

Designing With Urbanite: Turning Construction Debris into Beauty in the Garden

Text and Photos by Chris Drayer

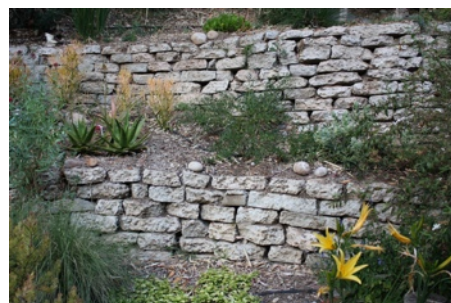
It's often said that one man's junk is another's treasure. As a garden designer, I've always thought that there is a corollary to this: If you have enough of any one thing, it's a resource.

The perfect illustration of both of these ideas is broken concrete, referred to somewhat



Raw material

facetiously as "Urbanite" or "urban stone" by savvy gardeners. If you have ugly or cracked concrete paving that needs to be replaced, all that material is just going to cost you money to break up and haul away to be ground up and recycled. However, if you have significant grade changes in your garden, consider the effect of a properly constructed dry-laid broken concrete wall or pathway—especially if you can't afford either a stone veneer or an authentic stone rubble wall but also can't resign yourself to the rather manufactured look of a keystone wall (or other



Walls and plantings with sloping grades

"landscape wall" material). As these photos show, the irregular broken edges, staggered joints, and varied thicknesses of broken concrete

can create the natural look and permanence of a stone wall or even suggest naturally exposed rock outcroppings with all its varied colors. As a bonus, you will create many new opportunities for planting, both on top of the wall and between the courses.

There are a few tricks and techniques to keep in mind to achieve a stable and natural-looking feature:

Choose appropriate material

Broken paving from either driveways or patios—as opposed to foundation or wall rubble—makes the best

walls. This material usually comes in thicknesses of between four and six inches, and the more uniform the thickness, the easier it will be to work with. That said, I refer you back to my corollary: I have successfully incorporated curbs and foundations into my constructions, especially to create steps. It's very important, though, to get pieces that are at least twelve inches long in one direction, because a stable wall needs to be at least that thick. It seems to be getting harder to find good recyclable material because contractors often load it directly into dumpsters. Putting out the word to all your neighbors and friends often pays off, or talk to contractors you see doing demolition. They may agree (perhaps for a small



Steps from salvaged saw-cut curb pieces will be faced with flagstone veneer

gratuity) to bring material to you, but you will want to sort out as much unusable small rubble as possible beforehand. I've also occasionally gotten material advertised on Craigslist. It's important to assemble enough material to have a good selection before you start, but ideally you also want to replenish your stockpile during the course of the project because there is an unavoidable tendency to use all the best pieces first, leaving you with lots of problematic chunks towards the end.

Compact the base and give the wall a batter

Depending on your soil and the steepness of the slope you are working with, digging down into undisturbed soil a few courses deep and compacting the soil with a hand tamper will be fine for a wall of up to about four feet high. You must ensure, however, that the wall has sufficient batter—that is, a backward slant into the hill

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so that gravity helps support the structure; figure about one to three inches of back slant per foot of height. Unlike a monolithic masonry wall, a dry-laid rubble wall does not impede the flow of water due to its many gaps between pieces and courses, and therefore it does not need to resist the hydrostatic pressure of groundwater backing up behind it. Over time there may be some settling, but because all the pieces can move independently, the wall will remain intact.



Step and wall construction

Overlap the pieces and stagger the joints

This is where artistry meets craftsmanship. It's important that each piece sits solidly on the one below and that it fits reasonably closely to the one adjacent so that no single piece can slip out of place. A masonry chisel and mallet are your friends here—use them to knock off errant knobs or pebbles. This process can still be quite time consuming, especially if your material is irregular, so a way to cheat a bit is to put some dirt, sand, or even mortar (which to me is like admitting defeat) between layers to even things out. I rarely use a level to check my work: instead, I simply step back and just visually assess how it looks. If one course contains some long pieces, I will take the opportunity to use several smaller ones on the



Overlapping pieces of concrete

course above. You will always have more small pieces than big, so look for ways to utilize them. Generally, I save most of them for the last couple of top courses and use the widest, longest pieces at the bottom.

Minimize the amount of retaining wall by sloping the grade above and/or below

Unless you are growing rice, the planting areas above or below a wall don't need to be level—in fact, they usually look better when they aren't. I think of topography like sculpture: the slope should have a



Completed wall incorporating colored concrete pieces

rhythm and flow that the plantings can then reinforce. A flat place brings the eye to a stop, and while this might be fine for a patio, it doesn't make for appealing plantings. To see this effect, take a look at photos of



Aloe saponaria planted during construction

the Grand Canyon: notice how vertical cliffs are separated by sloping segments of softer strata, and see how sometimes the cliffs disappear into the sloping areas. Take a cue from nature! In the same vein—pardon the pun—think about the rhythm of the walls themselves. Is there anything more boring than a series of equally spaced,
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*Be silent. Be still.
Just watch everything come and go.
This is the way of Nature.
— Lao Tse*

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straight-line walls? Broken concrete lends itself to gentle, undulating curves, so feel free to “sculpt” the terrain by allowing the walls to subtly burrow in and project out of an otherwise uniform slope.



Completed wall with sloping grade above

A final thought

Like the act of creating all good stonework, constructing a wall out of concrete rubble is a slow and contemplative process—don’t plan on knocking it out in a few days. You’ll ultimately be rewarded by a work of art that gets more beautiful each year as your garden plants embrace it. There go your weekends!

Chris Drayer, ASLA, is a landscape architect who has completed several projects in Mission Hills. He was the principal designer of the Rancho la Puerta gardens where he led a tour for MHGC members. Photos courtesy of and copyrighted by Chris Drayer.

Nature does not complete things. She is chaotic. Man must finish, and he does so by making a garden and building a wall.
— Robert Frost

Day Trip Delight: Sherman Library and Gardens

by Elaine Wilson

I’m always on the lookout for day trips that take me to new places but get me home in time to feed my German Shepherds. When a friend suggested the Sherman Library and Gardens in Corona del Mar, it was a perfect destination for us to explore. Opened to the public in 1966, the Sherman Library and Gardens began life in 1951 as the Sherman Foundation created by Arnold D. Haskell, a man who dreamed of developing a cultural center. Slowly, Haskell bought up land until he owned a full city block measuring 2.2 acres, where the gardens and research library are located today.



Succulent garden Jan Blakeslee

After an easy ninety-minute drive north, my friend and I were greeted by delightful blooms and sculptures; upon further exploring, we found many little specialty gardens and species plantings—a stand-out was the towering camellia bursting with blooms against the west wall. There was also a cactus and succulent area, a large display shade garden, a rose garden, and a tropical conservatory. On my next trip, I’ll visit the non-circulating research library which has an extensive collection of Pacific Southwest material.

Sherman Gardens reminds me of a mini-Huntington, complete with a high tea offered the last Wednesday of each month by reservation only (call 949-673-2261). There is a lovely garden restaurant with innovative and tasty menu choices. Our last stop was the boutique-style gift shop which is worth your time to browse. After a full day of relaxing fun, we were still back in San Diego by 3:30.

Elaine Wilson, a California native living in Mission Hills for 42 years, has chaired MGHC committees including Special Events, Hospitality, Fundraising, and Garden Walk Docents. Photo courtesy of and copyrighted by Jan Blakeslee.

MHGC MISSION STATEMENT

The Mission Hills Garden Club was created to bring together friends and neighbors, share our knowledge and love of gardening, and support and educate others in order to make our community a more beautiful place to live.

MISSION HILLS GARDEN CLUB COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

COMMITTEE	RESPONSIBILITIES
COMMUNICATIONS Linda Stanley divinevine@aol.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ E-News & Monthly Meeting Postcards ▪ Quarterly Newsletter ▪ Website ▪ Liaison to other community groups
EDUCATION Mary Shelley rubbyhart17@gmail.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Grants, Internships, Scholarships ▪ Reports & Record-keeping ▪ Encourage recipients to join in on club events ▪ Ask recipients to present a program at a meeting
HOSPITALITY Martha Pehl martha.pehl@sharp.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Meeting logistics ▪ Meeting refreshments ▪ Greet members ▪ Encourage members to participate in activities
MEMBERSHIP Lee Skillman lee.skillman@ml.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recruitment ▪ Record-keeping ▪ Greet members ▪ Membership renewals
COMMUNITY PROJECTS Jeff Koch jeffgkoch@mac.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Street Trees: plant trees in parkway areas ▪ Planter Boxes: Goldfinch & Washington Streets ▪ Petals for Patriots ▪ Hanging Baskets: Business District ▪ SD River Park: provide picnic tables & signage ▪ Concerts in the Park ▪ Pioneer Park: plant a large tree as focal point
SPECIAL EVENTS Wally Hartwell metreco@pacbell.net	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Coffee/Wine in the Garden ▪ Craft Events ▪ Field Trips ▪ Member Appreciation Party

