1.6). During the design process, these edges are thoughtfully and creatively assembled to mold outdoor space as discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter.

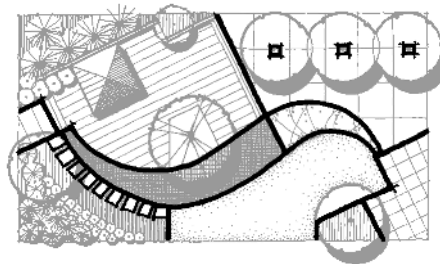
1.6 A design is composed of multiple lines and forms.



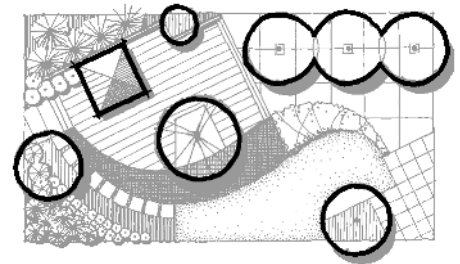
SITE PLAN



EDGES in VERTICAL PLANE

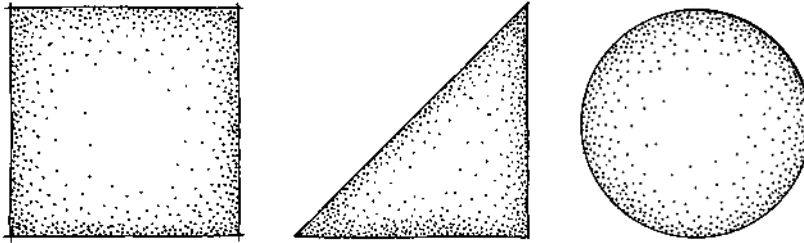


EDGES on GROUND PLANE

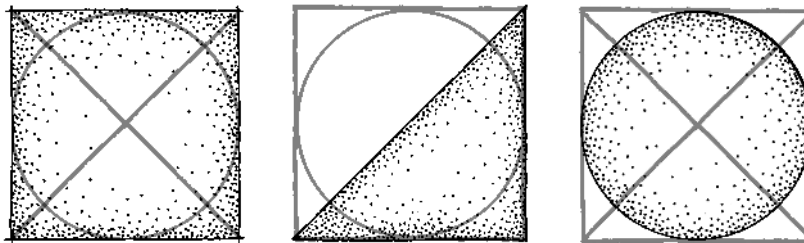


EDGES in OVERHEAD PLANE





1.7 Primary shapes.



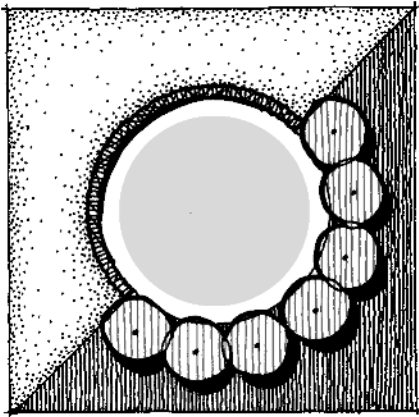
1.8 Geometric relationship among the primary forms.

## Primary Shapes

There are innumerable forms that the landscape architect can employ to mold exterior space. Some are human fabrications while others are abstracted from natural elements. Among the many possibilities, the most rudimentary shapes are the square, triangle, and circle (1.7) (Reid 2007, 17). Simple polygons like pentagons and hexagons are sometimes also considered among the basic geometric shapes (Ching 2007, 38). These primary shapes are composed of the least number of sides and therefore are the most pure. Similarly these shapes are the easiest to recognize and typically the first learned by an infant.

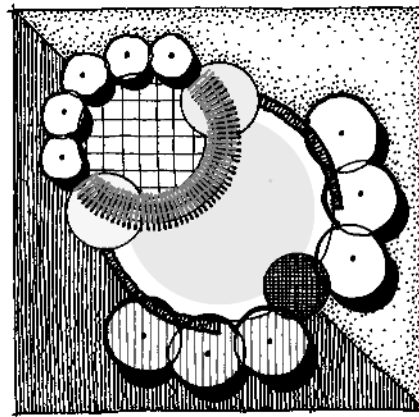
The triad of the square, triangle, and circle also possess an intrinsic geometric relationship. Each can be defined within and/or generated from the others (1.8). No other family of shapes manifests this unique interrelationship. There is an almost mystic association among the primary shapes that gives them special significance in design.

The square, triangle, and circle can each serve as the underpinning for a simple, single landscape space (left 1.9). Such spaces are fitting for an individual function, a place of restrained emphasis, and/or as one space among others. Their simplicity makes them easily recognized and understood, thus providing a feeling of familiarity and comfort.

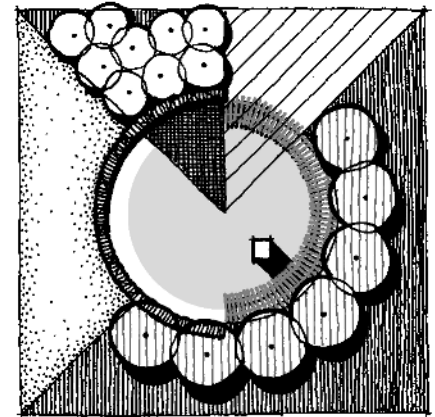


SINGLE SPACE

**1.9** Potential array of spaces that can be forged with the primary forms.



MULTIPLE SPACES

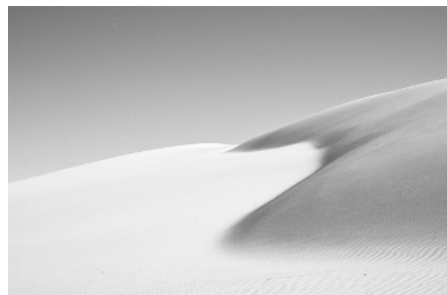


MULTIPLE SPACES & FORMS

In addition to being the foundation of single spaces, the primary shapes are also the principal building blocks for forging multiple and more elaborate spaces. Like individual notes in music, the square, triangle, and circle can be transformed to generate more complex configurations as discussed in the next section (middle 1.9). Furthermore, the primary geometric shapes can be combined with one another to forge innumerable additional compositional possibilities (right 1.9).

Another category of forms is the organic. While often not considered to be as fundamental as the square, triangle, and circle, organic forms are a broad classification of shapes that are derived from elements and patterns found in nature. Vegetation, landform, geological formations, water, the sky, insects, animals, and so on all provide copious sources that can be emulated or abstracted as the basis of landscape space (1.10). It should be noted that the square, triangle, and circle are themselves found in nature or extracted from nature. Thus, the natural world is the true origin of all forms (see Chapter 16).

**1.10** Examples of organic forms.

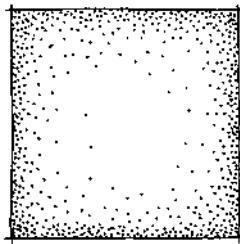


The square, triangle, polygon, and circle along with organic forms are the basis for Chapters 3–16 of this text. Each primary shape and its constituent parts are more thoroughly examined in their ability to serve as the foundation of landscape space along with their fundamental design qualities, potential uses, and associated design guidelines.

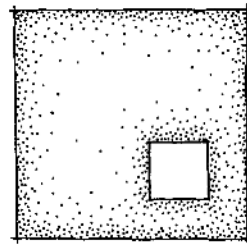
## Form Transformation

In addition to being used by themselves as pure forms, the primary shapes are the origin for the evolution of other more elaborate forms. The process for forging altered forms is referred to as *transformation* or the mutation of one shape into another. The purpose of transformation is to generate forms that are appropriate to the particular circumstances of each design setting and to be a vehicle for creatively molding landscape space. The extent of metamorphous a primary form undergoes can be minimal or extensive depending on site circumstances and program requirements. There are five fundamental strategies for transformation discussed in the following paragraphs: subtraction, addition, rotation, intervention, and synthesis of the others (1.11).

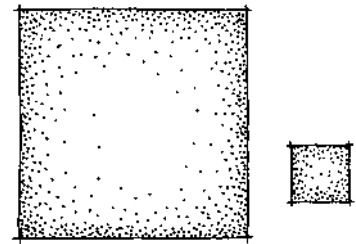
1.11 Typology of transformation processes.



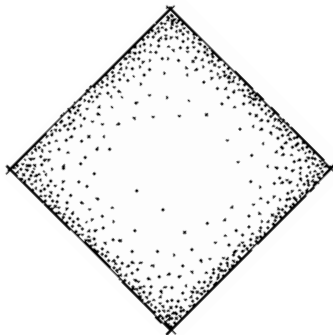
PRIMARY FORM



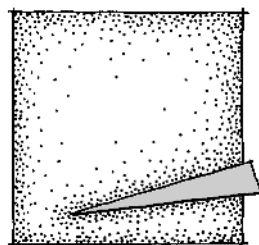
SUBTRACTION



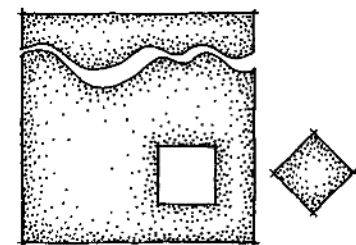
ADDITION



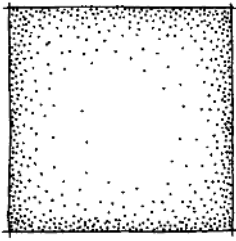
ROTATION



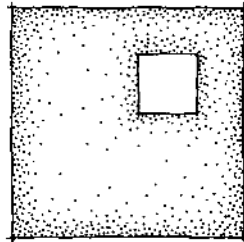
INTERVENTION



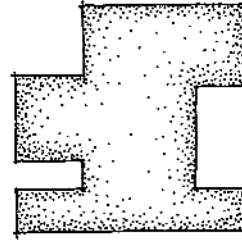
SYNTHESIS



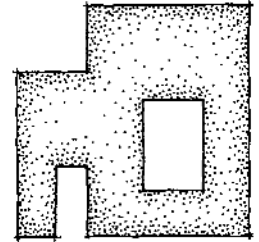
ORIGINAL FORM



SUBTRACTION from  
INTERIOR



SUBTRACTION from  
EXTERIOR

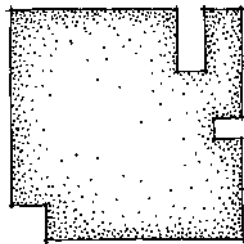


SUBTRACTION from  
INTERIOR & EXTERIOR

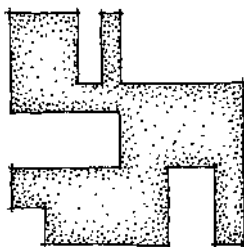
1.12 Alternative strategies of subtraction.

### Subtractive Transformation

Subtractive transformation is the procedure of removing selected areas from the interior and/or the outer edge of a primary form (Ching 2007, 50, 54–7) (1.12). This methodology results in a punctured fabric as the underpinning of a design. Too little extraction appears to be an incidental mistake while too much causes the original shape to lose its identity (1.13). Subtraction also applies to removing a volume from a solid as a means of defining a void in the ground plane, a mass of trees, and so on (1.14).



TOO LITTLE

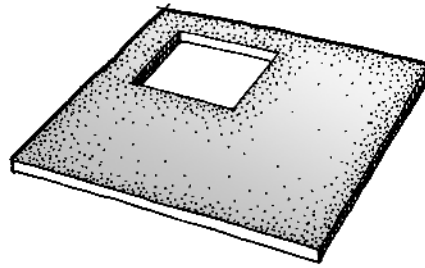


TOO MUCH

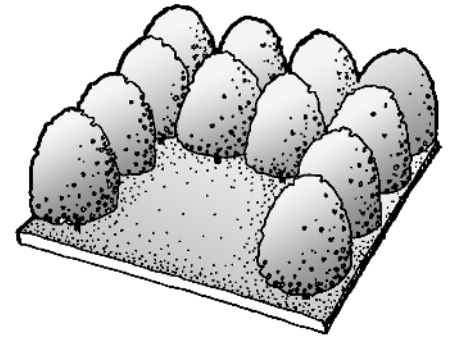
1.13 Inappropriate amounts of subtraction.

Subtractive forms have two qualities. First, the deletion of a section suggests subspaces wherever corners and indentations are produced within the overall form (left 1.15). This is helpful where more than one use or space is needed within the enclosure of a simple geometric form. A second aspect of subtractive forms is that they engage the exterior space by allowing it to push into the form. This begins to minimize the separation between “inside” and “outside” (right 1.15). Similarly, this tactic establishes a more complex figure/ground relationship. That is, the form or figure partially captures the ground or exterior. The more subtraction, the greater the ambiguity between what is figure and what is ground.

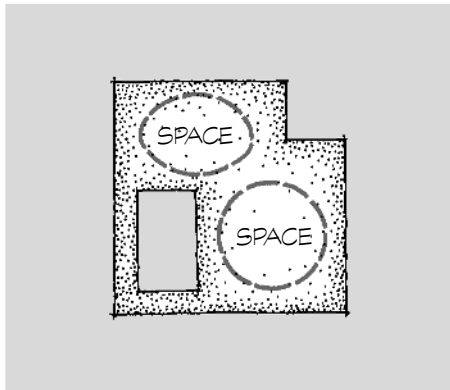
Landscape Uses. Subtraction permits a form’s interior to be composed of multiple spaces and/or materials, a viable tactic where the perimeter of a form or site is structurally fixed in place, restrained by site conditions, or where a form or site cannot be expanded because of surrounding spatial limitations. The areas that are subtracted from the original form can reveal the contextual background or be converted to alternative materials and elements (1.16).



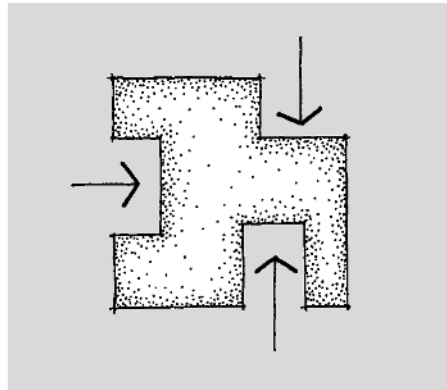
SUBTRACTED FORM in the GROUND PLANE



SUBTRACTED FORM from a TREE MASS



SUBSPACES WITHIN a FORM

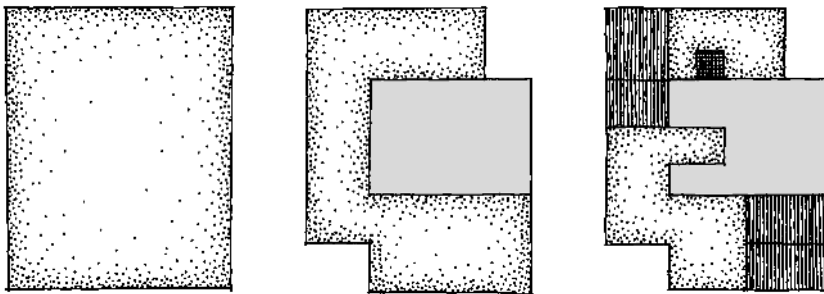


SUBSPACES ALONG the EDGES of a FORM

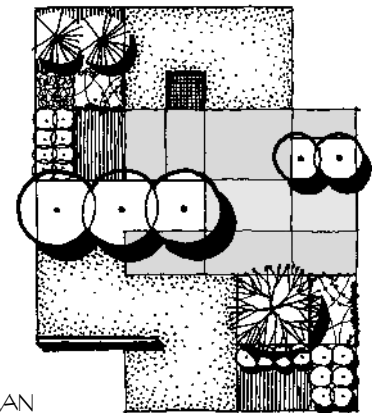
**1.14** Above: Subtraction of a volume.

**1.15** Left: Subtraction can create subspaces within a form.

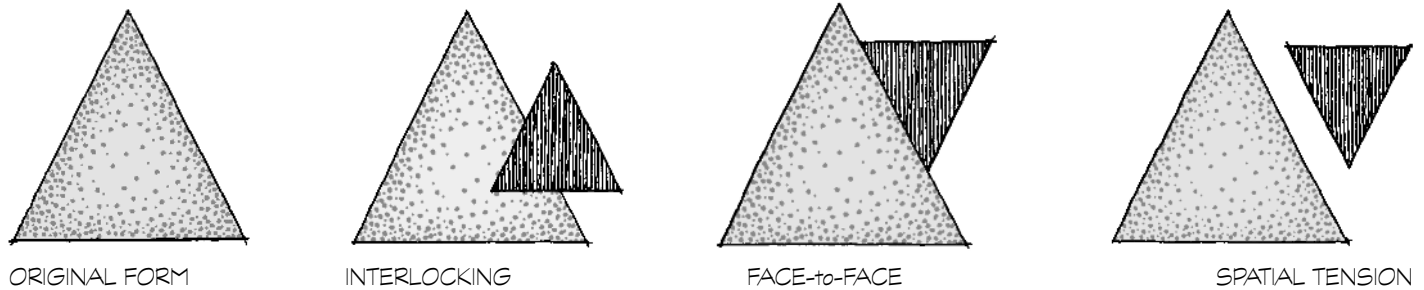
**1.16** Example of a site design created via subtractive transformation.



TRANSFORMATION PROCESS



SITE PLAN



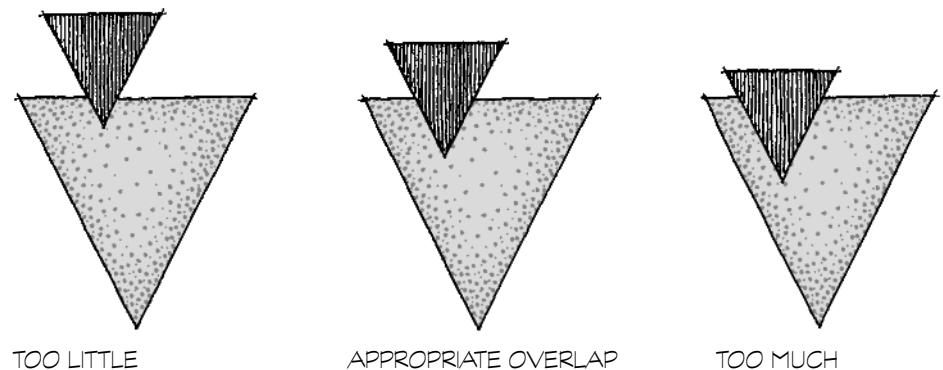
1.17 Alternative strategies of addition.

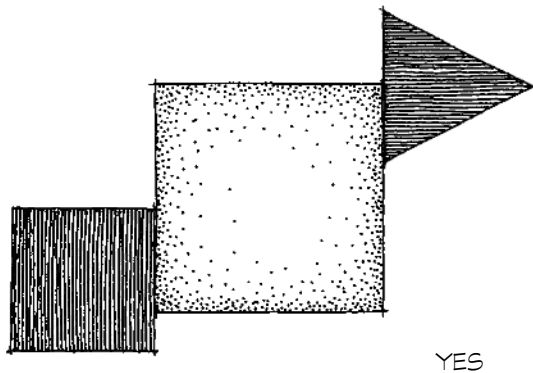
**Additive Transformation**

Additive transformation is the strategy of creating complex compositions by adding one primary form to another (Ching 2007, 58). Additive forms are often composed of a similar basic geometric form to assure overall cohesiveness, although dissimilar primary forms can be combined when more varied design configurations are desired. There are three methods for appending forms in landscape architectural site design based on the amount of space between forms: interlocking, face-to face-contact, and spatial tension (1.17).

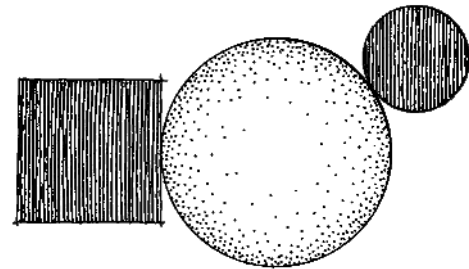
Interlocking addition occurs when one form partially overlaps another (Ching 2007, 58) (left 1.16). This attachment of forms establishes the strongest visual bond possible and is a suitable maneuver to allow adjoining spaces to inconspicuously merge and/or to support two interdependent functions. The amount of overlap among merging forms should be approximately 1/4 to 3/4 the area of each (1.18). Less than this produces a composition that appears more accidental than intentional. Too much overlap causes the initial forms to be visually absorbed and lost in one another.

1.18 Different degrees of interlocking.





YES



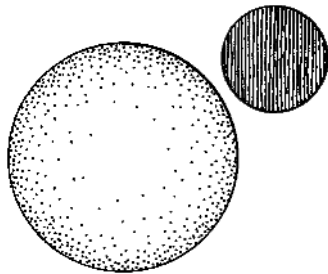
NO

Face-to-face-contact is the connection of one form to another along a common side (middle right 1.17). This technique of addition requires the affiliated forms to have planar or flat sides like squares, rectangles, triangles, and polygons (Ching 2007, 58) (left 1.19). These forms are able to join along a common uniform face, resulting in a stable and compositionally strong relationship between the attached forms. Circles and other curved forms do not lend themselves to face-to-face contact because a rounded face is able to connect to a planar face only at a single point, thus creating an unstable point of visual tension (right 1.19).

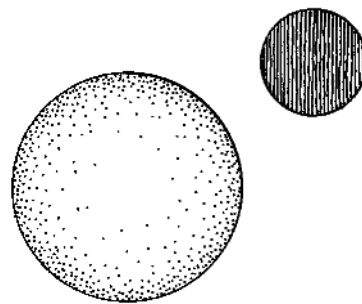
**1.19** Face-to-face addition should be undertaken with flat-sided forms.

Spatial tension is the tactic of additive transformation that places forms near each other without touching or overlapping (Ching 2007, 58) (right 1.17). This is a viable concept where there is a need to have spaces and uses in relative close proximity while maintaining their individual identity. However, spatial tension creates the weakest compositional connection of all the alternative strategies for additive transformation because the intervening space visually separates the forms from each other. As the distance of this interstitial space increases, the less association there is between neighboring forms (1.20).

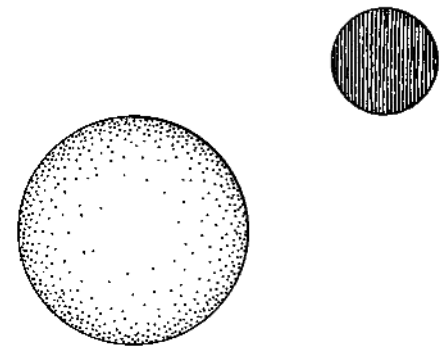
**1.20** Different degrees of spatial tension.



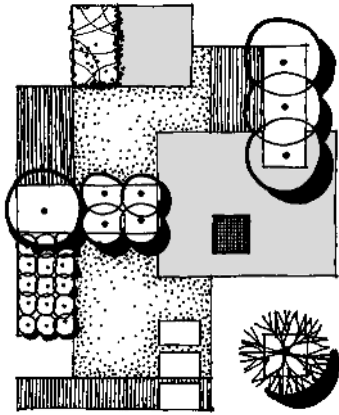
GOOD



OK

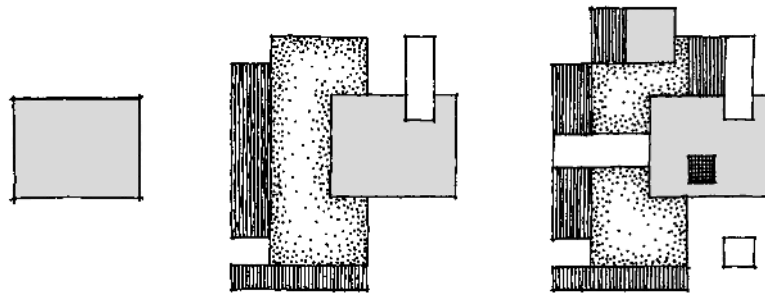


NO



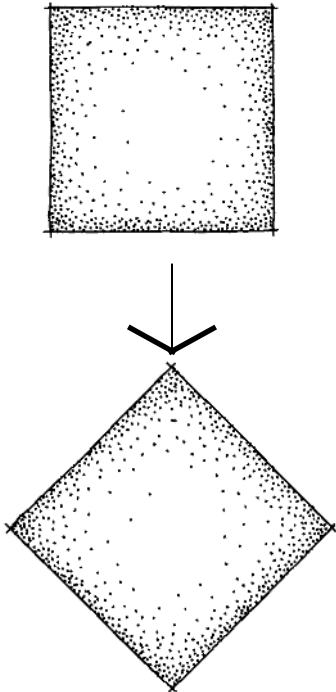
SITE PLAN

**1.21** Above: Example of a site design created via additive transformation.



TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

**1.22** Below: Rotation of original form.



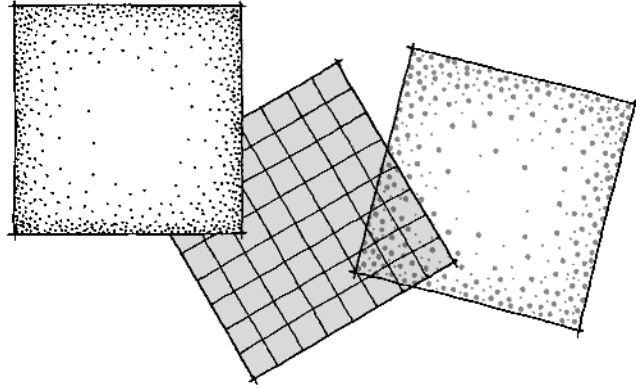
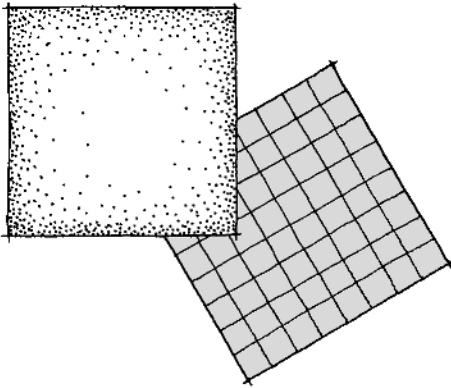
Landscape Uses. Additive transformation is appropriate when the exterior of the initial form is not dimensionally constrained, when space around it is available for expansion, and when multiple spaces are required, each within its own identity. Furthermore, additive transformation is a viable means of expanding into an adjoining landscape from an existing space (1.21). Similarly, the technique is good for embellishing a simple space to give it greater visual intrigue.

### Rotation

Rotation is the transformation process of pivoting a primary geometric form around an axis or point in one of several ways. First, the entire form can be turned to a new orientation in relation to its original position (1.22). A second means of rotation is to treat it as additive process in which each new component is turned in relation to the first, thereby suggesting cumulative action and movement (1.23). A third tactic is to consider rotation as a subtractive process in which a selected portion of a form is extracted and then pivoted in relation to the initial form (1.24) In all instances of rotation, visually and structurally unstable relationships between the original form and its modified version should be avoided.

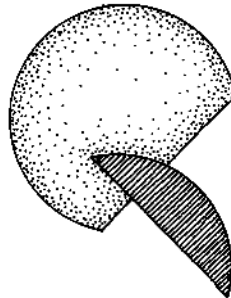
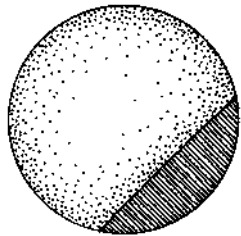
Landscape Uses. Rotation is suitable to provide an accent and/or divergent orientation within a site, perhaps toward a point or view not otherwise appreciated (1.25). Rotation can energize a design configuration with varied relationships among spaces and areas. It is also an appropriate strategy for generating an unconventional association among spaces and to the site itself.



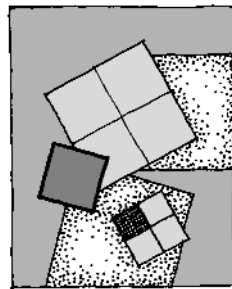
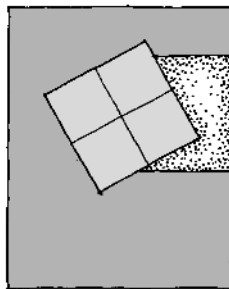
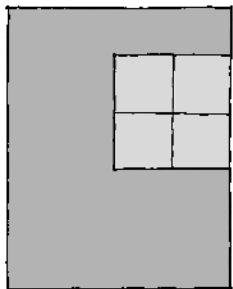


1.23 Above: Additive rotation.

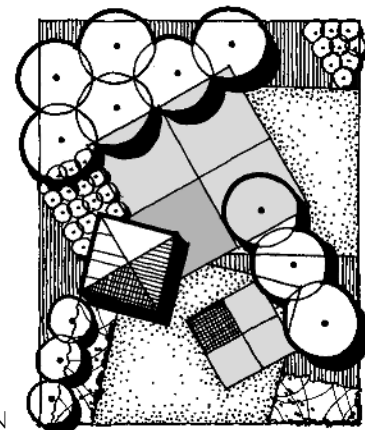
1.24 Left: Rotation of a selected area within the original form.



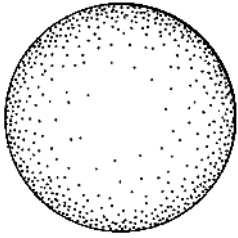
1.25 Example of a site design created via rotation.



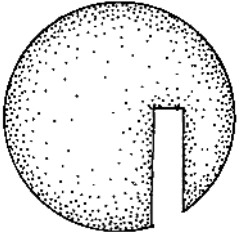
TRANSFORMATION PROCESS



SITE PLAN



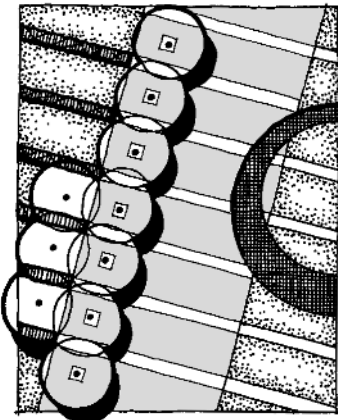
ORIGINAL FORM



INTERVENTION

1.26 Intervention.

1.27 Example of a site design incorporating intervention.



SITE PLAN

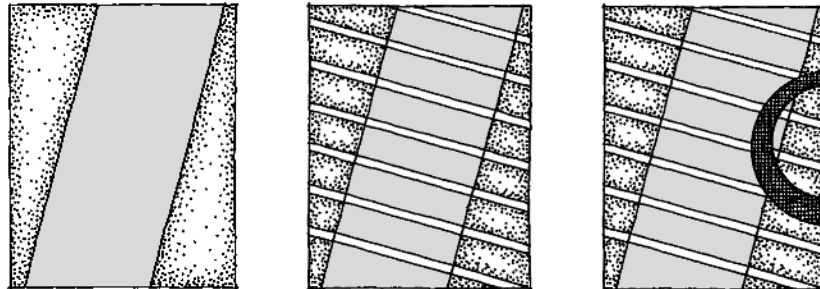
### Intervention

Intervention is the process of inserting a contrasting form or element into a primary form (1.26). The term *intervention* is also applied to the interjection of a complete design proposal into an existing landscape setting. The intervening component or design typically represents a profound departure in form, order, character, style, and/or material from the setting in which it is placed.

Landscape Uses. The purpose of intervention is to energize a design by the juxtaposition of dissimilar design structures. The intervening component can serve as an area of emphasis or it can accent the unique qualities of the original setting by virtue of the obvious differences (1.27).

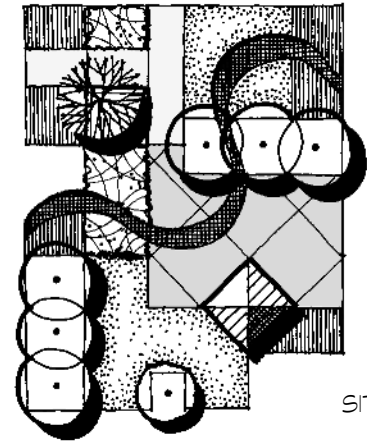
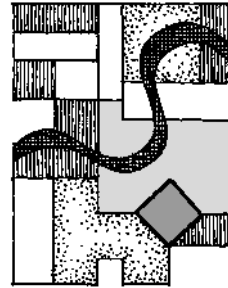
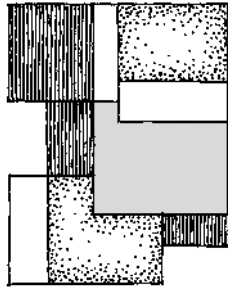
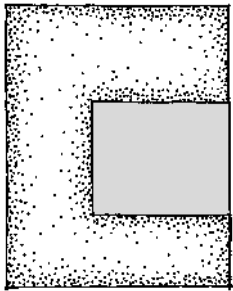
### Synthesis

The last category of transformation of forms is the fusion of more than one type of modification (1.28). For example, both subtractive and additive transformational processes can be applied to the same or different areas of a form. This approach furnishes the greatest freedom for creative expression and gives the designer the ability to simultaneously apply independent design tactics to accomplish different design objectives. It is often advisable to use one means of transformation as the primary method of modification while others are used in a supplementary role. This helps to ensure that the resulting composition will have one prevailing quality that consolidates the overall design.



TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

## TRANSFORMATION PROCESS



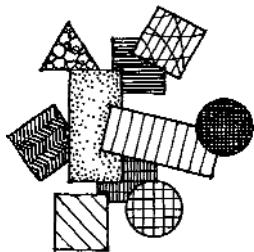
SITE PLAN

## Organizational Structures

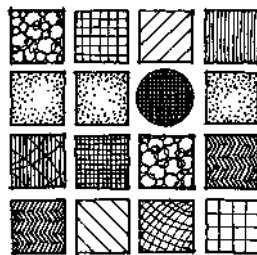
All the transformation processes discussed in the previous section are dependent on an organizational structure that governs where all the constituent design components are located in relation to one another. This applies equally to subdivision, addition, rotation, or intervention within a single form or in an assemblage of multiple forms. In essence, an organizational structure is the underlying skeleton or infrastructure of a composition and is akin to a tree's trunk and branch configuration or to a building's wood/steel frame. It defines the overall configuration of a design. The purpose of an organizational structure is to provide compositional order and to give a design a sense of legibility for people who experience it. The use of an organizational structure is essential for landscape architectural site design; without it, a design is likely to be a chaotic collection of forms and elements that have little or no relationship to one another. The most common organizational structures are (1.29): mass collection, line, grid, symmetry, and asymmetry.

**1.28** Example of a site design created via a synthesis of transformation processes.

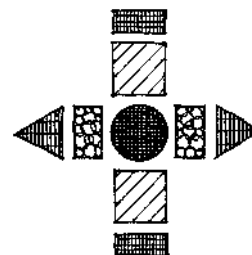
**1.29** Typology of organizational structures.

MASS  
COLLECTION

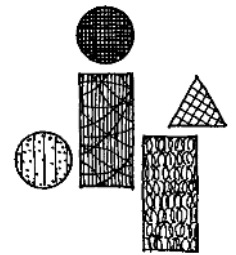
LINE



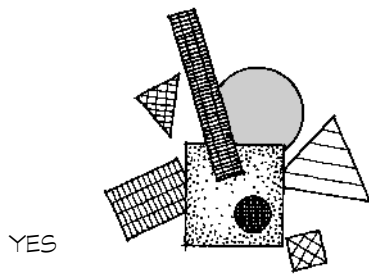
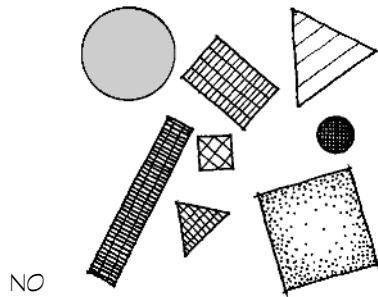
GRID



SYMMETRY



ASYMMETRY



**1.30** Mass collection groups design components together.

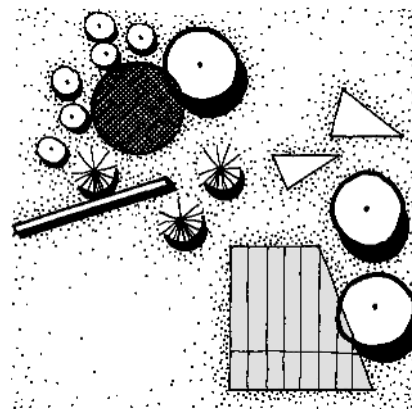
**1.31** Mass collection requires close spacing among elements.

### Mass Collection

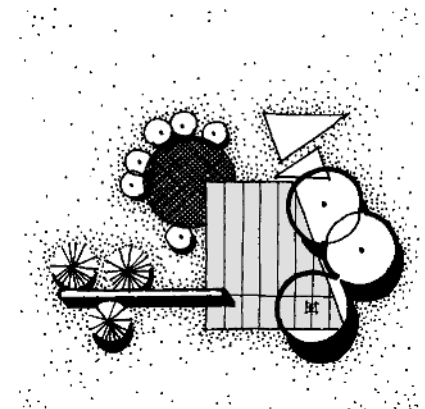
The most elementary method for organizing forms and associated spaces in the landscape is by massing or clustering them together (1.30). Placing elements together in close proximity causes them to be perceived as being members of a family even when differences exist among them.

Mass collection is the easiest and most rudimentary method of organization. It requires no special design skill other than to assemble component elements together. However, successful mass collection does require that the constituent design elements be located relatively close to one another if not touching or overlapping. As previously discussed, proportionally broad interstitial space segregates a design composition and so needs to be avoided. Therefore, one of the most fundamental organizational design guidelines is to group spaces and the elements that define them together with little or no intervening space (1.31).

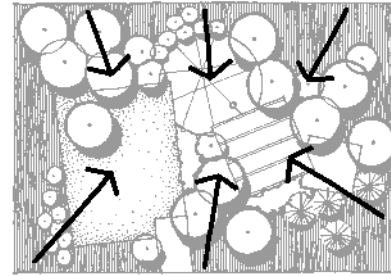
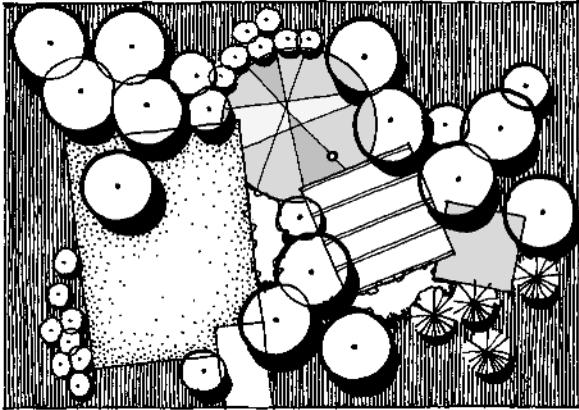
Landscape Uses. Mass collection is the foundation and beginning point for all the other design organizations discussed in the following paragraphs. That is, they too aggregate constituent elements together, although in more elaborate ways. Because these other organizational typologies go beyond mass collection, it is typically not used as the sole design framework unless there are no functional or aesthetic requirements beyond grouping (1.32). While this design structure appears chaotic and thrown together to many eyes, it is nevertheless ordered by the fact that the design elements are gathered together.



NO-ELEMENTS are NOT MASSED



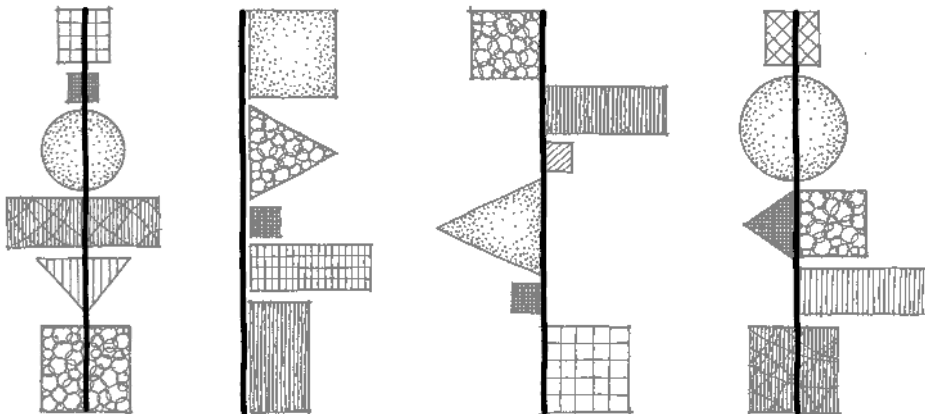
YES-ELEMENTS are MASSED



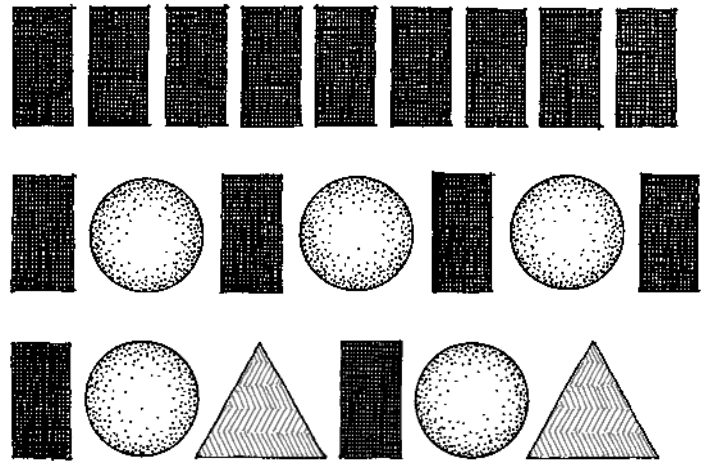
**1.32** Example of a site design incorporating mass collection.

### Line

Stretching a single form along one dimension or assembling several forms next to one another in a chainlike configuration is the next level of organization (Ching 2007, 62) (1.33). Rather than simply being randomly heaped together as they are in mass collection, multiple design elements are intentionally assembled next to one another in succession. An actual line can be, but does not necessarily have to be, delineated to produce a linear organization. A linear organization may be straight, angled, curved, and so forth, depending on the design context and the desired disposition of movement along it. All linear organizations regardless of alignment emphasize extension, directionality, and movement. Cadence or rhythm is established when multiple elements are spaced in a recurring pattern within the serial construct (1.34).

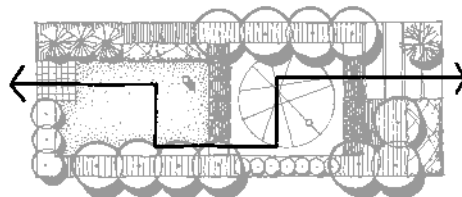
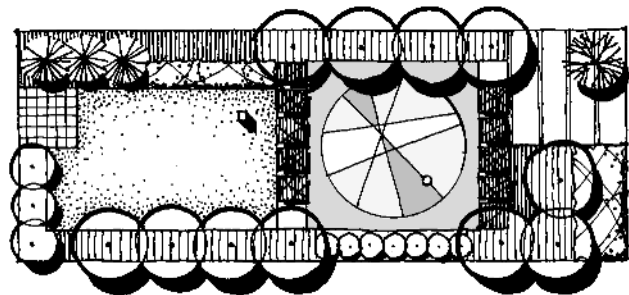
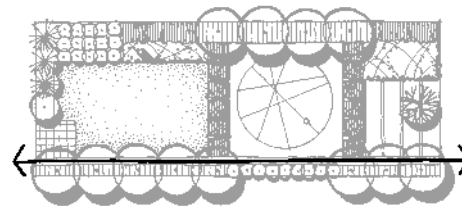
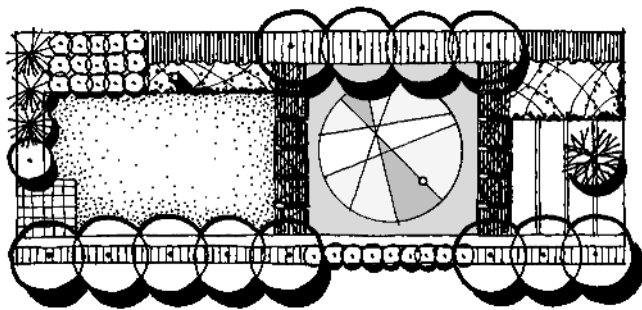


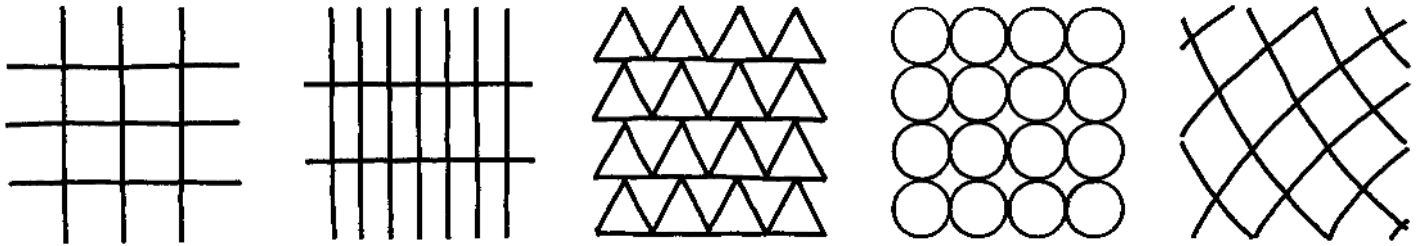
**1.33** Alternative strategies for creating a linear organization.



1.34 Right: Examples of cadence created by a linear organization.

1.35 A linear organization can establish a direct or indirect path of movement between spaces.





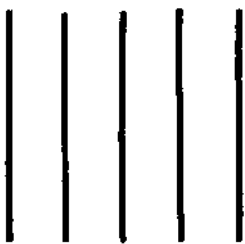
Landscape Uses. One application of a linear organization is to establish a sequential series of spaces, one experienced before and after another. This forges a chronological progression through the landscape that intentionally choreographs movement, a particularly effective design structure in an elongated site. The sequence can be arranged on an axis (see Symmetry) or a straight spine that is located next to or through the spaces (top 1.35). This concept provides an obvious route of travel. An alternative strategy is to organize the spaces so that path of travel is not direct or even explicitly expressed (bottom 1.35). This establishes a more explorative progression that has an aspect of mystery.

**1.36** A grid is formed by repeating forms and lines in sets of parallel rows.

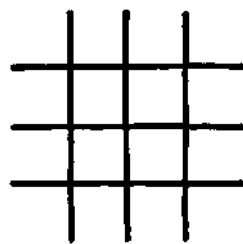
### Grid

A grid is an assemblage of elements arranged in contiguous parallel lines, a more advanced organizational structure than the previous two (1.36). The intersecting lines establish points and interstitial spaces that are the basis of the four primary types of grid: line, mesh, point, and modular (1.37). An orthogonal grid (see Chapter 6) is the most conventional, although other forms and directions of lines can create grids as well.

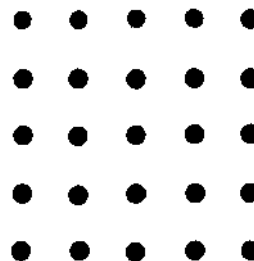
**1.37** Grid typologies.



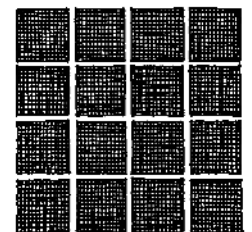
LINE GRID



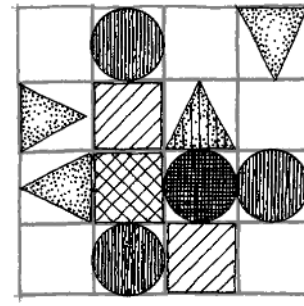
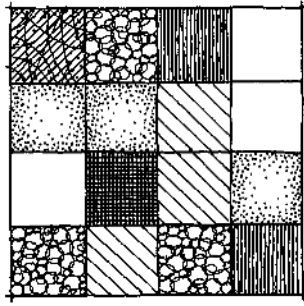
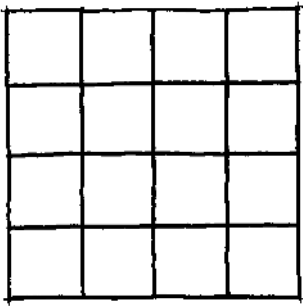
MESH GRID



POINT GRID



MODULAR GRID

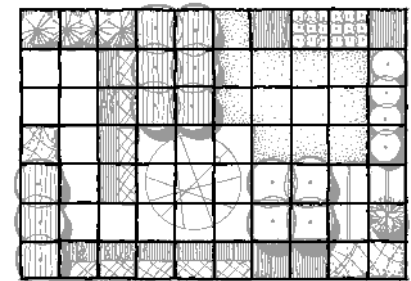
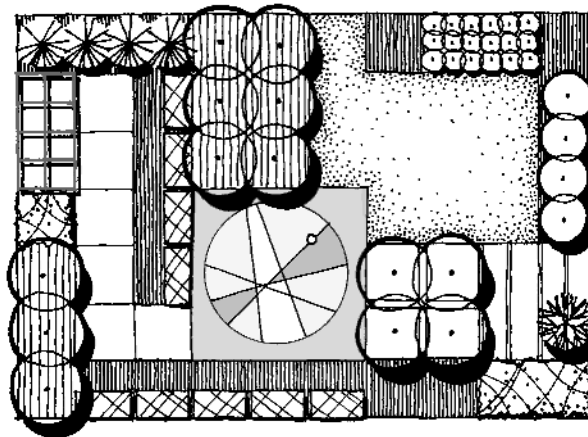


**1.38** A grid is an armature for organizing different content.

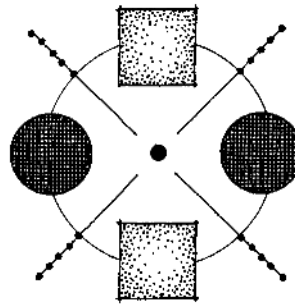
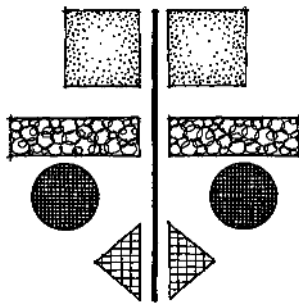
A grid organization represents a systemized, rational approach to design. It is a non-hierarchical field of equal components; each line, point, or module is the same as the others. A grid has no inherent points of emphasis or dominant areas. Similarly, a grid is a neutral, nondirectional configuration. In essence, a grid is a standardized template that similar or varied design elements can be inserted into in a predictable and regular fashion (1.38).

**Landscape Uses.** A grid organization is an armature for orchestrating various landscape design elements and spaces along its lines, at the intersection points, and/or in the interstitial modules (1.39). The static dimensions, orientation, and position of the grid lines assures that all the design elements will align with one another and be unified by the common size of the area in which they are placed. A grid can be limitlessly added onto or subtracted from, thus permitting it to acclimate to either a site with uniform conditions or one with numerous impediments. Finally, a grid potentially provides choices of movement along its lines, a distinct difference to a linear organization.

**1.39** An example of a site design based on a grid.







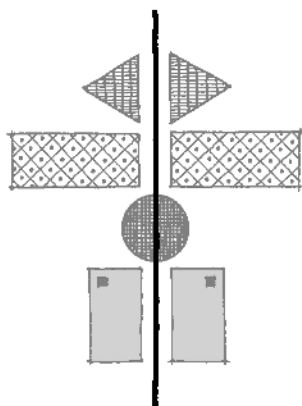
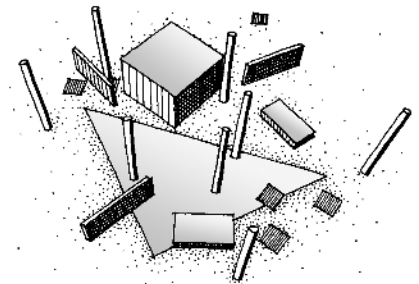
**1.40** Left: A symmetrical composition is organized around a line or point.

**1.41** Below: All elements in a symmetrical composition are mirrored around a dominant axis.

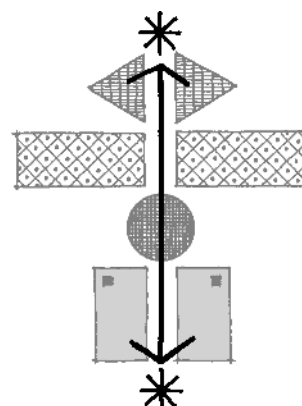
## Symmetry

Symmetry is the balanced distribution of equivalent forms and spaces around a point, line, or plane (Ching 2007, 339) (1.40). The centering element or plane is called an axis and may be a line such as a walk or road, or it may be an elongated element like a pool, panel of lawn, bed of plants, and so forth (Simonds 1997, 223). Compositional elements are located directly on the axis or adjacent to it so that each side of the axis is the mirror image of the other, a phenomenon that is sometimes referred to as reflective symmetry (1.41). Thus, members of a symmetrical design exist as singular elements, pairs, or multiples of pairs.

The axis has several other traits. First, the axis is *the* dominant feature, whether explicitly or implicitly expressed, that governs the use, form, and character of all elements on or near it (Simonds 1997, 224) (left 1.42). The consequence of the axis's supremacy is a clear sense of hierarchy within a design; not only does the axis demand authority for itself, but also for spaces and elements placed on it. Second, as a line, the axis concentrates movement and views along its length toward the termini or to any element placed on it (right 1.42).

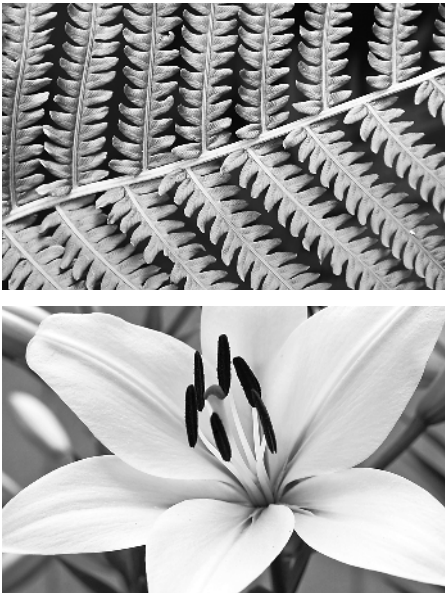


AUTHORITY



DIRECTIONALITY

**1.42** Left: The axis dominates the composition and creates directionality along its length.



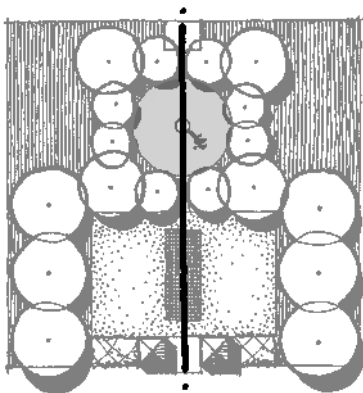
1.43 Examples of symmetry in nature.

Symmetry is one of the most basic organizational strategies because of its relatively simplistic process of placing elements on or near an axis in an equally balanced fashion. Symmetry is often one of the first organizational strategies employed by novice designers because of its comparative ease of use. Symmetry is sometimes inaccurately considered to be a human construct, a notion reinforced by numerous highly controlled formal gardens. Yet, symmetry is a naturally occurring phenomenon as seen in the skeletal structure of most animals, flowers, crystals, and so on (1.43). However, it should be noted that these forms of symmetry primarily exist as individual elements, not as a broad organizing system within the landscape. There are three fundamental symmetrical typologies: bilateral, cross-axial, and radial.

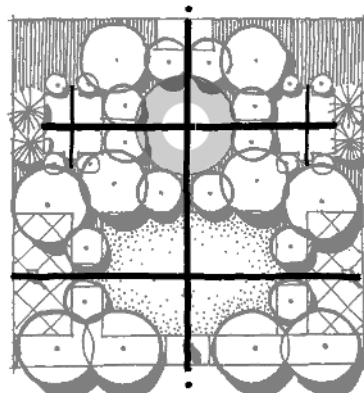
**Bilateral Symmetry.** Bilateral symmetry is the organization of spaces and elements along one dominant axis, thus producing two distinct sides (bilateral) (left 1.44). The arrangement of design components on one side of the axis is typically the mirror image of the opposite side. This organizational structure establishes a heroic, autocratic power that concentrates energy along the axis and toward the termini.

**Cross-Axial Symmetry.** Cross-axial symmetry is the organization of spaces and elements along multiple axes (middle 1.44). The axes may intersect one another at any angle, although they commonly do so at a right angle. The multiple axes and paths of movement can provide numerous routes for navigating through this design structure and permit the landscape experience to be varied.

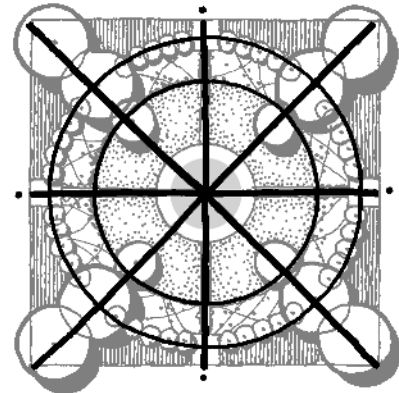
1.44 Symmetrical typologies.



BILATERAL



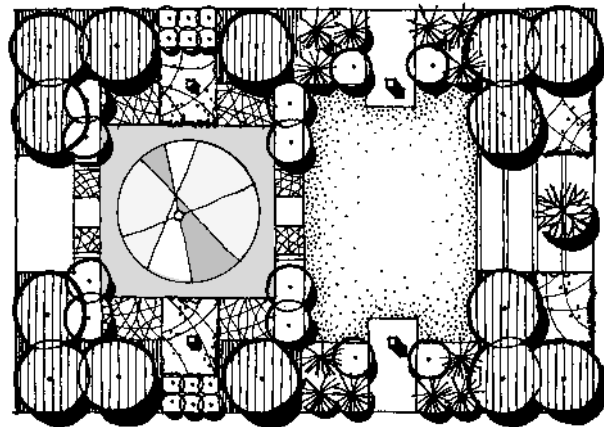
CROSS-AXIAL



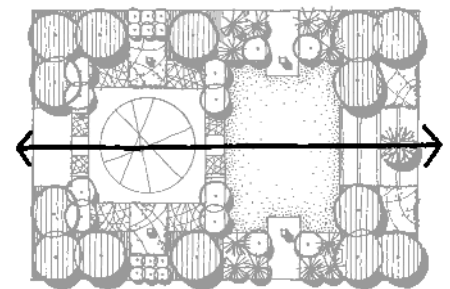
RADIAL

**Radial Symmetry.** Radial symmetry is the organization of spaces and elements along radii and/or concentric circles around a single center point (right 1.44). The compositional authority of radial symmetry lies almost entirely in the center point. Everything else in the design extends from or around it in a subservient manner. To furnish symmetry, the component elements and spaces are placed on the radii or concentric circles in an equally balanced fashion.

**Landscape Uses.** A symmetrical organization is appropriate to impose human authority on the landscape, especially when the constituent design elements like plant materials are precisely manicured. Symmetry is also apropos for establishing selected elements or areas as being absolutely supreme in relation to the surrounding landscape (1.45). Similarly, symmetry directs attention and movement toward selected points and/or spaces in a persistent and relentless manner. The movement is typically highly controlled along predetermined routes of travel. Symmetry is best used on open, uniform sites where there are few restrictions or existing elements that need to be incorporated into the design. Symmetry demands consistency and does not easily acclimate to site variation.

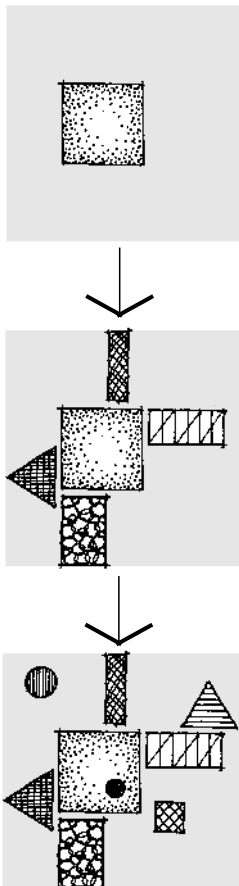
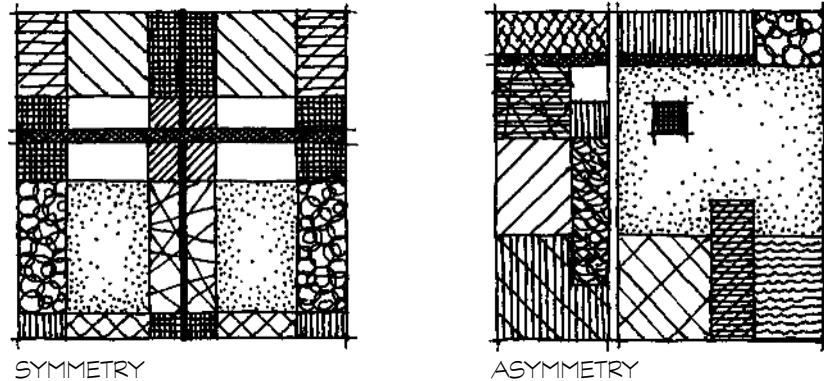


**1.45** Example of a site design based on a symmetrical organization.



1.46 Right: Comparison of asymmetry with symmetry.

1.47 Below: An asymmetrical organization places elements by feel and intuitive balance.



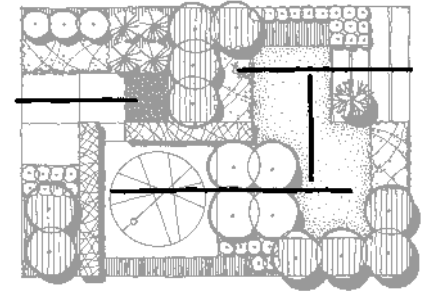
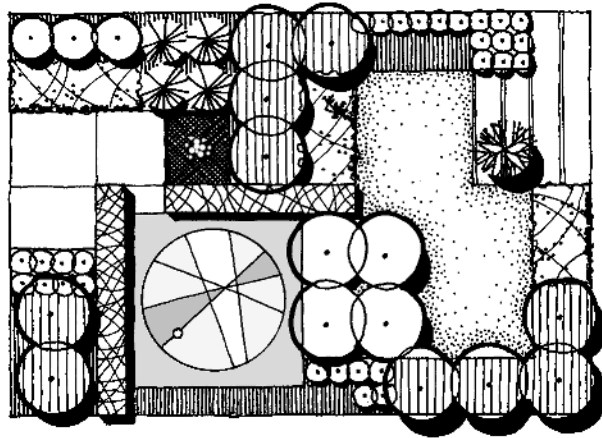
### Asymmetry

Asymmetry is an organizational structure that intuitively orchestrates and balances constituent design elements to achieve overall compositional order (1.46). The feeling of equilibrium is created by subjectively distributing design elements so that one area of the composition appears to equate to another in terms of visual weight. There is typically no definitive center point in an asymmetrical organization although hierarchy is frequently created with a commanding element or space.

An asymmetrical organization creates visual balance by instinctive placement of diverse design components (1.47). It does not require that constituent design elements be the same or be paired with one another. Varied design elements and spaces are easily incorporated into the design. In addition, asymmetry lacks the ever-present and domineering axis of symmetry. There may be multiple points or spaces that garner attention without being slavishly located in a predetermined position.

In comparison to the other design constructs, the asymmetrical organizational structure is the most right-brained, giving the designer relative freedom and latitude to work within. Asymmetrical compositions are created more by feel and perceptive insight than by deliberate, rational thinking. For novice designers, an asymmetrical design structure is often challenging to work within because its methodology and “rules” are not self-evident. For experienced designers, this same quality provides leeway for pushing one’s creativity.

**Landscape Uses.** An asymmetrical organization is well suited to creating an exploratory experience that offers a variety of changing views through the landscape and alternative routes of movement (1.48). The asymmetrical design construct easily acclimates to varied site conditions because it is not rigidly tied to a preset structure. Finally, asymmetrical design encourages the designer to draw from inspiration and emotion, thus facilitating inventiveness.



## Unifying Principles

There are a number of unifying principles for landscape architectural site design that should guide how forms and spaces are assembled within the organizational structures just discussed. These principles are universal to all design expressions including architecture, graphic design, sculpture, painting, photography, and clothing design. Unifying principles inform the appearance, material, and size of all elements in a composition. The most essential unifying principles are similarity, dominance, interconnection, and compartmentalization.

### Similarity

Similarity is the concept of making all the forms and spaces of a design like one another in shape, size, and/or material (1.49). This is the simplest and most elementary method for establishing design unity. An easily applied strategy to forge unity is to use the same family of forms as the underpinning throughout a landscape design. For example, creating a design entirely with straight lines and squares, or arcs and circles, and so on assures a unified design foundation.

**1.48** An example of a design based on an asymmetrical organization.

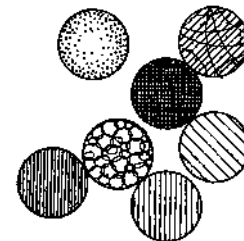
**1.49** Repetition of a similar form establishes design unity.



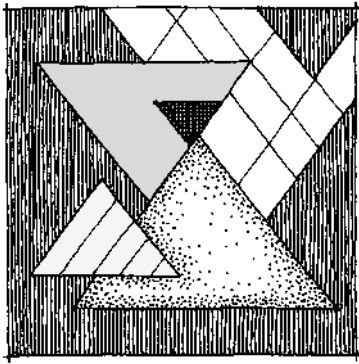
NO UNITY



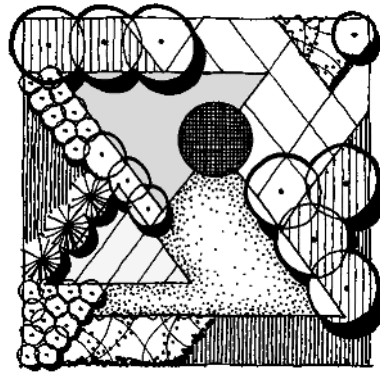
UNITY via SIMILARITY of TONE



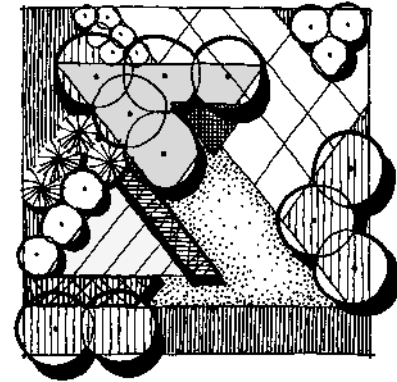
UNITY via SIMILARITY of FORM



SIMILAR GROUND FORMS



VARIETY *via* DIFFERENT FORM



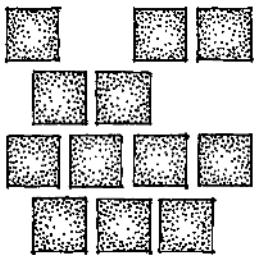
VARIETY *via* SPATIAL CONTRAST

**1.50** Similarity and variety.

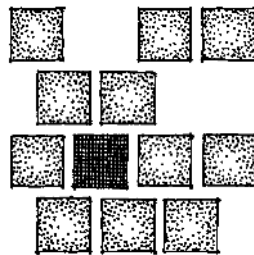
However, too much similarity can be monotonous (left 1.50). So, there normally needs to be a balance in a landscape design so that some qualities vary while others remain the same. This can be accomplished in several ways. One is to carefully interject different forms into a design (middle 1.50). The dissimilar forms are usually few in quantity and are skillfully added to fit the prevailing forms with common alignment and careful attention to how one form connects to another. Often the contrasting forms serve as accents to call attention to notable areas or spaces within the design.

Another means of interjecting variety is in the treatment of the spaces themselves. Even though all the spaces in a design might have similar forms as their foundation, they can each be distinctly individual with its own size, degree of enclosure, and palette of materials. One space might be relatively large, open to the sky and have a prevalence of lawn while the next is intimate in scale, shaded, and enveloped by dense planting of shrubs and trees (right 1.50). Thus, it is important to understand that similar forms throughout a design unifies its underlying structure, but not necessarily the appearance and feel of the spaces that result from them (also see Spatial Sequence, Chapter 2).

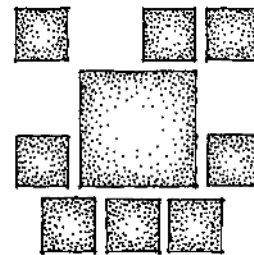
**1.51** Different techniques for establishing dominance in a composition.



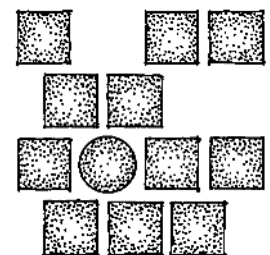
NO DOMINANCE



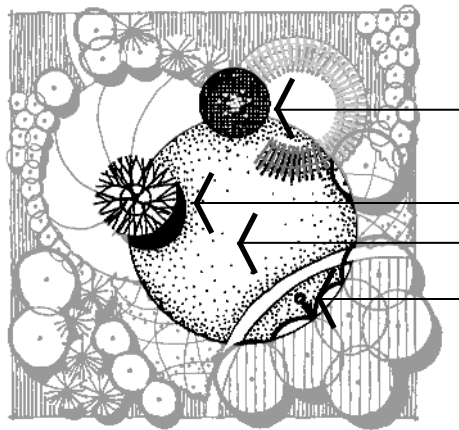
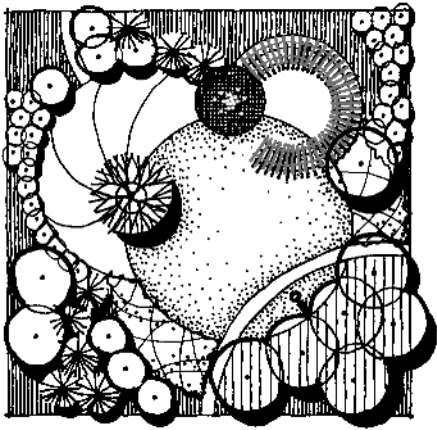
DOMINANCE *via*  
CONTRAST *of* TONE



DOMINANCE *via*  
CONTRAST *of* SIZE



DOMINANCE *via*  
CONTRAST *of* SHAPE



WATER FEATURE

SPECIMEN TREE

DOMINANT SPACE

SCULPTURE

### Dominance

Dominance is the visual authority of one point or area of a composition over others. This is commonly described as being an accent or focal point, a place that readily attracts the eye. The predominance of an element or area of a design is usually established by contrast in size, orientation, material, color, and/or texture (1.51). The greater the apparent difference, the more the authoritative element stands out.

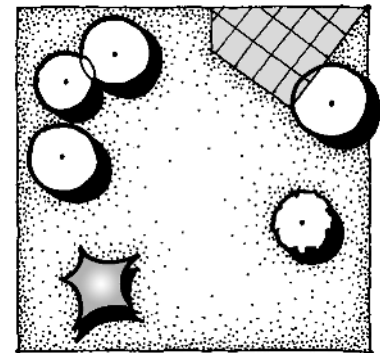
Dominance is desired in a design because it provides a place for the eye to rest. Without an accent, the eye wanders aimlessly and becomes bored. Furthermore, a focal point establishes unity in a composition by visually standing out, thus making the dissimilarity among the other constituent elements seems less noticeable.

In organizing forms as the basis of a landscape design, it is often advisable to create a dominant form or space by making it unique in character, enclosure, size, and/or orientation. A good site design frequently possesses one space that is more significant than the others. This provides a place to pause and remember, a critical factor in way finding through the landscape. A sequence of spaces that appear and feel too similar is more difficult to understand than one that varies and has at least one distinct space.

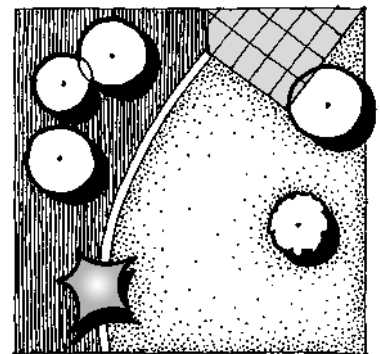
At a more detailed level, dominance can be established by numerous objects such as sculpture, distinctive building, specimen plant, a bed of perennials, water feature, framed, and so on. It is important to realize that there can be, and often should be, a hierarchy of dominance within a landscape with multiple accents, some being more important than others. It is desirable to create one predominant focal point in a design that prevails over the entire composition and simultaneously establish other accents that exercise control over smaller sections of the design (1.52).

**1.52** Left: Alternative means for creating dominance in a site design.

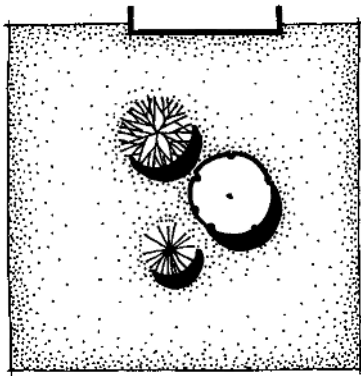
**1.53** Below: Interconnection links otherwise separate elements.



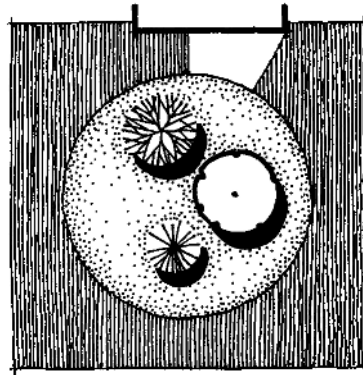
UNRELATED ELEMENTS



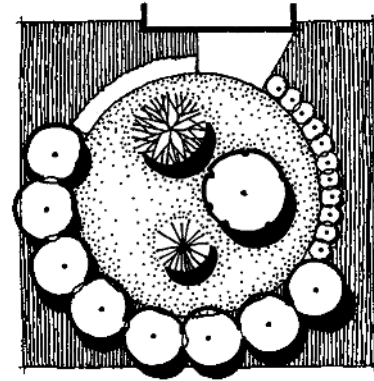
ELEMENTS UNIFIED VIA INTERCONNECTION



UNRELATED ELEMENTS



ELEMENTS UNIFIED VIA  
COMPARTMENTALIZATION



1.54 An example of compartmentalization.

### Interconnection

Interconnection is the physical connection of one design element to another. Linking what are otherwise separate design components permits the eye to move among them in a continuous fashion, thereby causing individual pieces to be perceived as one. It will be recalled from previous discussions that space between design elements segregates them into isolated fragments. The more space, the more the design elements seem unrelated. Interconnection serves to overcome the potential isolating effect of interstitial space by bridging across it.

Interconnection is typically established in the landscape by linking detached elements with a third. The additional element is a physical link that literally joins the other two elements together into one formation. A pavement surface, ground cover bed, line of trees, wall, and so on all have the ability to physically connect separated areas and unify a design (1.53).

### Compartmentalization

Compartmentalization unifies a design composition by encircling selected elements of a design within one enclosure (1.54). In essence, compartmentalization functions like a frame around a picture to isolate and surround all the pieces within, thereby diminishing whatever differences exist among the constituent parts. A wall, fence, row of vegetation, or any other design element that encloses an area around its perimeter can produce compartmentalization.

### Referenced Resources

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### Further Resources

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