

# Reconstructing a Modernist Icon

The Marble Garden's restoration earns a coveted Docomomo design award. *by HELEN OLSSON*







Designed by Bauhaus artist Herbert Bayer, Marble Garden is an evolving visual experience.

1965 PHOTO COURTESY OF ASPEN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

This fall, Marble Garden, designed by Herbert Bayer in 1955, received a prestigious award for its 2021 restoration from the Modernism in America Awards Jury and Docomomo US. The jury was so impressed with the restoration of this iconic sculpture on the grounds of the Aspen Institute that it created a new category: Citation for Art Preservation.

With Elizabeth Paepcke in tow, Bayer visited the abandoned Yule quarry in nearby Marble, selecting 21 discarded pieces of imperfect stone blocks—stones that, notably, hadn't been chosen for the Lincoln Memorial. "They were abandoned pieces of marble," says Lissa Ballinger, executive director of the Resnick Center for Herbert Bayer Studies. "Bayer wanted you to see the indentations of the machine, the imperfections. They weren't pristine." At the Institute's Aspen Meadows campus, the Bauhaus artist arranged the geometric marble shapes on a concrete base with reflecting pool and fountain set inside. The resulting work is considered one of the first examples of landscape as sculpture.

After more than six decades of facing the ravages of Aspen in winter—wind, water, ice and snow—the sculpture's concrete base was crumbling, a black crust was growing on the marble and some of the columns, weighing more than 5,000 pounds, had started to tip over. The deteriorating sculpture had become a safety hazard.

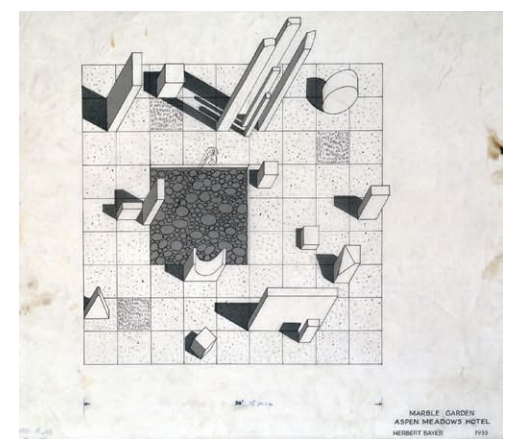
Design Workshop, a landscape architect firm in Aspen, was tasked with returning Marble Garden to its original condition, a project that required extensive historical research. "It was important that we had an academic understanding of the artist's intention," says Richard Shaw, principal at Design Workshop. The team spent hours digging through archival materials—original sketches, writings, photography and conversations with the artist's descendants. "We were delighted to work on this project because we understood the significance of this sculpture in the landscape art movement," he says. In the process, the team discovered some stones had been moved and rotated from their original positions over time. Putting them back to their intended configuration was paramount. "The result is a fantastic play of form and shadow," Shaw says. "It's an evolving visual experience."

"We found a film in our archives called *Man and his Work* showing Herbert Bayer walking through Marble Garden," Ballinger says. "Bayer was so fastidious he wouldn't have allowed a film to be made unless he approved of the stone placements. Seeing that footage was a real eureka moment."

The deconstruction process involved meticulously cleaning the stones and fortifying the cement foundations. To avoid future water damage, the team addressed

issues around irrigation and the sculpture's fountain. Shaw's team discovered that the original base wasn't substantial enough to support the weight of the stones. But it wasn't a simple matter of pouring more concrete. Bayer's original slab was a concrete aggregate seeded with marble chips. The team returned to the quarry to find matching pieces of marble and then machine-worked them to create precisely the right chip size to incorporate into the new base. "We went through many different iterations," Ballinger says. "It was one of the most intricate parts of the process."

Returned to its former glory, Marble Garden remains a centerpiece of the Aspen Meadows campus—waiting to be enjoyed by future generations. "I think one of the huge frustrations of restoration projects," Ballinger says, "is that if you do a good job, very few people even recognize that you've done anything at all."



From top: In 1965, Marble Garden was surrounded by only a few trees; a historical isometric drawing of the iconic sculpture by Herbert Bayer.