The Houston landscape designs of Thomas Church.

by Ben Koush
Thomas Church was active from the 1930s through the 1970s and is one of the founders of modern American landscape architecture. His work was widely published, and his office is credited with designing 2,000 gardens. In 1955, at the peak of his national influence, Church published *Gardens Are for People*, encapsulating his design methodology: He described landscape design as “logical, down-to-earth and aimed at making your plot of ground produce exactly what you want and need from it….To weigh, advise, interpret, integrate, and come up with some answers beyond the ability and imagination of the layman is the role of the landscape architect.” Church described how specific elements of his implicitly “modern” gardens (he avoided that polarizing word in his book) were adapted to the cultural, economic, and technological changes of the 20th century: The large lot with a stable has changed to a small lot with a garage absorbed into the house,…The change from tea in the parlor to drinks in the garden gives us a terrace or outside room, which increases in importance as the house gets smaller.…The change from high-neck ruffles and bloomers to the Bikini gives us the sun-bathing terrace….The change from long lace dresses and perambulators to infant nakedness gives us the modern child’s play yard….The automobile has changed our entrance from a circular carriage driveway to a parking lot….Lack of gardeners has given us the owner’s service area complete with potting bench, mulch bin, and a lath house….Gunite and plastic swimming pools bring this former luxury tantalizingly within our reach.

Although Church did not directly discuss the two formal elements most associated with his work, the whiplash curve and the zigzag, he hinted at their derivations when he wrote that in the 18th century “the waving line was proclaimed a true line of beauty, forgetting that a straight line is the best foil for the graceful curves in flower and plant.” The gentle tension arising from the juxtaposition of the “naturalistic” curved line and the “manned” zigzag distinguished Church’s work from his younger, nationally recognized contemporaries, Garrett Eckbo and Dan Kiley, whose designs were usually more uncompromisingly modern. Through his writing Church positioned his straightforward, functional, and democratic designs in diametric opposition to the implicitly elitist, formally composed suburban pleasure garden, whose best Houston example was the axial and symmetrical Diana Garden at Bayou Bend designed by C. C. Pat Fleming and Albert Sheppard in 1937.

By contrast, Church’s architectonic gardens, with their asymmetrical compositions, multilevel areas of gridded concrete or brick paving, and built-in sitting and lounging areas, extended the spatial order of their modestly scaled, mostly one-story modern houses. Through an economy of means, Church’s gardens evoked the “good life” the American public eagerly sought in the calm of the postwar years. The allure of such spare and simple settings, however, has died with the generation of Houstonians who commissioned them. Of the gardens designed by Church during these years only a portion of one, the front courtyard at the Gordon House, remains in its original state.

Church was first called to Houston in the fall of 1950 to design a garden for the 35-acre site of the Percy Straus house designed by Thomas Rather of Staub, Rather & Howe. Although after visiting the oak- and magnolia-studded site, according to Straus’s wife Marjory Milby, Church declared that he didn’t think his services were necessary he was asked by Hermon Lloyd to design the gardens of the Robert F. Straus house shortly thereafter. The Strauses, the first prominent local collectors of modern art, left their 1937 Moderne house designed by John F. Staub in River Oaks for a contemporary country house by
Hermon Lloyd on a seven-acre site fronting on Buffalo Bayou, in Briar Hollow, south of Memorial Park. The 6,000-square-foot house, built on three levels, was dubbed an “architectural sensation” in the Houston Post at the time of its completion in 1951.

Although the house has long since been demolished, Church’s design for the Straus garden is documented by contemporary photographs and landscape drawings produced by his office, now in the Houston Metropolitan Research Center. One entered the house by way of a winding gravel drive that led to a porte-cochere and open parking area. Off the northeast quadrant of the T-shaped house, which opened towards Buffalo Bayou, Church inserted a multilevel terrace with a circular dancing platform, trapezoidal swimming pool, and cantilevered wood decks held in place with zigzagging cast-in-place concrete retaining walls. Photographs of the garden appearing in House & Garden in January 1964 and October 1965 showed mature vegetation and several of the “many enchantingly unusual sculptures” the Strauses had installed in the garden.

For the Burton Liese House, also by Hermon Lloyd, Church designed one of his most iconic Houston gardens. The process by which it was created is documented by 11 letters written between March 12 and September 10, 1953 (preserved in the Environmental Design Archives at the University of California, Berkeley), in which Lloyd and Liese explain to Church the difficulty they had executing the design and the extra costs incurred in developing the schematic plans. Despite the fact that Liese ultimately asked Church to stop working on the project, he was pleased with the design, which cost him $987.60. When the Liese House and garden were featured in the April 1954 Contemporary Arts Association’s Modern House Tour, the Houston Post called Church a “landscape artist.”

Howard Barnstone designed his best-known work of the 1950s for Gerald Gordon and his family. Shortly after it was completed, this idiosyncratic, two-story Miesian house was published in Arts & Architecture, Architectural Record, Texas Architect, Interiors, House & Garden, Art in America, and Architectural Design.

Although the house was recently restored by its current owners, Church’s landscape remains only in the front courtyard. One landscape drawing by Bolton & Barnstone remains and is labeled “Based on the sketches by Thomas D. Church and Associates.” According to Preston Bolton (Barnstone’s business partner), at the time Church was mainly interested in working on the “biggies.” The Gordon Garden, at one-third of an acre, was very modest, and Church only prepared schematic designs. The courtyard, with its amoeba-shaped central planting area surrounded by diagonal, grided concrete paving, contrasted with the disciplined elevations of the house and was the most successful part of the design. The Gordons were never entirely pleased with the arced concrete terrace coming off the rear of the house because they thought it was awkwardly sited. In 1972 they filled the large, semicircular planting area surrounded by the paving with a swimming pool.

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The Farfel House, in the Tall Timbers section of River Oaks, along with the earlier Demoustier (for which Church also designed gardens that were only partially built and completed by Buxton and Tapley), and Gordon houses, marked the peak of Bolton & Barnstone’s assay in Miesian architecture during the 1950s. Like the two previous houses, it was published locally and nationally shortly after its completion. According to Bolton, the Farfels agreed to all of Church’s design proposals and were thrilled with the result. Church’s design for the 1.2-acre garden centered on a long, brick-and-concrete-paved linear terrace extending north and south from a glass-walled entry hall that connected the living to the sleeping areas of the house. The terrace, according to architectural historian Stephen Fox, “organizes open space adjoining it in a subtle but powerfully architectonic way.” The rear of the garden was further subdivided by a pierced brick wall running east and west. The southeast quadrant contained a gridded concrete terrace extending from the house and curving around a large willow oak. The northeast quadrant contained a concrete badminton court and the other two quadrants were planted with grass. Church provided a paved entry court facing the street side of the house with space for 11 cars. Although the Farfel House still exists, the original garden does not. It is well documented, however, by an architectural plot plan located in the Howard Barnstone Collection at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, by Church’s own landscape drawings located in the Environmental Design Archives at the University of California, Berkeley, and by photographs belonging to Preston Bolton.

The Steenland House was, along with the Straus and Liese houses, among the three most significant contemporary houses designed by Lloyd & Morgan during the 1950s. Lloyd & Morgan’s large contemporary houses were particularly interesting for their attenuated one-room-deep plans, which provided most rooms with multiple exterior exposures and created an especially intimate connection with the site that was further enhanced by Church’s multi-faceted garden designs. The light gray painted-brick Steenland House was built on a 3.5-acre site in the Circle Bluff addition, nestled in a bend along the north bank of Buffalo Bayou. Its spreading plan provided a number of architecturally defined outdoor spaces that Church animated through the use of stepped terraces outlined by painted-brick walls that were low enough to sit on. The main focus of the garden was the west-facing swimming pool. It was surrounded by a terrace paved of black-tinted concrete that looked over the thickly wooded riverbank beyond. The Steenland House and garden was demolished in 2006.

(In addition to the previous projects, Church designed two others—for the demolished Cullinan House by Cowell & Neuhaus of 1953 and the Maher House by Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubrey of 1964, which has been altered beyond recognition. The Cullinan garden was documented by a site plan drawn by the architects and the Maher garden by Church’s landscape drawings, both of which are contained in the Houston Metropolitan Research Center.)