MAKING A PLACE FOR ART:
COLLABORATION BETWEEN EDITH HEATH AND ROBERT ROYSTON

JC Miller

Edith Heath seated near the garden room, Heath Collection, EDA, UCB.
The years following World War II saw extraordinary growth in California. The home front effort brought industrial production to California coastal cities on an unprecedented scale. This was especially true in the San Francisco Bay Area. Thousands moved to the Golden State to work in wartime industries and returning veterans further swelled the numbers as they chose to stay after discharge from military service at the ports of Oakland and San Francisco. This postwar boom was nourished by an increase in high-paying jobs in the commercial, manufacturing, and professional sectors, a home-building boom fueled by mortgages secured by the Federal Housing Administration and educational opportunities funded by the G.I. Bill of Rights.

Many of the state’s new residents were creatives: architects, designers, artists, and performers drawn by the region’s vitality. The prospect of an ideal suburban life enticed many to cross the Golden Gate Bridge and build homes in the wooded hills of Marin County to the north of San Francisco. Transplanted midwesterner Edith Heath and her husband, Brian, were among these, relocating their business, Heath Ceramics, in 1947 from San Francisco to a leased workspace in Sausalito. The Heaths immediately joined in the creative and somewhat bohemian social circle that had developed in Marin County. Through that circle, they met landscape architect Robert Royston and his wife, Evelyn, and they became lifetime friends.

Shortly after relocating their business, the Heaths also relocated their domestic life to Marin, purchasing a barge, the Dorothea, with another couple, Eral and Kenny Leek, and remodeling it to provide living spaces. In 1951, the barge was floated to a waterfront parcel on the Tiburon Peninsula and then lifted during a high tide to a stable position on shore, turning the vessel into an extraordinary residence on land. Edith Heath turned to Robert Royston for site planning and design of a garden. In exchange for a set of dishes, he created a garden design that anchored, quite literally, the houseboat to a steep embankment that dropped into San Francisco Bay.\(^1\)

So began a collaboration that generated a remarkable garden that reflected both Royston’s modernist design principles and Heath’s creative talents. Beyond the Heath’s garden, the pair collaborated on tile art in the landscape and on furniture design. Perhaps as a result of their friendship and shared approach to design, Royston specified tile made by Heath for all the gardens he designed throughout his long career.\(^2\)

Robert Royston, Landscape Architect

In Robert Royston, Heath found a kindred creative spirit whose work as a landscape architect was becoming well known in California and nationally. Royston began his landscape design career working part-time for Thomas Church, a prominent California landscape architect, while still a student at the University of California, Berkeley. After service in the Pacific Theater in World War II, Royston returned to San Francisco to join the new generation of landscape modernists, partnering with Garrett Eckbo and Edward Williams to form Eckbo, Royston & Williams (1945-1958). By the mid-1950s, they had developed into one of the nation’s leading modernist landscape architectural firms. They put the design vocabulary of grids, arcs, and biomorphic shapes to practical use, creating engaging, functional spaces for outdoor living. Royston’s work during this period was frequently featured in such publications as Sunset, House & Garden, Arts & Architecture, Architectural Record, Architecture and Engineering, and House Beautiful.

Like his design peers, Royston regarded space as the primary medium of his profession and respected the intrinsic qualities of materials. Certainly, spatial manipulation was not a new concept developed in postwar California gardens. The Baroque gardens of 17th-century France, the villa gardens made by aristocrats of the Italian Renaissance, and even prehistoric sites such as Stonehenge, enclosed spaces, controlled views, and manipulated perspectives. What was novel in Royston’s approach was the application of a modernist design vocabulary and cubist spatial concepts to the suburban California garden. Royston’s innovative landscape design, with its emphasis on art and abstraction, was well matched to the creative approach of Edith Heath, who was similarly pushing the boundaries of ceramic design and production.

The Heaths’ home was located downslope from the nearest road. Because of the unique nature of the structure and its situation on the side of an embankment, it was not practical to build a garage adjacent to the home.\(^3\) In response to the situation of the house and the site’s topography, Royston located parking, a carport, and storage on an upper level that was significantly above the house. To hide the automobiles from view of the house and garden, he placed a vertical picket screen at the top of the slope and planted the side slope heavily with the evergreen Toyon (Heteromeles arbutifolia), a robust, regionally native shrub well suited to the bayside microclimate. A broad, gently sloping concrete path and a set of equally broad garden stairs moved residents and guests from the parking area to the living terrace and the entry to the home.

As an improvised structure, the houseboat-turned-home lacked an obvious front door, so in the initial concept drawing Royston guided visitors to the entry by means of another picket screen that angled dynamically
across the central terrace. This screen divided that terrace into two spaces, presumably to allocate private zones for both couples who were to share the dwelling. As built, Royston highlighted the entry with a strong paving pattern, an angled lawn panel, and a dramatic trellis.

The open center of the garden was a generously scaled level space paved in a mix of materials, including concrete, turf, brick, and wood decking. The pattern of the concrete paving, a combination of asymmetrical rectangular sections with contrasting colors and surface finishes, suggested subspaces that might be used for sunbathing or outdoor dining. A lawn panel with a complementary biomorphic shape further defined the ground plane. Royston often mixed paving types and irregularly shaped lawn panels with shadow patterns from overhead structures to create large-scale abstract ground paintings. These were first and foremost functional spaces, but they were also large works of art. In a Royston-drawn garden plan, the compositional strategies of fine art painting are unmistakable. Conversely, in a painting by Robert Royston, the reference to landscape design is obvious.

Royston’s plan cut slightly into the upslope bank of the hill and used the material generated to fill downslope, by this means expanding the area for paving and turf. As a result of this cut, a seat-height retaining wall defined the west and south sides of the terrace. The decking that ran the length of the terrace on its northern side was in reality a wide bridge that spanned the gap between the sloping ground and the building. Bordered on all sides by upslope embankment and retaining wall or structures, the central space of the garden was inward focused and protected from chilling breezes off the bay.

The property had a stunning unimpeded view of the bay looking north and east that was enjoyed from the vantage point of decks the Heaths constructed on the Dorothea’s west end and east side. Given the decks and location of the home, Royston resisted the impulse to incorporate the view into the garden composition. There was an initial glimpse of the bay from the top of the garden stairway that disappeared as the visitor descended into the garden’s self-contained world.

Spanning the entire width of the terrace, south to north, the trellis terminated in a garden room that Royston developed in collaboration with the Heaths. The garden room functioned as a foyer to the house, defining a space outside the glass entry with open grids of steel and wood. It was roofed in retractable canvas panels to provide shade in summer.

Edith Heath embellished the space with tile murals (the plywood panels seen in the photos accompanying this article would eventually be covered in tile) and a kinetic sculpture of ceramic rings. It was furnished with a number of pieces designed by Royston, including a “sun sled” lounger and plant tubs. The structure was painted in Royston’s favorite color, Chinese red, and trimmed with black accents. This color scheme extended to wooden construction throughout the garden.
To the east of the garden room was a sunken garden reached by a stairway that led to a lower level of the dwelling and a second stairway to the shoreline. The planting in the sunken garden took advantage of the protected microclimate and included exotic species such as banana (*Musa spp*.). This was a choice not typically seen in Royston-designed gardens and likely reflected input from Heath. Beyond the sunken garden, Royston’s paving pattern ended in a gravel area that included a vegetable garden and laundry drying area. The garden room and trellis functioned as a visually permeable divider separating the open public and social spaces of the garden from the more private area and the vegetable beds. Two wood-frame screens with solid concrete panels were staggered and set off from each other in this area. These screens stopped the eye, blocked the wind, and created a vertical plane at the east edge of the property.

The combination of the upslope screens at the carport and at the south end of the garden with its dense planting revealed Royston’s intention to create a secluded space protected from being viewed from the street, and from the chilling breezes from the bay. He was not hesitant to use built structures to achieve functional results in his gardens, and vertical picket screens similar to those originally in the Heath garden are found in many of the gardens he designed in the early 1950s. The first example of this structural approach to controlling breezes can be seen in his 1949 design of the Standard Oil Rod and Gun Club in Point Richmond, California. Similar to the Heath garden, that project was also an east-facing property at the bay’s edge. The wood and concrete screens in the Heath garden were set perpendicular to the adjacent hillside and terminated into it, a design move seen in other Royston gardens, including his Mill Valley home constructed four years earlier. The integration of architecture and landscape was always a fundamental goal for Royston and this device of anchoring walls into nearby slopes for visual effect was one way that he achieved it.

**Planting the Heath Garden**

Unfortunately, no construction or planting plans for the garden remain from Royston’s office, but Edith Heath’s papers include nursery receipts and a handwritten shopping list of needed garden supplies. These fragments offer a glimpse into the process of making the garden and, in combination with close study of period photographs, allow for analysis of the planting design.

As was often the case with previously undeveloped sites in Marin County, native California live oaks (*Quercus agrifolia*) provided a dark evergreen frame for the new garden. Royston was an advocate of the Japanese idea of borrowed landscape and so likely considered the hillside oaks visible from the interior of the garden a part of the scheme. Within the bounds of the managed garden, he likely followed his typical approach, choosing and combining evergreens to create structure and define spaces.

By Royston’s account, Edith Heath was enthusiastic and knowledgeable about gardening and the varied and colorful plant palette certainly reflects her approach to planting. Her notes included details on the cultural needs of certain plants as well as their anticipated size and form. She paid particular attention to the aesthetic qualities of plants, especially flower color and bloom time. Her painterly approach to planting accounts for the great variety of colors and textures, the mosaic of planting, that is evident in photos of the garden.
Supplementing the large evergreen Toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*) shrubs that Royston introduced for screening on the upslope embankment, Heath’s plant list added medium and smaller-scale shrubs to embellish the edges of the garden. These included California lilac (*Ceanothus thyrsiflorus*), red bottlebrush (*Callistemon*), purple flowering pride of Madeira (*Echium fastuosum*), and plumbago (*Plumbago auriculata*) with its unique true-blue flowers. There were several varieties of strap-leafed New Zealand flax (*Phormium tenax*) in the garden, which contrasted with the soft gray foliage of bush germander (*Teucrium frutescens*) and the shiny sharp leaves of the Australian bush cherry (*Syzygium paniculata*). Late winter flowering plants included the cheerful yellow flowers of Scotch broom (*Cytisus scoparius*), calla lilies (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*), holly cherries (*Prunus ilicifolia*), and cone bushes (*Leucophyllum spp*). The rich mosaic of planting continued to the ground plane with low-growing blue fescue (*Festuca ovina*), California gray rush (*Juncus patens*), carpet bugle (*Ajuga reptans*), and yellow flowering gazania (*Gazania rigens*). More gray-leafed plants included dusty millers (*Senecio cineraria*), woolly lamb’s ears (*Stachys byzantina*), and sun roses (*Helianthemum nummularium*). Plants in Royston-designed wooden tubs
arrayed on the deck included tea trees (*Leptospermum laevigatum*), citrus, Hollywood junipers (*Juniperus torulosa*), oleanders (*Nerium oleander*), and jade plants (*Crassula ovata*).

Apart from the fruit trees incorporated into the vegetable garden on the east end, there are few trees in the garden. A patio-scale tree, likely a flowering plum (*Prunus spp.*), was set across the path from the garden room and a small pomegranate tree (*Punica granatum*) was positioned above the low retaining wall in the west edge to provide afternoon shade on the center terrace.

Friendship and Collaboration

The friendship between Robert Royston and Edith Heath spanned decades. In interviews conducted late in his life, Royston's recollections about Marin County during the dynamic postwar period often included stories about Edith and her husband, Brian. As couples, the Roystons and the Heaths were often guests at each other's homes, where they talked politics, history, and art over shared meals and red wine. Royston would bring his children to the Heath factory, where they would decorate tiles and cups to be fired along with the dinnerware. Many of those tiles found their way into the Royston garden, where they can still be seen today.

Royston recalled that despite busy professional lives, art and art-making were integral to both his and Edith Heath's lives. While it is difficult to make a direct connection between their personal creative efforts, especially as they worked in different mediums, comparison of work produced contemporaneously indicates that they shared ideas about graphic composition. The patterns that Heath rendered in glaze on plates and tiles and the paintings and plans done by Royston, both utilize asymmetrical grids in contrast with irregular zigzag lines. If recontextualized on paper, the pattern made by Heath could be sketches of the irregular paving that Royston designed for her garden.

The pair collaborated directly on the production of a tile-topped table in the mid-1950s. The TT-42 coffee table was part of a furniture collection designed and promoted by the office of Eckbo, Royston & Williams. Initially produced locally in the Sausalito workshop of Luther "Bill" Conover, the line would eventually be made by the John Hancock Manufacturing Company in San Diego, California. There it was marketed as the New Era group within the company's collection of redwood furniture known as Solar-Rest. The furniture venture was not a commercial success and only a small number of the Heath tile-topped tables were made before the project was discontinued in 1960.

Heath Ceramics Factory, Sausalito, California, 1960

The construction of the Heath Ceramics factory in Sausalito in 1960 offered Royston and Heath a second opportunity to collaborate on the creation of a garden. Royston's concept sketch illustrated two courtyard spaces flanking an interior lobby. Residential in scale, the spaces were paved in a mix of brick and concrete with contrasting finishes. The asymmetrical paving pattern was defined by redwood dividers of varying width. Planters raised 12 inches above the paved surface further articulated the ground plane.

The entry courtyard included a screen integrated into the architecture for separation from the street. Royston often employed freestanding screens in his gardens for spatial definition and the display of art. In the Heath factory courtyard, the screen was simpler in construction than many of his designs, composed of a series of vertical posts joined by panels embelished with Heath-made tiles. A review of photos taken over time indicates that the tile panels were occasionally updated and changed.

As with the garden they created almost a decade earlier, the planting of...
the courtyards included a framework of structural plants chosen by Royston, with plants selected for color, texture, and variety by Heath. In the planting areas, ground cover planting of fine-textured evergreen dwarf periwinkle (Vinca minor) was punctuated by star jasmine (Trachelospermum jasminoides), Nile lily (Agapanthus orientalis), and camellia (Camellia japonica). The large, broad leaves of the rice paper plant (Tetrapanax papyrifer) and tree philodendron (Philodendron selloum) provided a taller layer of planting and foliage contrast. A patio-scale tree, likely silver dollar eucalyptus (Eucalyptus polyanthemos), provided a vertical element.

Beyond friendship, the collaboration between Edith Heath and Robert Royston offered each the opportunity to grow creatively. The places they created together include many of the design innovations characteristic of Royston’s work, including dynamic and flexible site planning as well as complex spatial relationships within the garden, all enhanced with exuberant planting and colorful tile by Heath. Similarly, the furniture and decorative objects that they made show a unique combination of modernist sensibilities. There was an appealing spare quality to their gardens and objects that reflected a moment in time still heavily influenced by wartime frugality. The garden spaces in particular stood apart from other landscapes of the period in that they were guided by a shared artistic vision that saw the garden both as an important functional space and as an opportunity for art.

1. Comparison of census data from 1940 to 1950 reveals that the urban population of California grew by nearly 50 percent in a decade, the greatest increase in the nation. See Mel Scott, The San Francisco Bay Area: A Metropolis in Perspective, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 250–251.

2. In interviews later in life, Royston recounted this story, joking that the Heath’s would bring dishes with them when invited to dinner. He acknowledged that over time a large collection of dinnerware accumulated in the Royston cupboards, but given the piece-by-piece delivery, he was never sure it was anything like a full set. This anecdote is from my recorded conversation with Royston, July 16, 2006.


4. The innovative garden designed by Royston and nurtured by Edith Heath no longer exists. The description of the Heath garden is based on my conversations with Robert Royston in a series of interviews recorded between June and September of 2006, as well as a review of plans and period photographs in the Robert N. Royston Collection, Environmental Design Archives, University of California, Berkeley.


7. Receipts for plants and garden materials from Pacific Nurseries in Colma, California, dated October and November 1951, and Edith Heath’s written notes included with nursery receipts, n.d. This material included in The Brian and Edith Heath/Heath Ceramics Collection, EDA, UCB.

8. This anecdote is from my recorded conversation with Royston, July 16, 2006.

9. The tiles were not manufactured by Heath Ceramics; rather they were hand-painted with a custom glaze by Edith Heath.