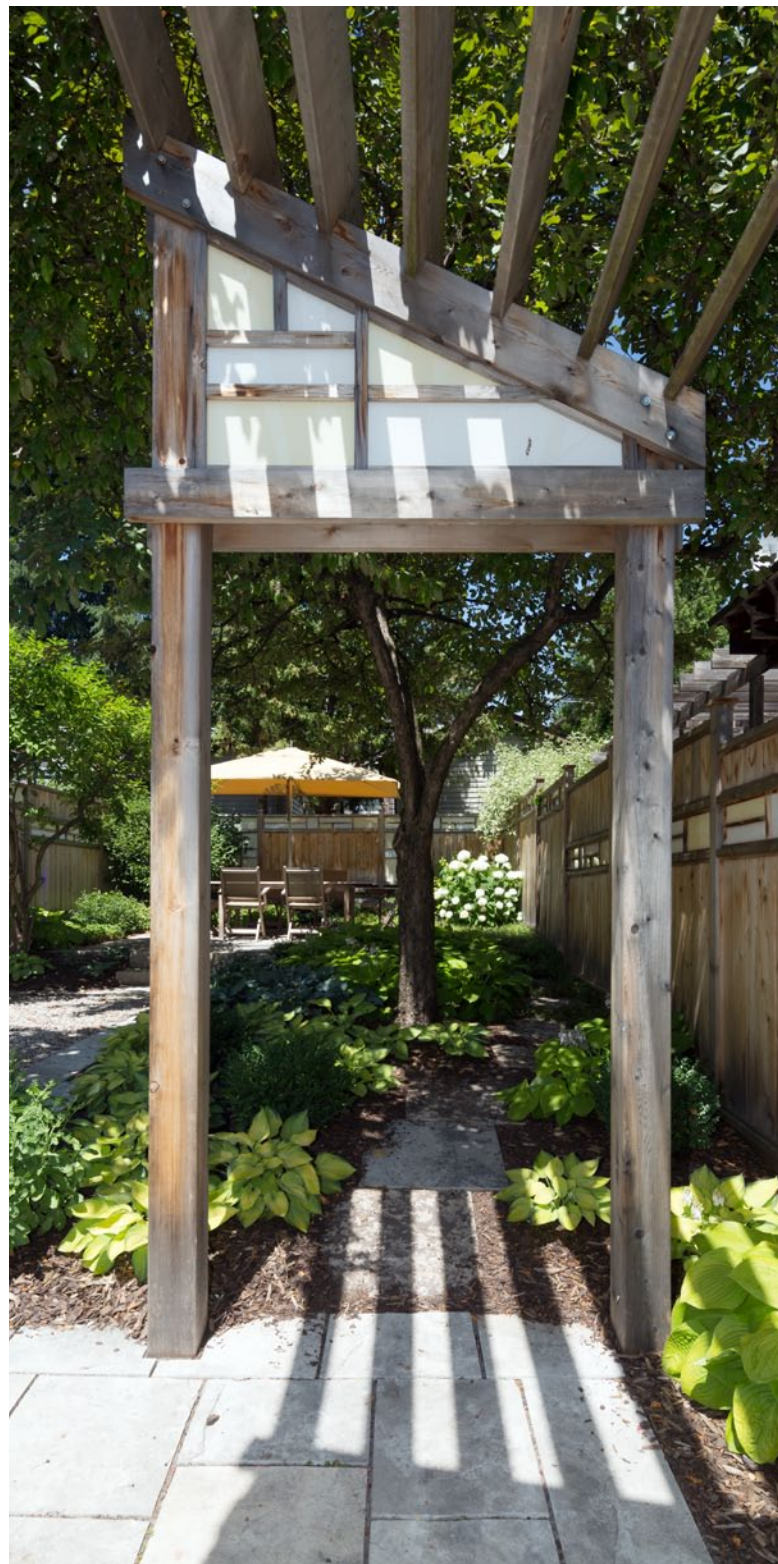


## A vested interest



A unique entry arbour entices visitors to this intimate contemporary inner city garden.



A home and yard renovation saw the landscape of this property extensively updated to integrate the home, pool and garden with richly detailed arbours, curved stone walls and lush plantings.

Close working relationships mean landscape architect keeps tabs on the ‘experiences’ he creates for clients

PATRICK LANGSTON

If you hire John K. Szczepaniak to design your pool and its landscape, don’t be surprised if he later shows up with swimming trunks and a towel. “I don’t have time to have a pool and I’d rather tend my flowers. So I nearly always take a swim in the ones I design,” says the landscape architect, who prides himself on his close working relationships with clients, even those who have to swim at a beach.

Szczepaniak ([jszla.com](http://jszla.com)) tells me this as we stroll around the deep green acreage of a Cumberland country estate.

He designed the grounds 24 years ago when he first struck out on his own after working briefly for other firms. A man who takes a proprietorial interest in his projects — “If I drive by and notice a client’s not looking after things, I stop and tell them,” he says in a friendly but definite tone — he has continued to enhance the Cumberland property over the past couple of decades.

Well-treed, the estate includes a rectangular pool with rocks from the excavation around its perimeter, a thriving vegetable garden and plantings such as hostas, lady’s mantle, and, for a splash of colour during the winter, yellow-twig dogwood shrubs.

It’s welcoming and restful. It’s also both natural

and groomed, so you sense but aren’t clobbered by the hand of its designer. It’s what Szczepaniak, who describes his landscapes as art and who draws for pleasure, seeks in his projects. He says his job is to “create experiences” for his clients.

A garden is a “collection of experiences” that can include multiple zones for socializing, daydreaming and so on. Over the past two dozen years, he has seen those experiences evolve as we spend more time outside. We’ve moved, for example, from a bare-bones patio table and chairs to outdoor sofas, fireplaces and even kitchens.

Szczepaniak is still astounded by how much we’re willing to spend on our outdoor lifestyles: \$100,000 and more for a pool and landscaping is par for the course if you work with someone like him.

CONTINUED BELOW



Sculptures are enhanced with shade-tolerant perennials and broad drifts of spring bulbs for year-round views from inside the house.



# HOMES & CONDOS

**A garden is a 'collection of experiences' that can include multiple zones for socializing, daydreaming and so on, says Szczepaniak.**



**Before and after: The front reception area of a 1970s bungalow features a stunning arbour and dramatic landscape lighting to entice visitors to the front entrance, above, which was previously seldom used, left.**

## Landscape: Creating Experiences

CONTINUED FROM ABOVE

He has also seen a shift to more environmental consciousness, including the use of drought-resistant plants and native grasses rather than water and maintenance hungry lawns. We're planting more perennials, fruit trees and shrubs such as currants and gooseberries that look great and feed us. We've also moved toward harder-edged garden design just as we've moved to more modern home design. But, says Szczepaniak, "we've got to have flowers; a garden has to smell good, too."

Marjorie Harris, gardening columnist for the Globe and Mail, says in an email that modern gardens can mean boring plants. She praises Szczepaniak for combining "a great sense of delicacy in his hardscaping without sacrificing his great love of plants."

He likes lots of spring bulbs and he's big on hostas, which not only fill in the space as the spring flowers die back but whose understated variety and textures seem to fit anywhere.

Szczepaniak has a soft spot for vegetable gardens and his eyes brighten as he mentions the tomatoes, beets and carrots he grows in his own large patch. "When I grow up, I want to become a gardener," says the 54-year-old.

A Northern Ontario native, his appreciation of rugged, natural features, especially rock, is thanks to his northern Ontario upbringing. Two years of study in architecture before switching to landscape architecture at the University of Guelph means he links that love of natural forms with design principles of flow and function so that you move easily through his landscapes.

You won't get such artistry by simply hiring a landscaping company, he says, even if the firm includes design among its services. "Everybody's a designer, you notice that?" he asks archly. "You get what you pay for."

Szczepaniak's portfolio includes "pocket gardens", small urban oases like one in the Glebe that especially delights him. A Valentine's Day gift from the owner to his wife, the now terraced side/rear yard was once not much more than an awkward grassy slope with a crabapple tree and a hydrangea in it.

Szczepaniak transformed it into a cool, contemporary, low-maintenance living space by adding a cedar fence, plantings and other elements, including pea gravel and square-cut limestone paving stones (interlock, he says, looks tired after 10 years whereas natural stone is just coming into its own).

An outdoor dining area sits at the highest point of the garden, while playful opaque Acrylite panels dot the fence, echoing the glass panels of the home's exterior light fixtures. An entry arbour linking the garden to the driveway has a sloped top that mimics the home's roofline.

"Did you notice that?" asks Szczepaniak, clearly tickled by his trademark referencing of a home's architectural features in its landscape.

In a pocket garden, he says, "you notice every details. Everything has to be exquisite."



**Inspired by Spanish gardens, the pergola, wooden screens, urns, floral displays and spa, which doubles as a fountain, all combine to create a unique urban space.**

We visit another home nearby. Its exterior — in front, a low box hedge and a couple of Muskoka chairs for watching the setting sun; in the rear, a black, wrought-iron fence and terraced stone patio with a curved wall — has a certain formality distinct from the other two projects.

That, he explains, is in keeping with the Mediterranean architecture with which one of the home's owners was raised.

Tour completed, we sit on the front stone steps in the late afternoon sun. Szczepaniak, who sometimes seems to surprise even himself by reminiscing aloud, recalls how, when he was young, his mother read aloud to her children from a large book of poetry. "I used to love that time."

He adds that while home designs on the Internet can inspire us, "we can't as a society just point and click all the time. Parents need to send their kids to art lessons. Music, poetry, art: it makes us enjoy what we see. It's good for the soul."



**Efficient use of space in an inner-city pocket garden provides the owners with ample outdoor living opportunities, including a soothing custom spa at the garden's heart.**



**Once an awkward grassy slope, a Glebe pocket garden was transformed into a low-maintenance living space by adding a cedar fence, plantings and other elements.**



**'If I drive by and notice a client's not looking after things, I stop and tell them.'**  
**JOHN SZCZEPANIAK**  
Landscape Architect

John Szczepaniak still maintains a Cumberland estate he originally designed two decades ago, finding balance between natural and groomed.