

The Book Garden



Situated in the small town of Davidson, N.C. (population approximately 13,000), the 30' x 60' space adjacent to the public library underwent an artistic renovation. The design consisted of sculptural seating along a brick wall, pervious pavers around an existing oak and quotes, found in children books, designed and constructed by metal artist Ben Steele, under the seat.

by W. J'Nell Bryson, J'Nell Bryson Landscape Architecture

Located 30 miles north of Charlotte, N.C., is the quaint college town of Davidson. Picturesque tree lined streets and a walkable downtown attract businesses, visitors and new residents to the area. The Saturday morning Farmer's Market, summer free concerts on the Village Green and the 'James Beard' award-winning Kindred restaurant are just a few of the attractions located in Davidson.

Despite the developments of downtown, an overlooked 30' x 60' space, beside the library and along Main Street, remained vacant for several years. On this spot, a large 40" caliper water oak inhabited the space and stood testament to the historical significance of the area. The tree had been badly pruned and was showing signs of stress. With little to hold the soil in place, gradual erosion was exposing tree roots and creating ruts throughout the space. Something had to be done.

The Davidson Art Commission sent out a request for quotation, or RFQ, asking for landscape architects

and artists to team together and present ideas for a new "Children's Book Garden" Public Art and Landscape Design Project. The goal of the project was to provide a gathering spot for both locals and tourists along Main Street. The commission requested that new public art was to be installed in this high profile location. They wanted the installation to be both a gathering spot for neighborhood to use, as well as a location outside the main library where children's events, such as book readings, could be held.

I spoke with several artists who mistakenly felt that the space was too small for anything other than a single piece of art. So, I teamed with Lydia Musco, an artist and instructor at Davidson College. It was exciting for me to work with an artist who understood the idea of creating context for art. Her medium is concrete that can be made to look like beautiful soft folded stacks of paper or cloth. I felt it was the perfect complement to our Reading Garden project. (www.lydiamusco.com)



Above: To break up the amount of hardscaping that was done, a few mulched planters were incorporated into the design. The planter in the foreground holds eight Korean boxwoods (wintergreen). Two Yellow Ribbon Arborvitae are in the raised planter on the left, backed by two Sieryu Japanese Maples in the corner.

Top, Right: Lydia Musco, an artist and instructor at Davidoson College, designed these concrete sculptures that resemble stacks of colorful books. The overall design goal of the project was to reflect the theme of a children's book garden.

Bottom, Right: Under the bench cap a stainless steel 'ribbon' includes quotes from famous children's books. Recently a benefactor paid for lighting the quotes, adding a nice dimension to the public space at night.

Our design was presented to the commission, along with 14 other landscape architect and artist teams. Out of all the submissions, ours was chosen and we were hired to install our work. As project manager I supervised the installation of the work.

Preserving the longstanding water oak tree in front of the library was important for us. Our design made sure that any construction that took place occurred away from the irrigation drip line for the tree. To ensure safety of the tree, a large area around the base of the tree was mulched and left alone; excluding any additions of hardscaping or plantings. For the hardscape portion of the project, a cobblestone-like paver that is 1-5/8" thick was used. These were installed over a 3" base of screenings and aggregate base covering (ABC) gravel. Under the ABC, we used 2" of permatill, which is a crushed, natural rock that provides permanent aeration for clay or compacted soils. Fabric was not installed since we wanted to encourage the tree roots to re-populate the permatill.

Our development incorporated colorful, precast concrete benches that swirl and sweep through the space. Behind the benches are new landscapes that soften the surrounding hardscape with the inclusion of ground covering plants and a Sieryu Japanese Maple. A cobblestone pathway defines the outdoor room and intersecting pathways. Three colorful sculptures celebrate the intersection of these pathways, allowing visitors to experience the sculptures, not just as a static body of work but interactively by walking around and through them.

Lush plantings populate the planters. Sieryu Japanese Maples create a lower level tree canopy under the oak, adding definition and intimacy to the space. Grasses, conifers flowering plants and ground covers add texture and color and break up the starkness of the hardscaping done in the area.

What was once a small leftover parcel along Main Street has become a lively and colorful urban garden with an elegant hardscape. In the end, the project added to the finely woven fabric of this beautiful small college town by enhancing the public library for years to come. —