

THOMAS CHURCH, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT (1902-1978)

Thomas Dolliver Church was born in Boston but grew up in Oakland, California. He received his B.A. degree in landscape architecture at the University of California, Berkeley in 1922. He later received his master's degree from the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Church traveled to Italy and Spain for six months on a Sheldon Fellowship that he was awarded at Harvard. After returning from Europe he taught at Ohio State University for a year before returning to the San Francisco Bay area. At the age of thirty, Church opened an office in San Francisco and continued to practice until his retirement in 1977.



Church was the first professional landscape architect in North America to embrace the principles of abstract modernism. He had met Fletcher Steele in the 1920s but worked as a garden designer for a decade before becoming interested in the Bauhaus and Cubism. Church then embarked on a European tour and returned with a confirmed belief in the use of modern materials to achieve functionalist objectives. His Dewey Donnell Garden in Sonoma County, CA, is considered a masterpiece.

At the time that Church started practicing, the neoclassic movement was still the design style of choice. Thomas's education at UC-Berkeley and Harvard, along with his travels to Europe, instilled in him a sense of the classical form. However, Church is known as one who opened the door to the Modern movement in landscape architecture with what came to be known as the "California Style."

Informed by the Cubist idea that a scene may be seen simultaneously from a number of viewpoints, he felt that a garden should have no beginning and no end, Line plays against line, form against form, the whole uniting, with admirable restraint, into a composition which has its own unique identity and at the same time belongs essentially to the site. In his book *Gardens Are For People*, Church outlines four principles for his design process. They are:



- Unity, which is the consideration of the schemes as a whole, both house and garden.
- Function, which is the relation of the practical service areas to the needs of the household and the relation of the decorative areas to the desires and pleasures of those who use it.
- Simplicity, upon which may rest both the economic and aesthetic success of the layout.
- Scale, which gives us a pleasant relation of parts to one another.

Although he used the Modern idea of freedom of elements, such as form, line, and movement, Church never abandoned the solid design principles of the past. One of the things that made his designs both unique and influential was the seamless marriage of two opposite design principles. Another design element that Church often used was the idea of the outdoor living space or dividing the landscape into separate "rooms."

In addition to residential projects, he worked on a number of larger projects including the master planning of UC Berkeley, the grounds of the American Embassy in Havana, Cuba, the General Motors Research Center in Detroit, the Des Moines Art Center, the Hotel El Panama in Panama City, and the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and Parkmerced in San Francisco.