

# PROFESSIONAL LANDSCAPE DESIGN

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## Inside Out

Vanessa Nagel merges two worlds - interior design and gardening - to create engaging residential environments.

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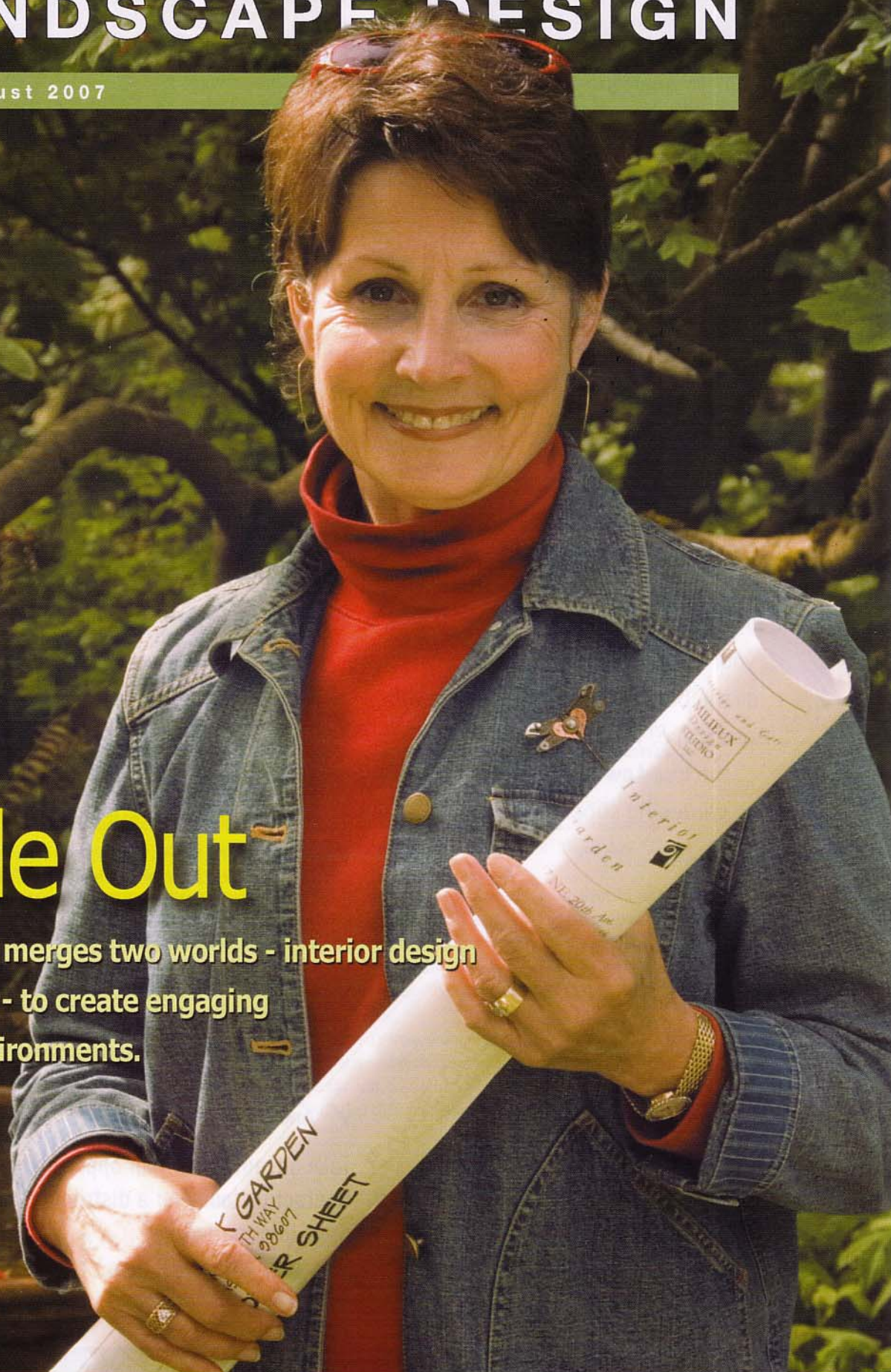




Photo: Vanessa Nagel

Vanessa Nagel  
merges two worlds  
- interior design  
and gardening -  
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environments.



Cover photo: Allan Mandell

# inside out

**Vanessa Nagel takes a holistic approach to landscape design, seeking to unify the entire environment, not merely select plants and hardscape elements.** With an extensive background in interior design, Nagel pays particular attention to the inside of a client's home before she creates an outdoor design. "Having a disconnect between the house and the garden causes a very uncomfortable environment - one in which the cause of the discomfort may not even be readily apparent," Nagel says. "The connection should be seamless."

Creating harmonious environments is something Nagel's been doing for more than 25 years. She left a corporate interior design position with an international architecture and engineering firm to start her own business in 2002. Merging her bachelor's degree and years of experience in interior design with her passion for gardening, Nagel founded Milieux Design Studio, a Vancouver, Wash.-based residential interior and garden design studio. Today, her business is split 75/25 in favor of landscape design.

Nagel's first order of business is to discover what's truly unique about her clients, so she can tailor her designs specifically to their tastes. Using this approach, rather than simply asking clients which of their neighbors' landscapes they like the best, ensures clients will become more engaged and satisfied with their gardens, she says. "So rather than just looking at it, they'll actually go out and experience it."

By Marisa Palmieri / Associate Editor

## THE DESIGNER FILE

**Vanessa Nagel**  
Owner, Milieux Design Studio  
Vancouver, Wash.

**Education:** Bachelor's degree in interior design, San Jose State University; courses in landscape design from Portland Community College, Rock Creek

**Service/client mix:** 75 percent residential garden design; 25 percent interior design

**Project price range:** Up to \$500,000 (installed price)

### First step in the design process?

"Gathering information. Trying to get inside the head of the client to understand their wants and needs is extremely important. It's the beginning of a relationship, which is always done best with good communication. After that the information gathering continues at the site – documentation with measurements and photos. A project is always only as good as the information available to the designer."

**What's the last step?** "This depends on how much work the client wants to do. It ranges from handing them a set of documents and explaining everything to them to walking a finished site with the client after the contractor has finished picking up items on a 'punch list' to attending the garden party."

**How do you break a creative block?** "I find inspiration everywhere I look. The value of having a formal education in design is not only learning design principles, but absorbing them into how you think. It's learning to see rather than just look."



Photo: Vanessa Nagel

But getting to this information can be tricky for designers. As Nagel says, "You're trying to take what's in their head, put it in your head and put it back in their head again." As a result, her approach isn't just to ask clients what they like and take their word for it. Instead, she digs for clues that tell the whole story.

The design process starts with a seven-page questionnaire that divulges details about the property and the clients – from cues like personal philosophies and childhood memories, right down to where they'd like to place their trash cans.

Next, she walks through clients' homes seeking elements she can pull from the inside to accent or compliment the landscape.

While touring clients' homes, Nagel pays special attention to color choice, furniture, artwork and tidiness. She's looking for hints about style that clients may not have mentioned or may not be conscious of. For example, one of her client's homes had a contemporary feel with Asian influences, except for one element in the living room: wildly colored ceramic roosters. These French Provencal-inspired figurines revealed a whimsical side of her clients' style that she wouldn't have discovered by simply asking them their likes and dislikes.

Like any good landscape designer, Nagel also considers the home's setting, whether it's in a neighborhood, urban location or countryside, and its architecture. "I always hope a client has an interior design that also works with the architecture of the home, but that's not always true," she says. "When there's a disconnect, I have a bigger design challenge on my hands."



Photo: Vanessa Nagel

**Vanessa Nagel doesn't classify herself as a designer who specializes in any one type of garden, like English gardens, for example. But she does focus on sustainability.**

## INTERIOR DESIGN INSIDER: SPATIAL REQUIREMENTS

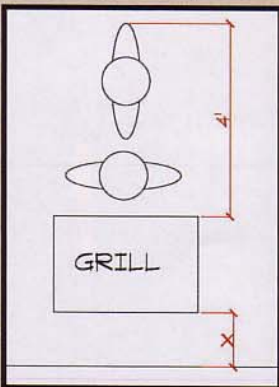
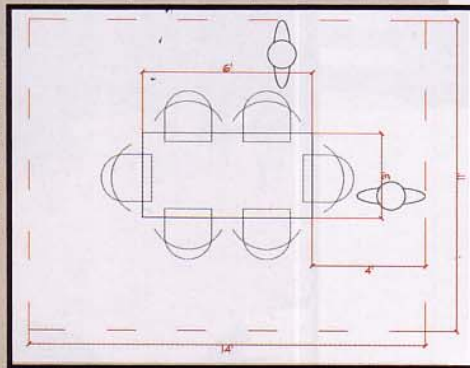
From her days as an interior designer, Vanessa Nagel has picked up a few tips for determining spatial requirements and circulation planning. After finding out which elements a client seeks from his outdoor space, Nagel breaks down the space required for each function (see diagrams, below, for examples). Once these dimensions have been determined, multiply the width and depth of each function to get square footage and then add them all together. "Circulation on average could be 25 percent, but would increase to as much as 60 percent if all of the functions use very small amounts of square footage," Nagel says. "Circulation could decrease to a very small amount if the majority of the functions were very large."

This exercise is particularly valuable when a client requests a considerable amount of function within a small space, she says. Being able to estimate requirements before layout may prepare the designer to design areas with multiple uses or to ask the owner to prioritize functions, considering all may not be possible within the available space.

**Diagrams: Vanessa Nagel**

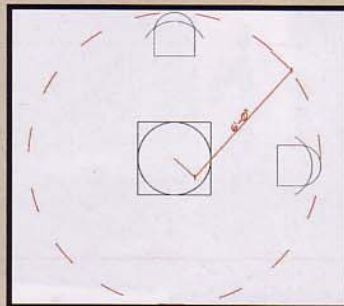
### Six-person dining area

The minimum table size to comfortably seat six people is 3 feet by 6 feet. Ideal minimum clearance around the table is four feet, which allows room for moving the chair and a person to pass behind the chairs.



### Grill

Consider the required safe distance from a structure, space for a person to stand at the grill and space for a person to pass behind



### Firepit

The ideal dimension for a firepit area is suggested to be 12 feet in diameter, assuming the fire pit is 3 feet.



A scenario like this – modern furnishings in a Victorian home, for instance – challenges the potential harmony of the space as a whole. In this contempo-Victorian case, she'd strive for a landscape that was simple enough to fit the homeowners' tastes, yet still had enough detailing to complement the ornate nature of the house, like keeping elements on axes or incorporating fountains or urns. "You're looking for ways to help balance the entire environment," she says.

Indoors, Nagel also notes the views from the home's windows. "It's important to see those openings and be able to understand what somebody's going to be looking at from the inside out, or the outside in, in some cases," she says. In addition to taking notes, Nagel will snap some photos to remind her later about the views.

Being conscious about inside-out vistas is particularly important during new construction or renovation when the interior design isn't complete. Even if a designer doesn't have access to the inside of the home, the exterior and site plans should give enough clues about what the views might be. In this situation, a designer should continue to dig wherever possible, asking homeowners, builders or interior designers about the style of the interior finishes and furnishings. As Nagel says, "It's important to have a good understanding of what's going on inside before you start looking at the outside." **PLD**

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