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D. A. Hochstetler/Design Workshop

Poetry of Absence

Designed landscapes take on a new beauty once the snow falls.

Story by **HILARY STUNDA**

WHEN WINTER ARRIVES, landscapes change. Summer's manicured gardens and the vistas of wildflowers, native plants, and grasses once on view from backyards are for five months buried in snow. Ponds freeze. Ice formations morph to the days' light patterns, creating erratic and, at times, startling visions.

These are the aesthetics of ski-town scenery in winter, and they would seem to render a landscaper's skills unnecessary. But for some thoughtful designers, the arrival of winter brings new artistic possibilities.

"A winter landscape suddenly becomes engaging with the addition of colorful and sculptural materials, which add texture to an otherwise monochromatic scene," says Mike Albert, landscape architect and associate at Aspen's Design Workshop. Those materials can come in the form of sculpture, walls,

and water features, but also hardier flora.

"Plant choices become limited as you go higher in elevation," Albert explains. "Nevertheless, there are some deciduous and evergreen trees and shrubs, as well ornamental grasses, which possess distinct winter interest at Aspen's elevation."

The red osier dogwood shrub (pictured above) is one of them. Its red branches arrest the eye, breaking a snowscape's white uniformity with punctuations of vermillion. The deciduous Gambel oak shrub, with its quirky form and rough texture, is another. That it readily holds snow on its leaf-shorn branches gives it even greater winter appeal. The poplar also favors winter climes.

Of course, relative to summer's, the plant palette for designers in winter is considerably smaller. So they look to larger plants and manmade forms to add

interest and structure to backyards.

Walls, fences, and even trees can create the semblance of rooms and an intimacy amid the vast landscapes that, when cloaked in white, can feel nearly infinite.

"The western landscape exists at such a large scale that it can sometimes be overwhelming to people," says Sheri Sanzone, a principal of Bluegreen, a landscape, architecture, and planning studio in Aspen. "Creating rooms where the proportions become similar to our human scale make spaces comfortable to inhabit. Even the space created under the canopy of a single large tree can achieve these results."

Whether connecting their work to existing architecture or extending it out in the greater landscape, designers look to the play off light created by walls, trees, fences, and sculptures to form visual boundaries.

But it's not as simple as adding a fence here, a wall there.

For a client who wants to face a custom-designed wall capped with fresh powder that sparkles with sun rays at a certain time of day, the designer has to know that midwinter light streams in low and indirect, intensifying shadows and creating contrasts in horizontal and vertical planes.

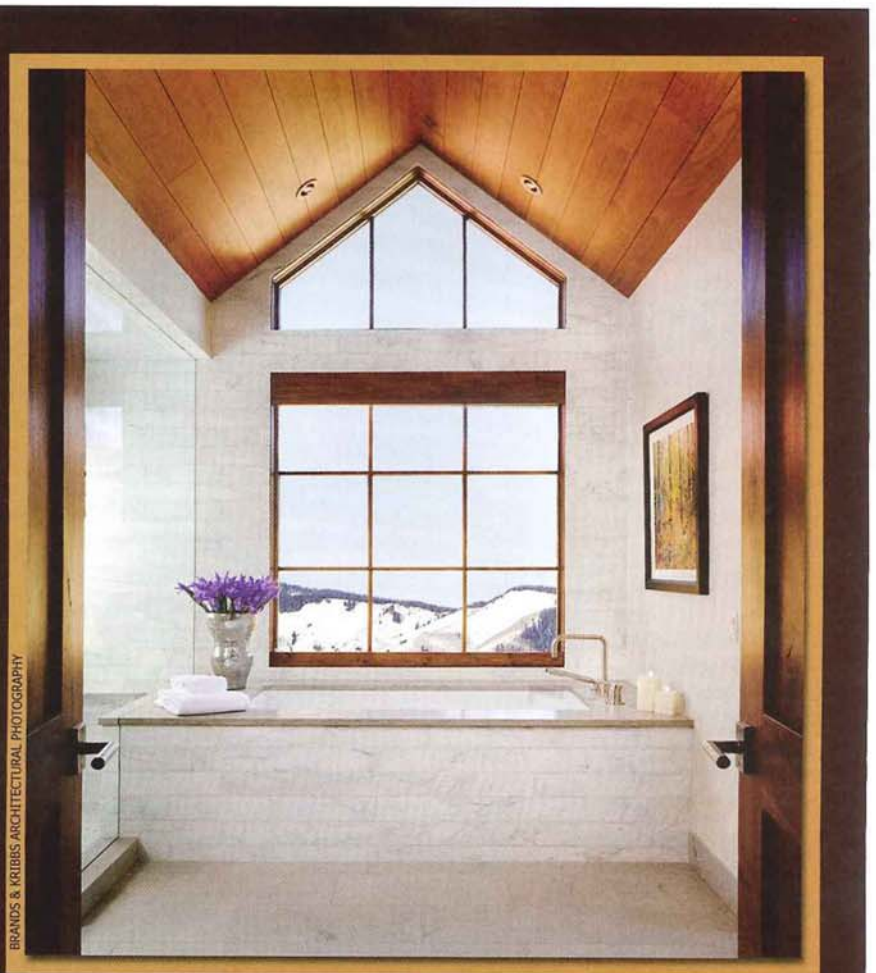
But good landscape architects are like meteorologists, only with art degrees. They understand the changing seasons and know how to build environments that enhance nature, creating artful results that look as if they've been there all along.

For Sanzone, it's all about seeing possibilities in the more Spartan canvas of a ski town's longest season.

"In the winter you have less to work with as far as design principles," she says. "You don't have color, you don't have texture, and you don't have the mass of deciduous plants, trees, and grasses. What we emphasize is what's left—large-scale texture and line."

Of course, the design elements of a winter landscape are simply the remainder of summer's.

"What can be apparent in winter is the bones and structure of a well-designed summer landscape," Sanzone explains. "Do it right in the design process, and a landscape can shine in all seasons. Too often clients write off winter. You can have a powerful landscape in that season. It won't be colorful, but it will be a beautiful minimalist design." ■

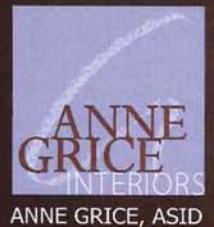


"We were so thrilled with Anne's work on a recent development project, that Anne and her team were the clear choice when we decided to remodel our own home in Snowmass!"

- Doug and Amy Thom, Snowmass Village, Colorado

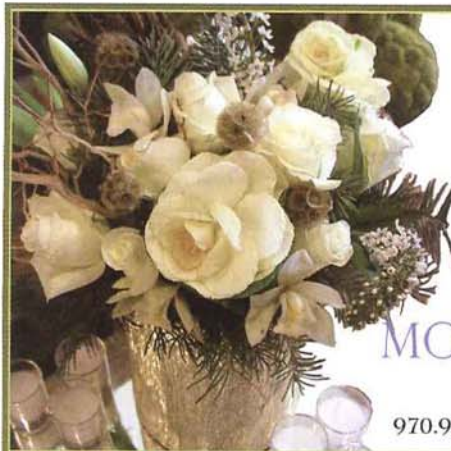
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