



An Inside Look at Outdoor Rooms

"Outdoor room." It's a clever turn of phrase, arguably an oxymoron, certainly an ironic term at first blush. It's an idea that has caught on in a big way over the past 20 years and is familiar to anyone interested in landscape design. As such clichés go, however, the outdoor room carries considerable heft; few would deny that creating living spaces outdoors has transformed and elevated the arts of exterior design and construction. No one knows where the concept first took root; in fact, evidence of outdoor living areas can be found in the world's most ancient ruins and have existed in all forms of architecture ever since. They can be found in Greek and Roman ruins, the great Italian villas of the Renaissance, Japanese gardens, the grounds of Versailles and Lanais of Hearst Castle.

Typically associated with luxury, outdoor rooms have become a contemporary mainstay in the vast sea of landscape and lifestyle-oriented media content, online, in print and on television. Almost everywhere we look these days, the outdoor room is there.

"It's all about lifestyle," says Ryan Hughes of Ryan Hughes Design/Build in

BY ERIC HERMAN



Courtesy Ryan Hughes

Even in relatively small spaces, outdoor rooms can be used to maximize homeowner enjoyment and utility both in and out of the water.



Courtesy of GreenScend Landscape.com

Designing outdoor rooms often means taking into account the footprint, size and style of outdoor furnishings.

continuity of design, continuity of process and continuity of the end product.”

THE GRAND VIEW

In that sense, the idea of the outdoor room isn't a contradiction in terms, but instead an idea that represents a dynamic expansion and aggregation of existing industries in an integrated profession: the “outdoor living specialist.” To a large extent, it's where the aquatics industries and landscape architecture come together.

On one level, the idea is extremely simple. Outdoor rooms are simply those spaces outside designated for specific functions including cooking, dining areas, living rooms, sunning, play areas, viewpoints, intimate spaces for reflection and meditation and more. They are also defined by a vast array of possible amenities such as outdoor kitchens, showers, bathrooms, game rooms, audiovisual systems, landscape lighting, shade structures, fire features and, of course, swimming pools and spas.

The concept becomes far more complex when trying to combine those elements both functionally and aesthetically. Not only does developing an entire property's outdoor area require a variety of technical disciplines, it re-

Palm Harbor, Fla. “I would argue creating living spaces outside not only adds value in terms of utility, it's also more fun and creative because you're creating areas where people go to enjoy their lives.”

Hughes is among the growing ranks of professionals who strive to create comprehensive exterior designs that in effect expand the home's functional

living space. Rather than focus on a single element such as the swimming pool or the landscape, Hughes' firm approaches every project as a single-source for clients, from the design process through construction to selecting outdoor furnishings.

“Continuity is a word we use over and over,” Hughes says. “You have control over the entire project so there's



Courtesy of GreenSceneLandscaping.com

Among the many advantages of designing with outdoor rooms in mind, these spaces can be used to great effect when working on properties with a view.

quires an understanding of human behavior.

“When you look at the way people entertain and behave at parties, they tend to break into smaller groups,” explains Scott Cohen, owner and president of the Green Scene Landscaping

and Swimming Pools, Chatsworth, Calif. “You’ll have one group talking about Facebook over here and then another talking about politics over there, then there might be a group of husbands complaining about their wives in one area and wives complain-

ing about their husbands in another, and maybe parents complaining about their teenagers over there. Whatever the case, people have a tendency to cluster. Outdoor rooms provide different areas where people can gather in smaller groups and move between the groups.”

“If we do our job,” Hughes adds, “every outdoor room will be used at a party, and at different times in the homeowners’ daily lives.”

ALL IN ALL

The challenge in tackling this grand form of one-stop shopping is having the ability to work in multiple outdoor genres. A common refrain among pool builders, for example, is that pools are quite challenging enough without taking on all that surrounds them.

“I think that’s an old-school mentality,” Hughes says. “Customers are more educated these days and want to work with someone who will create a master plan. I personally believe pool guys are going to be pulled in this direction. If they don’t have the design



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expertise, they can hire someone or form a relationship with a landscape architect or general contractor. “

“You do have to be confident and competent in a variety of areas,” Cohen says. “But why would you do it any other way? You don’t go out to eat and get your steak in one place, vegetables in another and then wine someplace else. When clients find that they can have their entire property handled by one person or one company, they prefer it to having to work with one firm for their pool and another for their landscape and so on. From our perspective, we work so hard to get them in the first place, it only makes sense to try to meet all their needs.”

Working with outdoor rooms, i.e. comprehensive landscape design, professionals must learn to work with often sophisticated, even demanding clients with strong ideas. The sweeping nature of the work and care and attention many homeowners requires necessitates a high level of constant communication and client education.

“When you walk into a backyard, you might see 50 different ways you



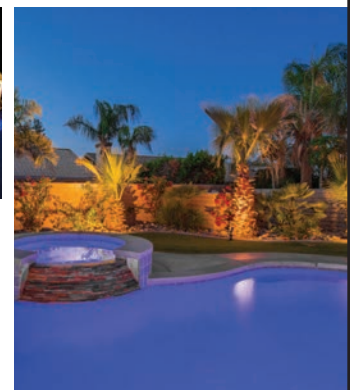
Courtesy Ryan Hughes

As illustrated in this cluster of images, outdoor rooms can provide virtually all the amenities found inside the home, from full wet bars to fireplaces to audio/visual systems.

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Oftentimes, the shape and layout of the swimming pool can be used to set up and define outdoor rooms directly adjacent to the water.



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could design it,” says Cohen. “The key is to provide the version the clients want. That’s why I have questionnaire that helps me understand their preferences. Maybe they’re interested in a more formal design or something that’s more natural. Do they want lush plantings or are they concerned with drought tolerant plants? It’s all about listening and then guiding them in a direction based on your expertise.”

In some cases, clients will want an entire plan but only be able to pay for one or two phases. Although constructing the entire site is always preferable, outdoor specialists confirm that sometimes working on a grand scale means keeping the long view in sight.

“When you phase a job like that, it’s absolutely critical that you have a master plan and a full set of construction details,” says Hughes. “If you don’t,

inevitably when you go back for the subsequent phases you’ll find that you left out something. Maybe it’s a gas line for a feature or conduit for the sound system. If you plan ahead and install parts of the infrastructure when you’re already there, you won’t have to be pulling up pavers, cutting concrete or trenching through landscape.”

SURROUNDING THE WATER

Both Cohen and Hughes are quick to point out that none of this attention on the big picture means that pools are insignificant in their grand designs. Both design and build remarkably complex swimming pools and have earned awards and accolades for their swimming pool designs.

“I don’t think you should have someone design only the pool and

then hand it off to others for the rest of the work because it’s impossible, or at least far more difficult, to integrate the landscape with the pool,” says Hughes. “You need the same person, or at least the same team of people with a common design concept to work together.”

When designed in concert with the entire outdoors scene, the pool takes on even greater importance in the landscape in the way that bodies of water interface with the spaces around them. More than any other element, the water can unify the landscape and provide the most compelling destinations.

“We use the shape of the pool to set up the areas around the water,” Hughes says. “Pools invite you into the space, they create exceptional focal points and can reflect surrounding elements of landscape, architecture and even fire. Yes, pools are just one ele-

ment, but they're a very important one, and often the most expensive."

"Like everything else in the landscape, a swimming pool can provide different areas for different activities," explains Cohen. "You might have a spa area on one end that's more for adult entertainment, perhaps adjacent to an outdoor bar, while in another part of the pool you have an area that's more for play, maybe a deep end for diving. It all depends on what you learn about how the homeowners use the space."

Just as a spa will indicate a place for luxuriating, so too other elements in the landscape indicate their function by way of the design. "An outdoor fireplace is a great way to visually anchor a room," says Cohen. "Just by looking at it you know that's a place to sit and relax with intimate conversation, an after dinner drink or a cigar. Overhead structures do the same thing, you know right away it's a dining area or just a place to escape the sun."

PATHS AND PLACES

One of the tricky aspects of outdoor room design is that while there's aesthetic value in harmonizing the different spaces through use of color and materials, the rooms should also present their own separate characters.

"There should be an overall theme or concept and then the colors and textures of each room give it its personality," says Hughes. "As an example, you may have an area around a fire pit where we'll use rougher textures and more organic shapes so the space has a casual feel. Then when we get into some of the formal areas we might transition to more refined finishes and architectural shapes. The spaces are each different but at the same time there's continuity."

"One of the best ways to indicate you're in a particular room is by varying the flooring material," explains Cohen. "Inside you have different types of floors for different rooms. The same idea applies outside; maybe the sunning area is a wood deck, the dining area tile or some type of stamped concrete."

Of equal importance to the rooms themselves, the pathways and stairs between also work to define the outdoor experience. "I call it 'way-making,'" says Cohen. "As a designer, you're controlling the way that people move through the property, you're

inviting them to visit the different rooms or destinations. Often how you move to the room defines it; if it's on a separate elevation and you have to move up or down steps to get there. If you're traveling down a small winding path toward a viewpoint, the journey there should be part of the experience."

"The possibilities are almost endless," says Hughes. "Ultimately, it all

comes down to educating the client so they can understand and appreciate just how useful and enjoyable their outdoor rooms can be. We're always excited by the fact that we're creating spaces that can become the most fun and most used parts of the at-home lifestyle." ~

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