



# **Passion** in the Heartland

By **Robert Bledsoe**



I like to tell people that I have **the greatest job in the world.**

It's true, and whenever I start working with a new client, I feel like a kid in a candy store. Look at it this way: As a watershaper, I get paid to use my ideas, experience, imagination and creativity to make my clients' dreams come true. Essentially, we're big kids playing with very big toys, and clients respond to our enthusiasm in a big way.

And the best thing about it is that exterior designs are like fingerprints: Each one is different; every client has his or her own set of priorities; and every property calls for a distinct set of solutions. No two projects will *ever* be quite alike, and each of them comes with its own set of limitations and expectations.

I also like the fact that we at Cripple Creek Pools & Rock Co. work mostly in the Kansas City area, where the idea of "outdoor rooms" and "private resorts" isn't nearly as much a part of the culture or lifestyle as it is in places like California, Arizona or Florida. When we get into the design phase with our clients, it's great fun to watch their eyes light up as they start to comprehend just how fantastic their homes' exteriors are going to be by the time we're through.

### **friendly ties**

I started the company in 1997 after spending about seven years building large ponds and streams for high-end golf courses across the country. My decision to move in a distinctly residential direction came after years of seeing how volume pool builders were under-serving the Kansas City market: It occurred to

**Creating eye-catching outdoor living spaces is a process of pure passion for watershaper Robert Bledsoe, who prides himself on distinctly bold, vivid projects rich with fine details and deft artistic touches. Working in the Kansas City area, he has built a reputation for designs that are always informed by unbridled enthusiasm and a free-wheeling style tailored neatly to clients who have big expectations – and budgets to match.**

me that we could create the same levels of beauty and spectacle we were providing for golf courses for residential clients right here at home.

As it turned out, my experience with golf course clients was quite helpful, teaching me a number of lessons about working on high-stakes projects of all types.

First, I observed the value of developing strong, friendly relationships. I know there are watershapers who don't need a personal rapport to make a project work to everyone's satisfaction, but I'm not that guy. When I show up to an initial client meeting, I don't even bring a notepad. I'm there mostly to determine if there's a basis for an amicable working relationship.

In most cases, I've come to these meetings through referrals, so I'm usually pre-qualified in the clients' minds. So I dig right in and aim these discussions at determining their ultimate wish lists. There's no mention of budgets at this point: Instead, I want to get a sense of how they think and how active their imaginations are, always trying to figure out if there's a good fit for our ambitious approach.

I'm never there to "make work." In fact, I'll walk away from a client if we don't connect, and sometimes that means setting aside major projects. My experience has been that, when you're doing something this personal, artistic and *intrusive*, if you're not on friendly terms with clients, the results won't be to anyone's satisfaction.

Next, we visit one of my past projects – never a problem because I maintain close relationships with my past clients, most of whom don't mind showing off their backyards in this way. This is an extremely important step, because I don't think photographs do the work justice: My clients have to be there to get the feeling of moving water and an overall sense of the given space.

Once they're on board and we all agree that we want to work together, the real work always starts with a design contract and a design fee. It's my belief that when clients pay for a design, they place a greater value on the creative side of the work and see what we're doing as more than just a construction project.

As my firm's sole designer, I work off pictures of the site and create a master



plan for the entire exterior. With the vast majority of projects, we also do the construction, which is always going to be better for the client in that when changes occur, we're on hand to make everything work within the overall plan.

### the 'bling' factor

In our area, land is relatively inexpensive, so people who have money tend to think on large scales. That's a

**ELEVATED AMBITIONS:** Our projects are all about great materials and craftsmanship, from our approach to masonry and deck work to our arrangement of naturalistic details and the selection of plants. Everything flows from our relationships with our clients and our desire to enable them to maximize their enjoyment of the spaces we create on both aesthetic and functional levels.



big part of why our bold approach to the entire environment works so well here: These clients want large outdoor cooking and dining areas, big pools and large decks where they can host big parties and take full advantage of the weather when it's warm.

This level of engagement, this sense of how they'll use their outdoor spaces is so important because it always helps us define the fine details that really bring

these projects to life. Water is almost always a central part of the design, but the way we surround it with plant materials, fire effects, lighting, hardscape treatments, pottery, furnishings, audiovisual systems and more – all of these combined elements are absolutely essential to the overall impression the work makes.

In everything we do, there's an element of what I like to call "bling": We aim to

dazzle and excite our clients and their guests with these environments. In other words, this is work with an attitude, and although that may seem like a vague or ephemeral quality, that fact informs every aesthetic and technical detail.

As an example, I *love* moving water, even in places where you might expect it to be still, so it's not unusual for us to put as many as a dozen returns in the deep end of a pool to create an upwelling, rippling effect on the water's surface. That's subtle, of course, but it makes the water come alive – a great look when you use quality materials in interesting designs. We also include lots of underwater stone and interesting bench, step and lounging areas: When the water ripples over those structures, it's as though the whole pool has a life of its own.

I also believe in putting returns in the floor of the pool so that heated water is added at the bottom. For one thing, it increases energy efficiency, but for another, there's no "layering" of the heated water. That may seem a small point, but it's a detail that makes for a more enjoyable experience when my clients go for a dip.

In addition, we use saltwater chlorination systems on all of our pools these days to give our clients fantastic water quality. We also use upsized sand filters to make the water clear and inviting. Some might say our systems are overbuilt, but we know we're creating exciting environments, and the last thing we want our clients to face is cloudy water.

Finally, and unlike most watershapers in our area, we build our pools for year 'round operation. We want our clients to be able to take advantage of their investment in an outdoor lifestyle 12 months a year, if only from a distance at times. They may not want to swim in January, but there's no limit on their ability to look at a graceful waterfall, a babbling brook or reflections across the water. It's all part of our program of taking the concepts of luxury and enjoyment as far as we can push them.

### **florida in the midwest**

To illustrate what I mean in more specific terms, let's look at two special projects – the first of which was built for a doctor specializing in cancer treatment.



**A TOUCH OF FLORIDA:** For this project, the clients wanted tropical, Florida flavors for their Kansas home. The main element in the outdoor-living scheme is the large, open-air structure that flanks the pool, but the broad, open decks set against a forested backdrop are also visually compelling – as are the fire-effect-topped towers that mark one edge of the space.

His work is all-consuming, so he wanted a special retreat, a place where he and his family could unwind, entertain and have fun.

In the design phase, he told me that he wanted a backyard that reminded him of Florida. There was an existing pool – nicely done with clean lines, a diving board and some decent landscaping. It wasn't offensive by any means and was just two years old, but right off the bat he told me they'd come to hate it because it seemed so *ordinary*.

Before long, the design included all sorts of Florida-esque features, such as an open-air, 30-by-40-foot building complete with a full kitchen decked out with a smoker, a charcoal grill and two gas grills. We also mapped out a full bar and plasma televisions in a plan rounded out with beautiful rockwork and woodwork and an unusual, one-of-a-kind iron post-and-railing system made to resemble tree trunks and branches (courtesy of a local sculptor).

Throughout the site, we used a stone called Indian Sunset. Quarried in Oklahoma and Arkansas, it's a beautiful material with a wide spectrum of colors in bronze, rust and gold and a variety of grays, browns and creams. Mostly, it has a sort of



buckskin look that works well with greenery and the shimmering blue water.

The stone deck covers 5,000 square feet. That may seem large – and it *is* – but the surfaces are arrayed on a ten-acre wooded property and have been carved out of the woods in such a way that the trees offer the perfect backdrop. All that material encompasses a reworked pool finished in a vibrant, acid-washed-blue-jean plaster chosen to make the water stand out and dance over the finish. The waterline features an iridescent blue tile that completes the picture.

The vessel itself is 60 feet long and 40 feet across at its widest point. The deep end reaches down 13 feet – great for diving – and the well is finished in the same stone material as the deck. The whole thing is designed with a sweeping, curvaceous, freeform shape that meanders through the wide space.

Off the deep end, there's a large natural-stone grotto fitted with a large bench offering a great view of the back of a waterfall. The grotto is a dry space with a sound system, lighting and all sorts of seating – a perfect, secluded hangout.

There are also three 12-foot-tall, stone-finished columns topped with steel bowls that contain fire elements, lighting sconces and speaker systems. This wasn't included in the original plan, but the clients saw them as a way of adding visual dra-

ma to the environment. They work well: At night when the fires are lit, reflected flames dance on the water's surface in truly spectacular ways.

### **a room without walls**

By contrast, the second project I want to highlight is one in which we weren't working with a large space.

The home has a contemporary style, so we developed a rectilinear design that takes advantage of the sloping property with a series of cascading architectural fountains and a raised spa – all of which spill into a long, narrow pool tucked up against the slope.

The area between the home and the pool is very much an “outdoor room,” complete with a beautiful fireplace that interfaces with the wall and waterfeature treatments as well as an outdoor kitchen and some intimate dining areas.

The pool, spa and waterfeatures are pushed right up against the property line within about 30 feet of terrain available behind the house. To give the space depth, we persuaded the neighbors to give us access to their property to landscape the boundary in such a way that the downslope space seems larger than it actually is.

Off to one side, there's a landing where the view opens up over the entire slope. This is where we established the transi-





tion between the architectural leanings of the pool and the naturalistic appearance of a three-story-tall waterfall that flows toward a putting green set at the low point of the property.

As I mentioned above, I started in the watershaping business installing large stream, pond and waterfall systems for golf courses. I still have a passion for those designs, and this project gave us a wonderful opportunity to show off our pedigree. Given that background, the entire waterfall structure is made of reinforced concrete.

Making a stream with a concrete structure look “natural” takes careful planning and proper engineering. The stream course, for example, is large enough that we had plenty of room to work in placing large boulders. We then feathered in the landscaping on the edges with rocks that extend into the dry areas beyond.

As is the case in everything we do, I like my natural watershapes to have a strong sense of drama, and this waterfall is no exception with its vigorous flow, tuneful cascades and strong sense of motion. When you enter the yard, you hear the cascade well before you see it, so it draws visitors over to a point in the backyard where the scene shifts from architectural to natural in a bold, distinctive and dramatic way.

## **no fear**

When I look at the work of other watershapers, I sometimes get the sense that they’re afraid to reach for something truly spectacular. That’s too bad, because most of the time what I see in their work is unrealized potential.

To be sure, our clients don’t run with every idea we present, but with us they’re always going to have the opportunity to do something that makes a statement: Ultimately, they are going to wind up with something special – a setting they’ll be proud to share with guests and in which they themselves will feel comfortable spending their time.

I get a lot of “high fives” from my clients when we conclude our work on site, and they know that what they’ve been through is a process of creating what I call “living art.” We’re often invited to attend parties at these homes once construction is through, and I must say there’s nothing like showing up to a place we created and watching people come alive because they’re excited to be there.

Some might accuse us of having an over-the-top approach to the work, but speaking strictly for myself, I wouldn’t know how to do it any other way.



**COMPACT TRANSFORMATION:** The pool and its sculpted cascades have an appropriately distinct, contemporary flavor that goes perfectly with the house, but the two low posts at the far end of the pool deck define a transition to another, wilder world occupied by lily-strewn ponds and a vigorous cascade you can certainly *hear* from the formal deck but cannot see without stepping out for a closer view.

