

# **AILDM STUDENT DESIGN COMPETITION 2006**

## **NOTES FOR STUDENTS and JUDGES' COMMENTS**

### **ENTRIES AND JUDGING**

Eighty entries were received from TAFE colleges and universities all over Australia. A panel of four judges shortlisted 10 entries of high merit from which the winners were selected. The judges' choice of winner was unanimous.

### **GENERAL PRESENTATION**

The judges were very impressed with the high standard of graphics and presentation in nearly every entry and interested to see such a range of styles from loose hand drawn through to tighter template-made drawings and CAD. Winners reflected this range of styles. Colour rendering was also very good, featuring water colours, pencils, pastels, pens and CAD. Both muted tones and very vibrant entries were among the prizewinners.

Similarly, there was no one style of information presentation that scored more highly than others. Some had planting and hardscape details on their main plan and others used separate plans; both presentation choices had excellent examples of clear and easily read plans.

Several of the prizewinners had used perspective rather than axonometric drawings. This may have communicated information better and so influenced the judges or could have just been coincidental.

Photographs were used well, both as an addition to plans and in the materials booklets, giving a very professional presentation.

Even clients not adept at reading plans would find nearly all the entries easy to understand and very appealing to look at. With only a few exceptions, the elevations, axonometric projections and perspective drawings were accurate, well chosen and informative.

### **ANSWERING THE BRIEF**

Really listening to and responding appropriately to a client's brief is at the heart of a good design. A successful landscape designer skilfully works the clients' needs, wants and preferences into a useful and pleasing garden. In other words, when your task is to design a garden for Jack and Betty Andrews, it should be about them and not about you.

Responding to the brief was surprisingly not well handled by quite a number of students. The brief makes it quite clear that the clients are "keen gardeners" however many designs had very little garden area or unimaginative planting schemes featuring only hedges and mass plantings. Being keen gardeners, for a couple in their 60s, means they want places to plant and tend plants and that they will probably prefer a diversity of plants. Keen gardeners also do not need to be enticed into their garden with a dozen different places to sit. Usually they don't sit because they're having too much fun pottering about!

The judges were also surprised how many students incorporated quite large children's play areas into their designs. Although Jack and Betty have grandchildren who visit, the judges thought that although they would want their garden to be 'child friendly', it was unlikely that they would actually want to have part of a fairly small

garden dedicated to children's play. This might be because the judges' ages are closer to that of the clients than the students, so they would have a different viewpoint!

Some designs felt more like public installations than an intimate, domestic garden. While creating grand and memorable public landscapes is an exciting way to design, being able to make small scale, beautiful and functional residential gardens is no less a challenge or worthwhile an area of design.

Despite the Andrews saying they didn't like repetitive maintenance, many gardens would require exactly that with clipping multiple hedges and trimming around pavers set in lawn. Students are perhaps also unaware of the high maintenance required to keep loose gravels and pebbles looking good.

## **DESIGN ISSUES**

### **Scale**

The judges felt that many students did not have a clear idea of the size of the garden they were designing or of the scale of the elements they were including in it. Lawn areas were often too small to be useful and entertaining areas were massive, often completely and unnecessarily dominating the garden. Groundproof the scale of your spaces before you commit to them. An entertaining area of 25-30 sq. metres can easily provide dining for 12 people!

### **Making Spaces**

The concept of 'garden rooms' can be a useful design tool but in most gardens it is not a good idea to over-compartmentalise the space. It is quite possible to designate spaces for different purposes without separating areas completely from each other with high visual barriers. Often all that is needed is a change of ground plane surface, or a low visual barrier perhaps only half to one metre high.

A couple of strong and simple ground-plane shapes make much more pleasing gardens than complicated compositions and separated areas.

### **Hardscape**

Imposing a maximum hardscape area of 33% was included to serve two purposes. First, it is commercial reality that many Councils will limit hard footprint area and that all too often the house has already taken up more than its fair share. From an environmental point of view, we also hope to encourage students away from over-paving and over-decking their clients' gardens. Unfortunately, many still choose this approach, perhaps feeling more comfortable with hardscape elements than they do with plants.

Many students introduced far too many ground surface changes. It is curious that using a wider variety of plant material seems to be avoided as perhaps being too busy or 'spotty' but incorporating maybe 4 or 5 different surface treatments is not. While gardens need at least some covered all-weather area, most students chose built structures to provide shade as well. Don't forget that trees provide naturally venting shade, a less oppressive sense of enclosure than a pavilion, movement in the breeze and more interesting ground-plane shadows.

### **Plants**

"Why are our students so afraid of plants?" was a comment by one of the judges. Shrubs particularly were avoided unless they formed a controlled hedge. Perhaps

they are seen as old fashioned but their absence often left nothing much between a canopy level and the ground-plane perennials. Students also shied away from combining different plants into interesting plant pictures of form and texture, preferring mass plantings or a patchwork of two species. Gardens of monocultures are very susceptible to failure - from pest infestation, poor stock selection, disease or adverse weather events. From a "keen gardeners" point of view, they also make boring gardens without variety or seasonal change.

### **Access**

Several otherwise interesting designs featured cooking areas at some distance from the house, often only accessible by steps, bridges or stepping-stones. Although Jack and Betty are fit and active now, they plan to stay in their home for some time and therefore this approach was thought to be impractical.

### **Levels**

Although the block has only a gentle slope, nearly all students chose to use retaining walls and reshape contours rather than attempt to work with the natural topography. If this is your favoured approach, check and re-check your levels. Several designs that at first impressed the judges failed on a closer examination of their built levels. Many included unnecessary level changes requiring steps both up and down to access different parts of the garden, greatly increasing the potential for drainage problems and trip hazards for both toddlers and aging occupants.

### **Focal Points**

Most students used sculpture or water features to create design focal points, rather than plants. While this is currently a fashionable approach, the judges felt that sculpture was not being incorporated into the garden as well as it could be. Most sculptors who design pieces for gardens do not imagine them displayed altar-style in a designated separate space but set among plants which provide a textural contrast backdrop, enhancing the qualities of sculpture.

When choosing plants for a garden, students should remember that colourful foliage plants, particularly with red or crimson leaves are real attention-getters in a plantscape, that will often steal the eye away from the sculpture or detail that was intended to be the focal point.

## **LOOKING FOR SUCCESS IN THE 2007 COMPETITION?**

Some AILDm advice -

- work more on putting yourself 'in the shoes of your clients', particularly if you have no personal experience of that age group or type of household. Don't make stereotypical assumptions.
- think about what makes a good garden as distinct from a public landscape
- find some open space to mark out your design ideas to scale
- measure up garden spaces that you like, particularly entertaining areas so you know how big they really need to be
- don't pave and deck the world
- don't divide up the garden into little enclosed spaces
- restrain your use of detail and focal points
- talk to some garden sculptors about how they like their work to be displayed
- expand your plant palette beyond the usual suspects but research carefully what really grows successfully. Many plants do not live up to gardeners' expectations in real life!