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GARDEN STUDIO
IN FLORENCE, ITALY**



Striking the Balance

IN HER GARDENS, DALLAS-BASED LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT MELISSA GERSTLE EMBRACES CLEAN LINES AND ORGANIC, SCULPTURAL FORMS

By Kirk Reed Forrester



Flower: Tell me a little about your background. **Melissa Gerstle:** I grew up in the suburbs on Long Island and always had a deep appreciation of nature. I went to college to pursue environmental studies because I wanted to be a photojournalist for *National Geographic*. What I realized is I am way too social to be alone in the jungle like Jane Goodall! In college I pursued a degree in business but took an introductory course in landscape architecture and was blown away. After graduation I got a job in Dallas in the marketing department for American

Airlines, but landscape design was always in the back of my mind.
How did you make the career leap? When I arrived in Dallas, I had never seen a place where people put so much care into their homes. It inspired me. Around 2003, I began a course in landscape design, going to school at night and working as an apprentice for a talented landscape architect named Rosa Finsley, who became my mentor. She was a pioneer in the industry and super hands-on. I finished my thesis at nine months pregnant, and soon after, people started calling me to

PHOTOS (THIS SPREAD): STEPHEN KARLISCH; PORTRAIT: TRUITT ROGERS



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: For Melissa's work in the Fall 2020 Kips Bay Decorators Showhouse, she created a Hollywood Regency feel for the pool and patio. • The minute Melissa saw the backyard's beautiful old tree, she knew she wanted to introduce this dreamy swing. • A secluded corner with a fire pit and chairs invites conversation. **OPPOSITE:** Poolside daybeds with sleek cocktail tables designed by Melissa (pictured at bottom)

help them with their homes. That was in 2008, and I've been in business ever since.

How did Rosa Finsley's work shape your own aesthetic? Rosa did a lot of work for the Texas-based architecture firm Lake Flato, which specializes in regional modernism—clean lines, lots of stone. She was a master of amplifying the best parts of nature to soften and complement the architecture. Like her, I am constantly trying to make what's natural work—to re-create it in a way that doesn't feel contrived but celebrates the beauty of what nature can do.

What else influences your work? I love pottery, sculpture, and origami. One of the sculptors I love is Eva Hild, whose pieces have an organic feel but also a strong geometry, which speaks to me.

You're based in Dallas but work all over the country, designing for a variety of residential styles. What's your jumping-off point for a project? When you're studying architecture, the first thing you learn about is *genius loci*, the spirit of the place. I try hard to let the home's location and architecture style guide me. Sometimes that's easier than

other times. I want things to make sense ecologically and feel natural, so that means often using native plants and local materials like stone from nearby quarries.

The global pandemic has upended so much of our lives. Do you feel like it's made people use space differently? I've had a lot of clients say they need to upgrade their outdoor space not just to make it beautiful but to have a place to be alone to sit and work. I think during the pandemic people have reclaimed the backyard. Whether they're escaping, connecting with one another, working, or seeking peace and solitude, the garden really needs to serve all of those purposes.

“I think during the pandemic people have reclaimed the backyard.”

—MELISSA GERSTLE

Do you have a favorite project? My favorite project is usually the one I'm currently working on or the one I've just finished. The Kips Bay Showhouse in Dallas was a recent fun one. The energy of working with so many talented designers and the pressure of pulling it off in a short period of time made it a standout.

Looking ahead, what are you most excited about? I recently designed a piece of garden furniture that's going into a beautiful formal garden I'm designing in St. Louis. I looked everywhere for just the right bench, and when I couldn't find it, I partnered with a carpenter to create it. We've decided to extend the line—hopefully add more pieces and make it available to the public, so I'm excited to see where that goes. ✨



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: For a ranch project, Melissa designed a cantilevered water feature to evoke a modern horse trough. • Her love of clean lines and sculptured forms shines in this garden. • A bench of Melissa's own design • An inviting outdoor fireplace with seating at Melissa's home