

Garrett Eckbo:
Modern Landscapes for Living
MATRIX/Berkeley 172

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Garrett Eckbo, Goldman Garden, Encino, California, 1951.
Richard Neutra, architect. Photograph: © Julius Shulman



Garrett Eckbo: Modern Landscapes for Living surveys an essential period in the five-decade long professional career of this celebrated landscape architect. Born in 1910, Garrett Eckbo received his undergraduate degree from the University of California at Berkeley in 1935. He then headed south to work for Armstrong Nurseries in Ontario, California, completing almost a hundred designs before undertaking advanced study at Harvard University. A man of social principle, Eckbo joined the New Deal Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1939 soon after graduation. A man of esthetic principle, he applied his developing formal ideas to the design of all spaces, whether private gardens, cooperative developments, or social housing for agricultural laborers. In the office and the field, Eckbo developed a sophisticated landscape system to complement the housing experiments by FSA architects, despite limited budgets, stringent time constraints, and inauspicious sites.

For the most part, innovation in modern American landscape architecture took place in the private garden — witnessed in the extensive production of Thomas Church — and thereafter, in the corporate realm. Eckbo, most unusually, succeeded in not only implementing original ideas in the public arena, but basing his theory and design research on the pursuit of a better living environment — one premised on *optimum*, rather than *minimum*, standards. His was a lifelong engagement with social improvement. The landscapes he created for the migrant workers under the Farm Security Administration stood as high-design expressions of honest intentions. Layered spaces articulated by planted geometries of varying heights and textures ultimately fulfilled very basic functions: protection from the wind and sun, perceptual enclosure, and

psychological protection from harassment for the worker coming “home” after a day in the sun-baked fields. So successful was the FSA in devising a rural housing system — efficient, inexpensive, for a great number of users — that when millions of Americans joined the war effort and migrated to support its industry, this administration was commissioned to carry out numerous war housing projects. Eckbo himself recalls working on fifty of these emergency landscapes, where once again, design gestures on a baroque scale served modest yet essential purposes.

With the return of peace, and the building boom that ensued, Eckbo proposed practical yet idealistic ideas for communities that favored pedestrian over automobile circulation, a hierarchy of open spaces for various age groups, and a number of social services destined to free the housewife from the drudgery of domestic chores. With architect Gregory Ain, he planned and designed a series of cooperative developments in the greater Los Angeles area, only parts of which were ever realized. Community Homes in Reseda offered a variety of house and garden configurations; plantings structured space through scale, shape and transparency, and provided neighborhood identity. Park Planned Homes in Altadena, and Modernique Homes in Mar Vista (both from the late 1940s), used layerings of plantings with a gradient of heights and volumes to define the collective streetscape.

Eckbo quickly rose to international prominence. His 1937 project for 26 typical gardens on an urban block (begun as a student project but soon published in one of the leading architectural magazines) laid out a complex vocabulary that the landscape architect exploited for the

remainder of his long career. Eckbo was a key player in advancing a design idiom that addressed the conditions of modern (usually California) living — for example, outdoor activities, reduced lot sizes, limited time or interest in gardening and maintenance — while transforming ideas from painting, sculpture, and architecture. The shapes that activated the composition of his plans were never left two-dimensional: each became the footprint for a series of spaces interlocked and highly charged. Because Eckbo held that defining space was basic to creating habitable landscapes, and used contemporary aesthetic ideas to create such spaces, his design work closely paralleled similar quests in architecture and the plastic arts. The extreme example of Eckbo’s curiosity, perhaps, was the so-called ALCOA Forecast Garden (1959) which he designed for his own family in Los Angeles. Here, the fascination with the new garden material — aluminum — propelled yet another rethinking of outdoor living in suburbia. Eckbo produced literally thousands of gardens in northern California and the Los Angeles Basin, and collaborated with numerous architects including Gregory Ain, Quincy Jones, Raphael Soriano, Robert Alexander and Richard Neutra. These projects were published in popular and professional journals and books around the world and contributed significantly to what became in time the modern California garden.

In 1950, Eckbo published his first book, *Landscapes for Living*, which became — like Christopher Tunnard’s 1938 *Gardens in the Modern Landscape* — a poignant polemic for new thinking about landscape design. To a degree greater than Tunnard, however, Eckbo tempered his formal interests with a

social vision, joining an understanding of the natural landscape with ideas for accommodating human use. In the succeeding years, he published *The Landscape We See*, *The Art of Home Landscaping*, and *Urban Landscape Design*, each the record of realizations and theory derived from daily practice and personal experience.

During the post-war years, the practice — reformed in various partnerships, including one with Robert Royston and Edward Williams — continued to grow in size, undertaking projects all over the country and abroad. Eckbo, Dean, Austin and Williams, later known as EDAW, became one of the most prominent landscape offices in the world. Eckbo left the firm in 1973 as its involvement with planning projects, rather than more focused landscape design, continued to burgeon. In 1963 Eckbo returned to Berkeley to accept the chair of the Department of Landscape Architecture, where he taught until his retirement in 1978. Since that time he has continued to write and undertake design projects.

Garrett Eckbo: Modern Landscapes for Living exhibits, for the first time, a representative selection of drawings of Eckbo’s student and professional designs, drawn from the College of Environmental Design’s Documents Collection. Photographs, including a selection by noted architectural photographer (and Eckbo client) Julius Shulman, and models prepared for the exhibition complement the drawings, providing a rich review of this master’s work.

Dorothee Imbert
Marc Treib
Guest Curators

Works in MATRIX:

Original drawings by Garrett Eckbo on view in the exhibition (lent by the Documents Collection, College of Environmental Design, University of California, Berkeley, unless otherwise noted) are:

Plan for a Hillside Garden
1933; ink on tracing paper

An Estate in the Manner of Louis XIV, aerial perspective
1934; ink wash on paper; Department of Landscape Architecture Collection, University of California, Berkeley

Forbes Garden, Ontario, California
1936; pencil and color pencil on tracing paper

Garden plan (partial), Ontario, California; 1936; pencil on tracing paper

A Country Estate on an Island, site plan
1936; watercolor on paper

Freeform Park, Washington D.C., partial site/planting plan
1937; pencil on tracing paper

Freeform Park, Washington D.C., site plan
1937; watercolor on paper

Small Gardens in the City, axonometric and plan studies (n°3, n°4, n°8)
1937; ink on tracing paper

Contempoville, site plan
1938; pencil on tracing paper

Recreation areas, row house block, site plan study
1938; ink and watercolor on board

Gutheim Garden, Georgetown, Washington, D.C., preliminary plan
October 10, 1938; pencil on tracing paper

Community park, Weslaco Unit, Texas, perspective
1939; ink on tracing paper

Community recreation space, Ceres, San Joaquin Valley, perspective
1940; ink on tracing paper

Labor Homes, Winters Unit, Sacramento Valley, site plan
1939; pencil with color pencil on tracing paper

Community Park, Winters Unit, Sacramento Valley, perspective
about 1939; ink on tracing paper

Community Park, Weslaco Unit, Texas, plan studies
1939; ink on tracing paper

Fraser Cole Garden, Oakland, axonometric view
1941; pencil on tracing paper

Hartman Garden, Beverly Hills, axonometric view
1946; pencil on tracing paper

Hartman Garden, Beverly Hills, plan
1946; ink on tracing paper

Ladera, site plan
1945; color pencil on diazo print

Community Homes, Reseda, San Fernando Valley, garden study
1946-1949; color pencil on tracing paper

Community Homes, Reseda, San Fernando Valley, tree patterns diagrams
1946-1949; pencil on tracing paper

Park Planned Homes, Altadena, planting plan
27 February 1947; pencil on tracing paper

Goldstone Garden, Beverly Hills, plan
1948; ink on tracing paper

Goetz Garden, Holmby Hills, plan
1948; ink on tracing paper

Jones Garden, Los Angeles, axonometric study
late 1940s; color pencil on tracing paper

Sperling Garden, Bel Air
1949; color pencil on tracing paper

ALCOA Forecast Garden, Laurel Canyon, Los Angeles plan
1959; ink, pencil and Letraset on tracing paper

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