



above: A mature cherry tree stands above antique granite stepping stones and the mounded forms of boxwood plantings.

Escape Artists

A MAGICAL OUTDOOR SPACE is the result of **SMART PLANNING** and **CREATIVE COLLABORATION**

*INTERVIEW WITH JAMES DOYLE & MATTHEW WILLINGER OF JAMES DOYLE DESIGN ASSOCIATES AND
SUSAN ALISBERG OF ALISBERG PARKER ARCHITECTS
PHOTOGRAPHER ALLEGRA ANDERSON*

How long did this project take?

James Doyle: My guess would be five months long.

Matthew Willinger: Yes, this project, unlike many of our projects, had a very strict deadline from the beginning. Father's Day was when we were to be done, because the client wanted to enjoy the property with their family for the holiday. We worked hard to get things done very quickly.

Susan Alisberg: The barn project took less than a year from initial design concepts to the client moving in and enjoying the property. This

“play barn” and outdoor space were part of a larger project. We initially renovated the main house, then the garage—to include a guest suite and gym—and, finally, we renovated the barn.

What did the client want, and how did you achieve that?

SA: Our client wanted a weekend getaway where they could escape the city and enjoy some relaxed time in the country with friends. They saw the barn and gardens as a great opportunity for a party location.



above: A stone pathway set in turf directs you from the main house, through a mature boxwood hedge, to the privacy of the entertainment garden.

JD: The client is a young couple who bought the property. Our task was primarily to create this entertaining space. This space was previously a parking courtyard—a black top with some loose gravel.

MW: And not a flat one, either!

JD: There are two buildings facing each other that flank the space. The garage had been renovated as an entertainment space but was being further renovated. They were adding to the footprint of it. We had to work while one of the buildings was under construction. The bocce court is at the lower level next to one building. The other, larger entertaining space is above that.

MW: The client has children, and we knew that these buildings were meant to be part of a wonderful space, away from their main house, where they could relax, lounge, and eat. In addition to the firepit, there's a grill, and we worked with Alisberg Parker to select these furnishings. The space also needed to be private, because it's closer to the road. With our plantings, we were able to create a very private, secluded area, but an area with ample space for enjoyment. You have this destination within this larger property

that you can be comfortable and enclosed in, and it's still somewhat secluded and serene.

JD: There was a charm about the property that existed, and we just wanted to work with that and enhance it. I feel like it's almost the ultimate entertaining space; it has opportunities for dining and for lounging, and it has many features, yet none of them are the main focus of the space. I think there's a separation and a starkness, and a palette of plant material that defines and separates these uses so it's not one big, open space. It feels quite intimate and is highly functional.

MW: It is definitely highly functional. Within this relatively contained area, there are lots of opportunities for different activities and places to go. And as wonderful as this space is in the daytime, it's equally as beautiful at night. We put a lot of thought into the incorporation of lighting: there are lights within the walls and lights at the steps. The most beautiful and dramatic part, I think, is that those multi-stemmed trees are up lit. The light on the tree trunks, going up into the canopy of the trees, is truly beautiful at night. You can see it perfectly from both buildings.

SA: I think we were successful in creating a fun and comfortable environment for their immediate family, but one that could also easily accommodate lots of friends for parties and larger gatherings.

You mentioned a strict deadline. I'm sure that was a challenge. Did you have any other challenges? Did that deadline shape any of the decisions you made?

MW: I think it did, in the sense that we just had to be prepared, get onboard with contractors, and start looking for plant material in a very organized way.

JD: But it didn't impact the design. We had a strong vision from the beginning, which is maybe quite simplistic, but it turned out to be a space that is not devoid of good design, good plantings, or beautiful, seasonal color.

MW: One of the important design challenges was that, in a relatively tight

space, these two buildings face each other, but they are not at the same elevation. Previously, that asphalt parking area was basically sloping down from one building to another. What's important about what we've done is the creation of usable spaces on two levels.

SA: The project progressed quickly. We worked with a master plan and an outline specification for budgeting, which enabled us to fast-track the project without every detail being designed before we started. These details were worked out along the way; our seamless work integration with JDDA and Parallel Construction allowed us to achieve this. We were mindful of our choices for all product and furnishings, to ensure we were not held up by long delivery or fabrication times.

The stonework is absolutely beautiful. Tell me more about it.

SA: JDDA designed and coordinated the stonework and the plantings. The walls are a Connecticut fieldstone in a random ashlar pattern. The walks

below: Reclaimed granite stones are bordered by steel-edged planting beds and an allée of multi-stem Parrotia persica trees that emerge directly from the gravel surface.



are large, split granite slabs. I think the natural pea gravel complements the warmer brown tones in the walls.

MW: We very much wanted to use this beautiful, reclaimed material. The stone is very prominent in the circulation, the pathways, and the steps throughout this area. It's basically antique material, and we were fortunate that we were able to use our sources to find it. We made it a priority well in advance to locate that specific material. This reclaimed granite is enjoying a second life in this beautiful space, and that is a very important part of this project.

JD: You can see it not only on the pathways, but on the firepit that Matthew designed, as well.

Tell me about the plant varieties you chose for this project.

MW: One of the most prominent plant materials is the Parrotia trees. We were able to find nine trees that were very uniform in terms of their habit, size, and shape. You can see the beautiful canes of the wood that we were able to clear on the lower portion of the trees. They look like they're growing right out of the gravel. I think they provide structure, but at the same time, you can see through them, and they direct you through the landscape. The other side has an ilex cornuta hedge, which serves as the



above: A custom-fabricated gas fire feature, constructed out of reclaimed granite, serves as the centerpiece of an intimate seating area. **below:** The harmonious arrangement of pared-down hardscape and softscape materials creates a spacious and private area for entertainment and relaxation.



above: Fieldstone walls and reclaimed granite pathways and steps transformed an inhospitable, sloping parking area into a functional and accessible garden space surrounded by lush plantings. **below:** Colorful perennials and grasses provide seasonal color and textural interest. **below, bottom left:** A bocce court the whole family can enjoy is edged in bluestone and bordered by a wall of native fieldstone.



enclosure from the road. It really gives you a backdrop and enforces the sense of privacy. We were able to use wonderful perennials as well. They were all picked to have color throughout a long season, so you really have a sequence of bloom. They were selected to not grow too tall or look too wild. Between the trees, the perennials are contained in these very organized rectangular beds. There are beautiful grasses incorporated, and they give this joyous sense of movement and seasonal change. The boxwood hedge was also very important. It was an existing feature we utilized. There's a lot of color and a lot of movement, but it still looks very contained and very clean, which is what we wanted to achieve. The repetition of the trees and the edged beds of beautiful flowers gives everything a sense of rhythm, along with the structure.

JD: Those trees are set up on the axial pathway that takes one back up to the main house, or down from the main house, through the opening in the boxwood hedge. —INTERVIEW BY VERONICA SCHORR

RESOURCES:

Architecture and Interior Design: Alisberg Parker Architects, 203-637-8730; alisbergparker.com

Landscape Architecture and Design: James Doyle Design Associates, 203-869-2900; jdda.com

Masonry: Luppino Landscaping & Masonry, LLC, 914-666-7028; www.luppinoim.com

Landscape Installation: Aquino Garden & Landscape Services, 203-570-0598

Fence and Gate Installation: J&J Fence Services, 203-496-9935

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