

THE PIEDMONT RETREAT: ENABLING THE LEISURELY PASSAGE OF TIME

Nestled at the base of the Shenandoah foothills in Bluemont, Virginia, the Piedmont Retreat is a 178-acre country site that honors the area's agricultural and Revolutionary wartime history, all while allowing room for the development of pursuits such as farm-to-table harvesting and a vineyard.





Whether entertaining guests or privately winding down, the outdoor space is equally enjoyed by the family in the evening as in the day.

When its owners purchased the land, they wanted to anchor a new house on the site that would employ a modernist language, provide desired amenities, and rejuvenate the soul through a connection with the earth, water, and endless sky views. They got exactly what they desired by working with architects and landscape architects who transformed the site into a country retreat complete with a dramatic backdrop for their modern home.

Graham Landscape Architecture (GLA) of Annapolis, Maryland conceived the property's master plan. Their involvement made sense, as the firm's history was built on creating private retreats that blend houses and gardens. Through an understated elegance, the firm creates meaningful harmony of details and access, as well as fluency among landforms, plantings, and architecture. GLA's work on the Piedmont Retreat replicated this cohesive design approach by effortlessly blending the indoors and outdoors.

Cooperative Approach Leads to Success

Situating a new home in this dramatic landscape was made possible because of the easy, flowing partnership between GLA's President Jay Graham, FASLA, and the architectural team tasked with creating the modern home that sits on the property today. The teams had worked together in the past, and this history enabled a streamlined workflow and real collaboration from beginning to end.

From the onset, GLA had some familiarity with the site, having recently completed a residential landscape nearby. But the team needed to learn more, so the first task was to personally see the property. During that initial visit, Graham and a few of his associates met up with the architect and his project team at the site. The husband and wife owners were there, too. The group's composition was perhaps unusual, but it set the stage for a successful project.

Case Study: Graham Landscape Architecture

That day, the group walked all over the property, discussing the merits of different ideas, including site selection for the house amid wooded tracts, agricultural fields bordered with dry-stacked stone walls, and a pond full of invading vegetation that the owners hoped to restore.

“When we arrived that first morning, we witnessed the most beautiful view,” says Graham, a trained landscape architect and architect. “So we went right to work with the architect to discuss the pros and cons of our design and the siting of the house. I would love to have this high level of cooperation for every project.”

For example, they were quite taken with the beautiful red, white, and black oak trees along the property’s edge, and they were going to build the house under them. This plan would have killed the trees, however, so Graham guided the siting of the house at the top of the

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*-Jay Graham, FASLA, President, Landscape Architect,
and Architect of Graham Landscape Architecture*

most private of the cleared areas where sunrises could be seen each day. He and the architect ensured the house was solidly anchored in the clearing and could take advantage of the views of the meadow, woodland, and sky, as well as a planned pond.

As the program and amenities of the house took shape, the next decision was to figure out where the driveway would come through the woods. Only as the house took form could the team get more specific about this part of the design.

“The house is contemporary—a piece of sculpture that sits in the landscape,” says GLA’s Project Manager and Landscape Designer Emily Rogers, ASLA. “So we suggested a realignment of the driveway to enhance the arrival sequence and honor the intended architecture of the home. We also designed the new driveway to be both permeable and to sit atop existing grade so as to not damage the root system of existing nearby trees.”

Now completed, the driveway curves around a clearing close to the edge of the property, travelling around 60 percent or more of the house before arriving at its entrance. This way, visitors and the owners experience the home from a multidimensional perspective before arriving at the front door. For example, the new drive captures an initial view of the foothills, meanders through a clearing and wooded areas, through stone walls, and curves under overhanging mature oak limbs while heightening the effect of the house as a sculpture situated in the landscape.

“There was so much character and opportunity to take advantage of at the Piedmont property,” adds Rogers. “We were thrilled to help realize it.”



Art and rainwater management are combined in this formal rain garden, forming an axial view toward and from within the house.

A Sustainable and Restorative Design Approach

Dedicated to a modernist aesthetic, the architecture of the house also embraces many established techniques of sustainability including a geothermal heating/cooling/hot water system, a solar heating system for the pool powered by a photovoltaic array on the garage roof, maximized interior daylighting, a trombe wall for radiant heat in the main living areas of the house, a passive stack convective cooling system, a cool (white) roof, LED lighting, low-VOC and water-based paints and sealers, and the collection and retention of stormwater.

Balancing the mass of the house are a grove of planetrees, which help shade the lawn, and a double allée of oaks and redbuds. A circle inscribes the home, delineating paths, terraces, and planting beds. The Master's Garden is planted with medium and tall perennials that provide seasonal texture and color in the foreground of the view from the master suite and block views to the driveway beyond. The Tapestry Garden includes a diverse palette of low-growing plants to set the ground plane as it leads the eye to the views in the middle and backgrounds. Bounded by boulders found on site, a square lawn provides flat ground for playing games and acts as the next layer of geometry mediating house and site.

Beyond the lawn, a newly established meadow is an ever-changing field leading the eye to a new pond and restored woodland edge. Desiring a restorative approach to the land, the clients endorsed the repair of the existing site walls and drainage pond, creation of a new bioswale and pond to hold water from the home site, establishment of native meadows on former tilled tracts, removal of invasive tree species and reforestation of two small cleared areas, and planting of more than 100 flowering native understory trees to enhance the woodland edge.



House Area Landscape Master Plan

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—Emily Rogers, ASLA, Project Manager and Landscape Designer of Graham Landscape Architecture

This cutting-edge residential landscape combines proven environmental restoration and sustainable living tactics with beautiful, formal modernist design. The combination is greater than the sum of its parts, offering a home so well situated in its landscape that one could pass time with no purpose other than watching the effects of the sun as it moves across the sky.

The residential landscape, in addition to displaying a diverse palette of native and specimen plants, captures stormwater from the roof, moves it through the garden in rock-lined channels to a bioswale enabling water infiltration as it leads to a newly established five-acre pond. Runoff is collected in a basin-type water feature that is framed by plantings and is visible from the home's foyer. The water then moves through the entry court in a rill constructed from fieldstone collected on site. The system highlights the natural cycles of rain showers while providing attractive elements during dry times, as well.



Study of the property's natural systems led the design team to site the house in an existing woodland clearing where views of the restored meadow, new pond, and open sky could provide respite for the family and their guests.

"We've become more and more interested in projects with natural systems and native plants, working with whatever is added to highlight the character of the site—which in this case was managing stormwater," says Graham. "The result is that as someone drives through the fields and woods, they learn about the site along the way. It's an unexpected experience for the visitor, yet it was purposefully planned."

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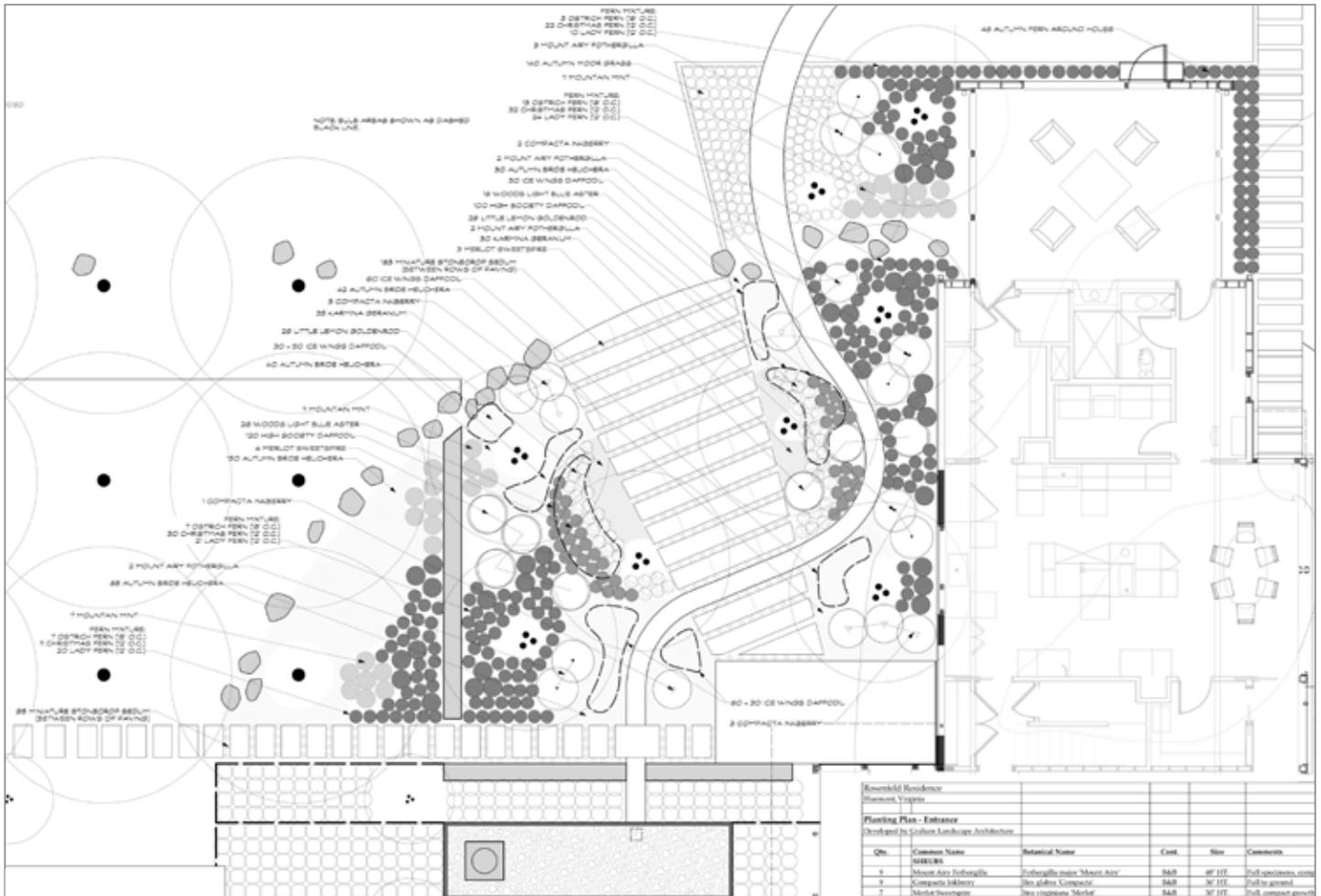
—Emily Rogers, ASLA, Project Manager and Landscape Designer of Graham Landscape Architecture

Designing with Vectorworks Landmark Software

To create stunning landscapes like the Piedmont Retreat, GLA enlists Vectorworks® Landmark software, a tool the firm has used for decades. Graham jokes that they've been using the software in their Annapolis office for so long that he probably takes for granted all the things it does for their workflows.

To start the process, designers often import actual photographs, sketches, or other illustrative ideas right into the software, which accommodates a wide array of file formats including Illustrator® EPS and native Photoshop® PSD files. The firm sometimes incorporates maps into their work, like survey data, that serve as the basis for site models. Team members then scale and draw right on top of those images to incorporate ornamentation, hardscapes, plant symbols, and more.

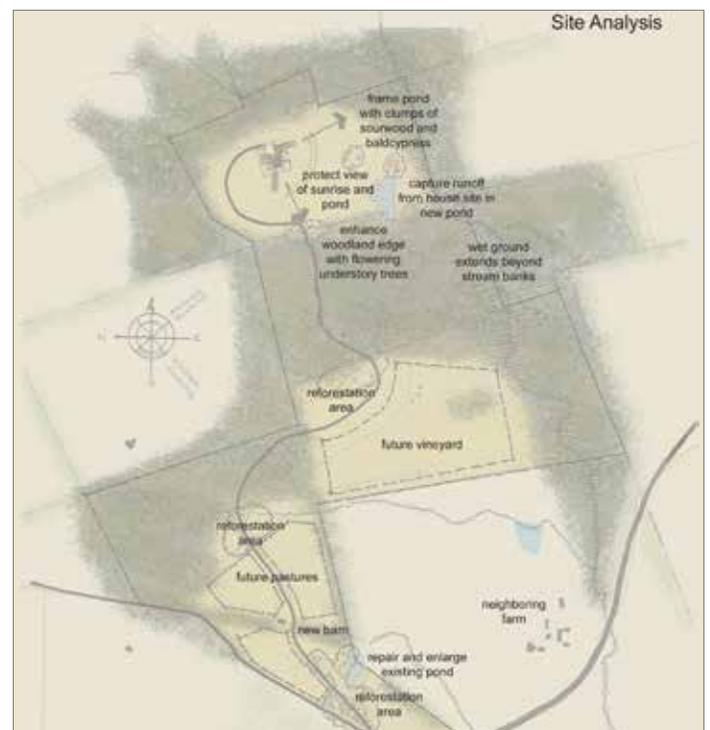
The ability to change scales on the fly is important to the firm. "We can design residential plans at a ¼-inch scale up to master plans at 1:1,000 or larger," says Graham. "Being able to easily scale up or down and create new viewports accommodates the scope of our business and is a big benefit of the software."



Shown here is the rainwater system incorporated into the planting and hardscape design.

Another capability the design team enjoys is the Duplicate Array command, which controls how many copies of selected objects are made and how these copies are arrayed, or placed, in the drawing. This is particularly useful for repeating plant types, lighting, and irrigation heads. GLA's landscape architects also appreciate the Clip tool, which cuts out pieces from 2D objects, such as arcs, plant symbols, and polygons. They can then split objects or cut holes in them when they want to clip away parts of objects that border paths in a landscape while maintaining their geometry.

Finally, GLA appreciates being able to place accurate plant symbols into their drawings. While plant parameters are set by definition, the firm values being able to change those settings before placing the objects. Embedded libraries in the software contain 3D modeled plants, as well as artistic and photorealistic plant image props for use in 3D presentations, providing views such as top and profile in varied seasons and sizes.



The analysis plan shows the full context of the site.



The drive includes gateways, such as those seen here, to introduce guests to different experiences on their scenic approach to the house.

“There’s no need to re-draw objects when you can just drop in the pre-drawn items right from the software ranging from plants, outdoor furniture, lighting, and irrigation objects to thousands of symbols and tile patterns,” says Rogers. “Vectorworks Landmark makes the actual drawing process intuitive and smart, meaning we can spend more time being creative and designing and less time drafting or redrawing. This is a giant competitive advantage for us and lets us achieve notable results.”

With awards for the Piedmont Retreat already under its belt from the Maryland and Virginia chapters of the American Society of Landscape Architects, GLA’s assessment of its work is far from just its own. Look for more inspiring work to come from this firm in the future.

Acknowledgements

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