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An East Central Illinois Garden: A Regional Garden [Transforming the American Garden: 12 New Landscape Designs-Exhibitor]

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A Regional Garden

One's vision of the word is a part of the feeling behind—and the subject of—much of one's work. This garden expresses my deep affection for the Illinois landscape. As expressed in this garden, the vision originates in the rural Middle West. The garden reflects my preoccupation with the visual qualities of those places, and my attempt to conform and reveal them to others. Its creation has required a conscious acknowledgment of the importance and power of both past and current experience.

Living in the Middle West and experiencing its particular light, the expanse of sky and horizon, and the effect of sunset on the flat plane of farm lands—these have been particular powerful components of my visual sense. During the summer, impressions of changing field patterns have provided experience in spacial and temporal patterns and exploration. Such experiences have enhanced my visual sense of the power and friendliness of this distinctive landscape.

The goal of the East Central Illinois garden is to recreate the extreme flatness of the landscape—the strong horizon, the essentially open and treeless terrain, the tension between the crispness of edge and the warping of the land plane. The sky acts as an important backdrop for changing light and objects seen against it. This setting and the garden in which it is replicated display dramatic seasonal change at planting, harvest, and in the starkness of winter. This is the eye-level carving of grain fields by machine, the asymmetrical slicing of edge, field and distance by huge tractors, trucks and combines; field lines changing and disappearing on the horizon in late October light; the visual tension between the empty, harvested field of soybeans and the upended field of corn. The patterns are seldom symmetrical, but all are contained in the Jeffersonian square-mile grid.

Across this regular, irregular pattern, the eye continually tracks along the field, road and ditch. The eye either follows the field line to the horizon, or it jumps from field line to field line to the horizon. Although the eye seeks built structures for scale, orientation and distance, the cumulative visual sense is of the entire scene’s profound openness. This visual experience requires movement or shifting of viewpoint and direction to reveal the changing variety of pattern.

There are other important qualities present in the landscape of East Central Illinois. The richness and detail of winter trees, for example, are against the sky. Ground fog of late fall abounds the intermittent lines of hedges. The aspect of age and its effects are revealed in trees and structures; the visual quality of growth originally controlled and confined, but now aging or escaping.

Another profound quality of the region is the directness and economy of its people, and its distinctive places and their materials. There is a congruence between the landscape and the independent, practical farmers who live there. The unadorned quality of plain concrete, metal grain bins and white clapboard siding belie an austerity and functional practicality that is visually direct and uncompromising; an astuteness in its economy, matter in its directness.

This garden’s purpose is to reflect these characteristics as a visible, built expression, to be experienced through time, seasons and changing light. A change of climate such as the dusting and drifting of dry snow should reveal the region’s winds and the variability of the continental climate. The temporary loading of the front lawn during and after a summer storm should write barefoot walking. The garden focuses on and celebrates the landscape; it should demonstrate the power and qualities of this unique place. The design source for this garden are in the landscape itself. The garden and the landscape are inseparable.