

Dialogue

Cultivating Contemplation: Public and Private Landscapes for Mental Health, Well-being and Joy

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Figure 1. Julie Moir Messervy Design Studio. The Toronto Music Garden. Photo Credits: Adrian Holmes (left) Virginia Weiler (center and right).

Interview with Julie Moir Messervy

Overview

This interview explores the work and philosophy of Julie Moir Messervy, an internationally recognized landscape designer whose approach bridges contemplative design traditions with modern technology. Drawing from her training in Japanese garden design and architectural theory, Messervy has developed a design language based on spatial archetypes that resonates with innate human experiences of landscape. Messervy discusses her evolution from traditional landscape design to developing digital tools that democratize access to quality landscape design. Her work demonstrates how thoughtfully designed landscapes can serve as healing spaces, particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when access to nature became essential for psychological resilience. The conversation highlights the integration of timeless design principles with innovative technologies to create contemplative landscapes that foster well-being, joy, and connection to nature.

Implications

Landscape designers and urban planners should incorporate contemplative spaces and spatial archetypes into public environments to support mental health and well-being. Digital design tools can democratize access to quality landscape design, addressing environmental justice concerns in urban settings. As climate change intensifies, integrating biophilic design principles with technology offers a pathway to create resilient, accessible green spaces that provide psychological benefits while supporting biodiversity and ecosystem services.

Keywords: contemplative landscapes; landscape design; mental health; nature; archetypes; technology; sustainability; climate resilience; joy; biophilic design

1. Introduction

This interview explores the intersection of history and the future through a conversation with Julie Moir Messervy, an internationally recognized, award-winning landscape designer. Specializing in both public and private landscape design, she shares insights from her past experiences, current projects, and forward-thinking vision.

Aligning with this journal's theme, *Urban Landscapes for Mental Health: Intersections and Connections between Wisdom and Innovation in Design* (UDMH, 2025), Julie's approach blends spatial archetypes with technology. Research demonstrates that access to well-designed landscapes and green spaces significantly improves mental health outcomes, reducing stress, anxiety, and depression while enhancing cognitive function and overall well-being (Bratman et al., 2019; Engemann et al., 2019). Julie's work introduces strategies to enhance natural environments while offering greater accessibility through digital tools, democratizing access to quality landscape design—a critical factor in addressing mental health inequities in urban environments (Nesbitt et al., 2019).

Julie Moir Messervy is the founder of a start-up that offered the first online landscape design service. Her company released a landscape design app that reached over half a million downloads (Home Outside, 2011). In 2024, the company launched the world's first AI landscape designer, demonstrating how expertly curated plant collections and thoughtful design can create beautiful, climate-resilient landscapes.

A distinguished lecturer and the author of eight books on landscape design, Julie has written numerous articles and blogs and presents lectures and workshops worldwide on the subject of landscape design. Her company, Home Outside, was nominated for the "2024 Earthshot Prize," one of the most prestigious global awards for climate innovation.

Julie also founded Julie Moir Messervy Design Studio (JMMDS), an award-winning design firm in southern Vermont, which has created parks and residential gardens across the country and internationally. One of her most well-known works, the three-acre Toronto Music Garden, was designed in collaboration with renowned cellist Yo-Yo Ma and received the Leonardo da Vinci Award (2005) for innovation and creativity.

Transcript

Sharp-Newton: Thank you, Julie, for taking the time to be interviewed. I was introduced to you through your focus on contemplative landscapes, which was also the subject of your thesis at MIT. I also understand that you were studying Architecture and City Planning and am curious about your early years. Would you mind sharing some of the background, and early seeds of your interests in planning, sustainability, landscape design and outdoor spaces?

Messervy: Thank you, Erin, for taking this time today to talk about my work and my life. I've been so lucky to have landed in this field at an early age. I grew up in a suburban setting outside of Chicago and was the second oldest of seven children. Maybe because of this, I was one of those children who always played outside in the nature around our house. I loved making little forts and gardens for my dolls in the forest, field, and apple orchard nearby.

I had thought that I might become a music major in college, since I played the piano and organ from an early age. When I got to Wellesley, I discovered art history and found a language that gave me words to describe what I was seeing. I particularly loved abstract expressionism, with its bold patterns, colors, and textures. While many of my classmates went on to get PhDs, I realized instead that I wanted to find a way to apply this new knowledge.

Architecture at MIT

An exchange program with MIT enabled me to spend a year taking architecture courses. I loved coming up with "big ideas" in our design studios, making models, and learning how to think about and create meaningful spaces for people. After graduating, I worked in New York City for 10 months and then returned to MIT to work on a double master's in architecture and city planning.

Fast forward to a course on East Asian architecture and design, for which I opened a book on Japanese gardens and immediately realized what I wanted to do with my life. The photos of the Saiho-ji—the Moss Garden, and the famous Zen gardens brought me right back to my childhood in nature, only these landscapes were more abstract, more perfect versions. It became my goal to learn the secrets of Japanese garden design by

working with a garden master in Japan’s ancient capital of Kyoto, where many important gardens were located.

Sensei in Kyoto

At the age of 24, I traveled to Kyoto to study with Professor Kinsaku Nakane, a well-known garden master, who became my Sensei (teacher). How lucky I was to have seen a sign for the Henry Luce Scholars program that enabled fifteen lucky young people to study or work in East Asia. Over those fifteen months, I visited eighty gardens, worked in his design studio, and in the gardens he built, to learn the craft from the ground up. I lived in a Zen Buddhist nunnery and took tea ceremony lessons there as well. It was an immersive experience, and (since Sensei and the nuns didn’t speak any English), I continued my Japanese language study there as well.

A Thesis at MIT

When I returned to MIT, I finished some coursework, taught a course on Japanese Gardens, and started my thesis work. I chose a topic that combined architecture, city planning, gardens, and had fascinated me while living in Kyoto: how, in such a teeming city as Kyoto, there were still places to get away that felt private in the public realm. Coffee houses, sake bars, temple compounds, and gardens were abundant, and I used them all. When I returned to live in Boston’s Beacon Hill, I deeply missed having access to such spaces. Under the tutelage of my thesis advisor, Kevin Lynch, who wrote *The Image of the City* (Lynch, 1960), I interviewed people who worked in downtown Boston and asked them where they went as a child for daydreaming, reverie, and reflection; then asked them where they went during their workday for the same purposes; and finally asked about their ideal image of what that might look like. Out of that research came “Contemplative Places in Cities.” I discovered there were four types of spaces people gravitated towards (see Table 1).

Table 1. Julie Moir Messervy “Contemplative Places in Cities” typologies.

PLACES WITHIN (such as a church)	AT THE EDGE (such as an urban waterfront)
ON TOP (such as rooftops)	AT THE CENTER (such as a bench in a park)

Each person longed for more spaces where they could “lose themselves” and feel comfortable and at ease in an urban environment.

After receiving my master’s degrees, I went on to start building gardens and continued teaching. I realized that my work in Japan wasn’t done, so I returned to Kyoto for another 5 months as a Japan Foundation Fellow, working again with Sensei and on the crew. Upon my return, my husband and I started a family, which proved to be very important to not only my personal life, but also my thinking as a designer.

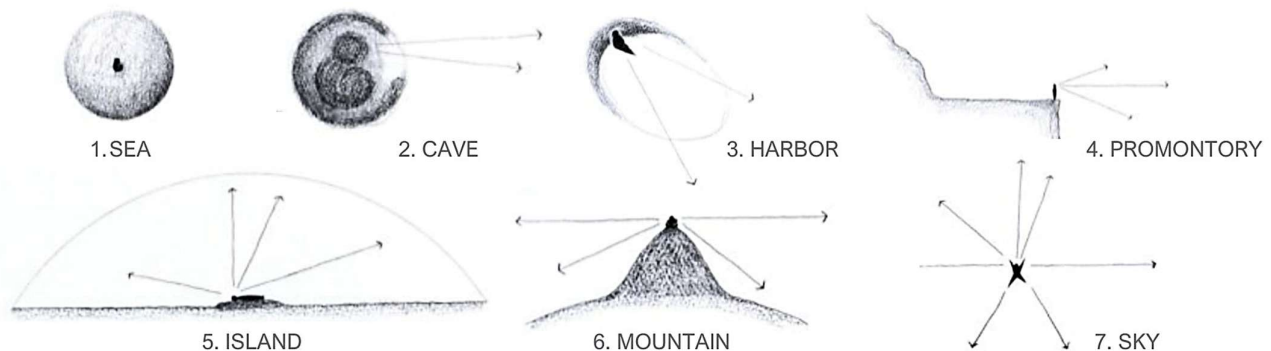


Figure 2. Julie Moir Messervy’s Seven Archetypes

Spatial Archetypes

As a mother and landscape designer, I realized that there's a language of landscapes that you start "speaking" before you are even born. You learned it as a tiny embryo swimming in your mother's womb (Sea); then as a newborn pushed out from within to the bright, cold outer world (Cave). You learned it again when held close in your parents' loving arms (Harbor). Then again, when you left the parent's lap, crawling and toddling out to the edge of the world (Promontory).

Eventually, you left the known world behind to become a little landscape of your own (Island). As you matured, you climbed upwards, gaining perspective to reach wisdom at the top (Mountain). Finally, you left the landscape behind, to start the process all over again, once more (Sky).

I've named these seven archetypal stages for landscape imagery: Sea, Cave, Harbor, Promontory, Island, Mountain, and Sky. You inhabit each through your body, your mind, and your spirit, again and again throughout your life. Each is made up of a different vantage point and a particular perspective that help us frame different views of our world. Together, they unfold in a cyclical pattern from innermost to outermost; darkest to lightest; lowest to highest, and back again, and form a language of landscapes of spatial archetypes.

I've been writing about and living the archetypes from earliest childhood, honing these perspectives in my work and throughout my life and have devoted a chapter about them in each of my books. Now, in my seventy-fifth year, I'm ready to complete the final chapters at last!



Figure 3. Julie Moir Messervy Design Studio (JMMDS) Project Examples; Photo Credit: Nicola Browne

Contemplative Gardens

Contemplative Gardens (Messervy, 1990) was my first book, with photographs by the National Geographic photographer Sam Abell. For this, I visited seven different garden realms around the world, each of which corresponded to one of the archetypes: Manhattan; Devon, England; Lake Como, Italy, Marrakech, Morocco; Yasnaya Polyana, Russia; Kashmir, India, and back to Kyoto, Japan. It's a beautiful book about public and institutional landscapes from around the world and articulates the many ways contemplative gardens can be designed and extended my knowledge of garden design.

While still designing gardens, I also started lecturing widely around the country and Canada. At the end of every talk on *Contemplative Gardens*, I'd quote the Persian poet Rumi: "This outward spring and garden are the reflection of the inward garden." I soon realized that what my clients wanted was for me to understand their inward garden and build it as an outward garden on their land and that I had been evolving my own design process, different from my peers that I wanted to write about. My *Inward Garden* book came out in 1995 and was influential for many because it explained the design process I evolved for working with clients.



Figure 4. Julie Moir Messervy Design Studio (JMMDS). *The Toronto Music Garden.* Photo Credits: Virginia Weiler (left), Adrian Holmes (right).

Sharp-Newton: Your approach blends timeless principles of beauty, meaning, and nature (with innovative technologies, later). Could you share more about the core principles and strategies that guide your work?

Messervy: As I always say in my lectures, our job as designers is to understand what people long for and to fulfill those longings through the spaces we create on the land. The way I like to frame this is that, while form certainly does need to follow function, form should first follow feeling.

Sharp-Newton: Designing for public clients differs from working with private clients: Urban design often focuses on parks and public spaces, so how can individuals create their own contemplative, meditative spaces in these urban environments?

Messervy: This is where my spatial archetype theory comes in: If you can ask your client what kinds of spaces they really want and need in their life, then you know what the underlying elements of where they want to be in their landscape. Are they a Cave, a Harbor, or an Island person, for instance? Then the question becomes, how do I link these vantage points together to create a meaningful journey through their garden? I usually design a stroll journey that links departure to destination points by choreographing an interesting path with pausing points that are small events that happen along the way. When they finally reach the destination point, another kind of journey occurs—a mind journey, which is the contemplative experience where a comfortable and safe viewing position enables someone to look through a frame to a focal point. Since each client's "inward garden" is different than anyone else, then each "outward garden" that I design for them should be unique as well.

Sharp-Newton: One of the core elements of our "Mind the Gaps Framework" includes integrating nature and green spaces to provide accessible green spaces for mental health and wellbeing. For this reason, your public space projects are especially relevant to our readers. You have made many contributions to landscape architecture, on many scales. Starting with public landscape design, I collected a list of some of your public projects (see Table 2). Could you speak about these as they relate to cities and mental health?

Messervy: Nature is the ultimate healer. If we didn't know this before, the world learned it during the Covid 19 pandemic. Leaving lockdown to be able to walk in a natural setting, a park or a public garden was a true lifesaver for so many. Because people had to stay home, planting an edible or a pollinator garden and improving the outside of their houses for their family became a much more important part of their lives than ever before. Spending time outside to dig in the earth, observe insects and birds close up, find awe in the night sky, or simply being in nature enabled so many of us to find solace and even joy in our lives, in the midst of the stress that we all endured. Our work as landscape design professionals can make a considerable difference in people's emotional, physical, psychological, and even spiritual sense of well-being in the world, wherever they live.

Table 2. Julie Moir Messervy Design Studio (JMMDS) Public Project Examples.

Toronto Music Garden*	Hidden Hollow Children's Garden**	Social Justice: Remembrance Garden at SCSU*
Little Falls Park Public Landscape*	Japanese Garden, Museum of Fine Arts*	Cultivating Place [^]
Spruce Knoll, Mount Auburn Cemetery*	Myriad Botanical Gardens ^{^^}	Weezie's Garden*

Notes: details available at: *<https://jmmnds.com/portfolio/>; **<https://heritagemuseumsandgardens.org/gardens/hidden-hollow/>; [^]<https://www.cultivatingplace.org/post/2018/05/24/social-justice-a-reflection-garden-southern-connecticut-state-university/>; ^{^^}<https://myriadgardens.org/>.

Public Process

When you take the idea that a landscape should be a place of beauty and meaning into the public realm, how do you ensure that you've designed a unique and special space that many hundreds (if not thousands) of people will come to love, cherish and continue to return to? To answer this question, we evolved a design process that enabled us to create public landscapes by making sure that the stakeholders who represent the end users were all in the room, including the community around the site, business owners, nearby institutions, city administrators, garden club members, to name just a few. There could be as few as twenty and as many as several hundred people in our design charrettes.

We start by talking about the site and, with their participation, deciding what is "sacred" (must be saved) and "profane" (can be changed). Then we show them our projects and discuss the big ideas behind them. Next is the most important difference between our design charrettes and those of other design professionals: we break everyone into mixed groups and ask each group to design the garden they want to see in that space. After half an hour, they pin their designs up on the wall and a spokesperson talks about their ideas. Then the entire group multi-votes on the big idea they prefer and the elements within each design that they like best.

Having the local users "design" the landscape first lets us (who are coming from far away) learn from those who deeply understand the site and its community. The "sacred" and "profane" exercise makes clear what elements must remain and multi-voting helps us know their priorities and add new elements into the mix. We then turn their favorite conceptual ideas into two different schematic designs that we then present to the group to discuss and then multi-vote once more. After that, we develop the preferred design with a local landscape architect, architect, or engineer and observe the construction as much as the budget allows. This process enables us to create public gardens that people seem to love.

Yo-Yo Ma and the Toronto Music Garden

The big idea for this garden came from the eminent cellist, Yo-Yo Ma. I happened to be working with his family to create their personal garden and had given them my *Contemplative Gardens* (1990) book to read for their thoughts. At the time he was working on a film project in which an artist would interpret one of each of the six cello suites by Johann Sebastian Bach. The Olympic gold medalists Torville and Dean, a Kabuki artist, and contemporary choreographer Mark Morris each created a new dance while Yo-Yo played the Suite. He decided to take a different approach for the final three suites and sent me a note asking me to listen to Suite #1 and #4 and to tell me what I thought. For me, the first suite was all about nature, so I wrote him back describing the images that came to my mind. The next few years were spent trying to make his dream of creating a contemplative garden in a city come true. We started in Boston, moved to Toronto, and finally, opened the three-acre Toronto Music Garden (TMG) along its Harbourfront. The film, *Yo-Yo Ma: Inspired by Bach: The Music Garden* (PBS, 1999) was shown on television and chronicles the process of creating and building the garden. Every year, millions of people stroll through its curving paths and beautiful plantings and listen to music there on Thursday nights.

Sharp-Newton: Could you share any evidence-based design strategies that informed these projects?

Messervy: Our firm has designed several children's gardens, including Weezie's Garden at the Massachusetts Horticultural Society in Wellesley, MA and Hidden Hollow at the Heritage Museums and Gardens in Sandwich, MA, for which a post-evaluation survey was conducted. Hidden Hollow was one of the first certified Nature Explore Classrooms in New England with specific programmatic guidelines that we followed for the two-acre kettle hole site. Our mandate was to reconnect children to nature, stimulate curiosity and creativity, and encourage learning through the freedom to explore and interact with nature. Children can climb stepping stumps, navigate log balance beams, construct forts, create nature-inspired art, build with blocks, dig in sand, experiment with water, make music, engage in sensory investigation with plants, and more.

The New England Museum Association hired Reach Advisors to conduct a post-occupancy evaluation. They found that 'when it comes to measuring engaging educational spaces, Hidden Hollow is off the charts' and that she's never seen results like these (Reach Advisors, n.d.).

Sharp-Newton: Have you received post-occupancy feedback from clients and users over time? What has worked well? Have there been any unexpected outcomes or lessons learned?

Messervy: Every time I re-visit one of our public gardens, I spend many hours observing people's behavior and check on the design and health of the plantings. I love to be surprised by what I see. In the TMG, I've seen people bring their instruments to play in one of the "movements" or conduct an impromptu wedding under the Menuett Pavilion. I love to see a parent reading to their child in the "nests" in the Bluebird Garden at Mass Hort or see a classroom playing in the Tortoise sandbox. I've seen small commemoration ceremonies atop Spruce Knoll, a natural garden based on the archetypes that is the first-of-its kind cremation garden where cremains are poured into the ground with memorialization happening on a ring of granite tablets around the garden's perimeter. Creating gardens that bring beauty and meaning to many others is such gratifying work.



Figure 5. Home Outside 3D Landscape & Garden Designer.

Sharp-Newton: Regarding technology and accessibility, I understand that you have been working with your team to develop apps and digital tools to help users integrate natural environments. How did this initiative come about, what are these tools, and what are your hopes for their impact?

Messervy: In the mid 90s, I started publishing with the wonderful publishing house, Taunton Press. I started by writing *Outside the Not So Big House* (Messervy & Susanka, 2006) in collaboration with the architect Sarah Susanka. Next, I wrote *Home Outside: Creating the Landscape You Love* (Messervy, 2009) to share our design process with homeowners. Then I wrote *Landscaping Ideas that Work* (Messervy, 2014) and *New Landscaping Ideas that Work* (Messervy, 2018), with the help of my amazing design staff. This was the start of our push to democratize landscape design for everyone.

After the success of *Home Outside*, we realized that while books were helpful for readers, creating an app would enable us to help many more people more intuitively. Our first app, now called *Yard Planner*, is a 2D drag-and-drop design app that lets homeowners and pros upload a Google earth image and design their landscape on it using our 800 hand-drawn elements that are a part of every residential landscape, from the house to the

driveway to the plants to the compost pile. Even though it's twelve years old, you can still find it on the App Store and Google Play Store.

Our next project was to use our app to work virtually with people around the world, making Home Outside the first remote design service. While we enjoyed doing this work, we still felt that our services were too expensive for most people to be able to afford, so after a few years, we turned to cutting-edge technology to help us democratize once more. Over the past three years, the design team combined with our Softeq development team created a 3D+AR landscape and garden designer app that we released in the fall of 2024. Our beautiful 3D plant and garden collection models can be seen in a yard in full scale and now you can click-and-buy what you love and have it delivered to your door. We also created a 3D AI tool that gives you a digital twin of your house and yard, then shows you where to place hedges, shade trees, or border and edible gardens, and then tallies up how much they will cost and what return on investment you will get if you follow our plans. We plan to release this as a part of our Home Outside 3D Landscape and Garden Designer app soon.

As an entrepreneur in her seventies, I've found that it can be stressful to raise money and run a tech start-up during these tough times. But it's all worthwhile because one thing our app can truly help with is inspiring people to plant for resilience. With five grandchildren under 6 years old, I feel that I must do everything I can to ensure that I leave them a healthy planet and planting plants is one of the best ways to do that.

Sharp-Newton: Your work is also focused on mitigating climate change. Your applications and technology tools teach users how to sequester carbon, save energy, and increase biodiversity, which helps all living animals, and even insects. I was wondering if your technology could be used for public works projects? Additionally, I saw that your team is working with Homegrown National Park® (HNP) to raise awareness and inspire ways to address the biodiversity crisis by adding native plants and removing invasive ones in order to regenerate biodiversity. Could you share more about this effort, award and offer any advice on how city planners, and other stakeholders could utilize this technology?

Homegrown National Park (HNP)

Messervy: People feel helpless in the face of climate change. While they may recycle already, most people don't have the resources to buy an electric vehicle (EV), replace heating and cooling systems with heat pumps, or add solar panels to their yard. But one thing everyone can do is to plant beneficial plants. When you replace lawn with shade trees and plantings, you sequester more carbon. You can increase water efficiency by planting drought and flood-tolerant plants. You can increase the biodiversity on your property with native and pollinator plants. And you can grow your own food when you create a garden of edible plants.

A small investment of money and time in a native collection of perennials results in beauty, pollination, and, with division, more plants. Our app can show a homeowner just what these plants look like in their yard, how big they get and how much space they take up and then enable them to either buy them and get them delivered or go to their local nursery, all so they can just get planting. I'm hoping that the result will be a much more textured look to our yards—lawns that are “nubbly” easy-care meadows, rather than perfectly smooth turf that requires constant mowing... And if you get your neighbors to plant this way too, then you extend the benefits beyond just your yard. HNP maps this benefit and helps you make it happen.

I have been lucky to count Professor Doug Tallamy of HNP as one of my friends and advisors, as we have worked to create our app. Since the app filters for native and other beneficial plants, it will help users to visualize our native collections of perennials, shrubs, and trees for their planting zone. We were nominated as a team for Prince William's climate initiative, the Earthshot Prize this year. (Home Outside was nominated for the second year in a row, so we are hoping that we make the finals of this prestigious award.)

We built our apps with homeowners as our first end-user, but any public or institutional garden can download the app to use for any size project they might have. As we develop it further, we will continue to add new plants and collections for more planting zones and for more countries around the world; our goal is to help everyone to plant more plants, wherever they may be.



Figure 6. Julie Moir Messervy Weezie's Garden. Photo Credit: Susan Teare

Sharp-Newton: The Centre for Urban Design and Mental Health aims to promote better environments for mental health. You speak about “Joy,” and having a “Joyful process”. What insights or advice do you have on this subject? How can we design for “Joy” in our urban environments? Do you have any reflections, reference or experience with mental health specific environments? How do you think city planners, developers, and policymakers could improve urban environments for mental well-being? Looking at history and the future, what are your thoughts on the relationship between landscape architecture, nature, and mental well-being? Could you share specific examples from your work that illustrate the benefits of natural spaces for mental health?

Messervy: I think that planners and designers sometimes forget that people want places that bring them delight, pleasure, comfort, and, especially, joy. Certainly, building codes and permitting issues can make landscapes feel bland and uninspired; resulting in acres of inert hardscapes, rather than the delight of ever-changing green spaces. When you design with gladness and joy in your own soul, it's easier to come up with creative ideas for places in which users can find inspiration and take pleasure. Throngs of people of all ages enjoy strolling through and sitting in the garden spaces at the Toronto Music Garden. Many people live in nearby condos or apartment buildings and visit it daily, treating it as their urban backyard.

But the other part of joy is staying true to our mission, which is to create and inspire others to create exquisite and resilient landscapes of beauty and meaning through a “joyful process”. Finding a way to keep the process of designing and building a project positive and productive, makes for a simple mantra that keeps a complex project (or even a simple one) on track. So many things can go awry at any time, so figuring out where the problems lie and fixing them as soon as possible is a big part of a project manager's and CEO's job. It's also a good way to live happily in a family or as part of a community.

The other part of our mission statement that sounds lofty but is a useful litmus test for us is that we strive to create “exquisite” landscapes, often defined as something of the highest quality, skill, or refinement. We strive to reach this threshold throughout the design process, but also when we are on-site, observing the construction process. It helps to see things freshly and tweak the design so that the elements really sing in harmony together. Once a project is finished, we try to build a yearly visit so we can work with staff to refine the plantings and work through any changes that might have arisen since our last visit. All this helps to keep a landscape looking “exquisite” over time.

Sharp-Newton: Julie, thank you so much for your time today. Before we conclude, you've written many books and have contributed to various publications, videos, and media that highlight your work. Which of your works do you feel would be most relevant for our readers to explore further?

Messervy: Until my new book comes out, the best books for your readers would be *The Inward Garden* (Messervy, 1995), and *Home Outside: Creating the Landscape You Love* (Messervy, 2009). My new book will be about spatial archetypes and will be about creating landscapes—and lives—of beauty, meaning, and resilience. I can't wait to finally see it birthed!

Sharp-Newton: That's wonderful to hear, we will definitely keep an eye out for it and look forward to its release. In closing, thank you again, Julie, for sharing your insights, wisdom, and depth of knowledge with our readers and the community. It's been an honor.



Figure 7. Julie Moir Messervy Design Studio (JMMDS) Project Examples; Photo Credits: Susan Teare (left, center), Virginia Weiler (right)

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions: All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This article received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: New data was not generated or analyzed during this interview.

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