Trees in the Frame

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As a designer as well as a photographer of landscapes I am haunted by images of trees. Trees are frequently the skeleton of a landscape composition, giving structure and order. In design, trees are used to create spaces in the same way that walls are used to create rooms in an architectural plan. Many of the photographs in my book, American Designed Landscapes: A Photographic Interpretation, are of views that are framed, filtered, or focused by trees. Just as trees direct the eye and frame views in the experience of these places, they serve to reinforce the structure of these photographic compositions.

At Middleton Place, a single monumental live oak (*Quercus virginiana*) arches over the water’s edge. This ancient tree, probably predating the settlement at Middleton, evokes rich associations of life and longevity. The photograph frames the marked horizontality of the tree, with its twisting limbs seeming to defy gravity in their reach over the water. The panoramic camera emphasizes its horizontality, and the asymmetric composition suggests the weight of the outward-spreading branches.
An ordered repetition of trees may direct a view or define a path. At Dumbarton Oaks, the north vista is defined by a mixture of hardwoods and conifers that extend from the center of the house and converge over a series of lawn terraces, enhancing the sense of distance as the viewer's eye moves outward. These borders are rendered as a unified mass of vegetation, framing the vista. Only the picturesque form of a deodar cedar (*Cedrus deodara*) stands out against the sky.
The repetition of trees along the street edge is characteristic of American urban spaces, an arboreal equivalent of arcade columns along city streets in Italy and Switzerland. Matched, tightly spaced plane trees (*Platanus x acerifolia*) flank the entrance roads at Solana, an office park on the Texas prairie. The low, early evening sun dramatizes the repeated tree trunks, which diminish in size as the eye moves toward the entrance of the building.
In the orchards of both the Miller Garden in Columbus, Indiana, and Naumkeag in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, the geometry of planting creates views along linear arrangements of redbud (*Cercis canadensis*) and apple trees (*Malus*). In the Miller Garden the midday light flattens the lines of redbud trees to a graphic blackness. Soft light reveals the texture of apple trees at Naumkeag.
There are also designs that imitate natural settings, such as groves or forests in parks and gardens. At Naumkeag, a birch grove is the setting for whimsical blue steps that descend through densely planted birches (*Betula papyrifera*) on a hillside. Bloedel Reserve (overleaf) is a series of gardens created on reclaimed timberlands on Bainbridge Island, Washington. The moss garden under a canopy of firs (*Abies*) and hemlocks (*Tsuga*) feels like an ancient place, exhibiting the ongoing processes of nature in the forest.
A photograph is a frame of the world, defined by vertical and horizontal edges. Trees likewise frame views, with their vertical tree trunks and leaves overhead. Photography is also about light. The light-modifying qualities of trees are subtly revealed in black-and-white film. Trees may appear in silhouette as lines and pattern, or with delicate and understated shades of vegetation. As trees define the vegetative edge of spaces, the individual trees recede and become subtle shades diminishing in the distance.

These photographs by Alan Ward are from his book, *American Designed Landscapes: A Photographic Interpretation*, which will be published this fall. He is a landscape architect and urban designer at Sasaki Associates in Watertown, Massachusetts.