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The Rooms Outside

DESIGNING LANDSCAPES AROUND THE WAY FAMILIES MAKE MEMORIES OUTDOORS

Madarash of Blondie's Treehouse designs landscapes around the way families make memories outdoors

BY STEVE MOSCO

Michael J. Madarash still reads a property before he designs it. He looks at the slope, the trees, the light, the wind and the way people will leave the house and enter the yard. He notices where a view should be opened, where a neighbor should disappear, where a pool belongs, and where a kitchen might draw people outside and keep them there long after dinner.

The habit began in Nassau County parks, where Madarash spent time as a boy with his grandfather, who managed several local parks after working as a machinist. They planted flowers, raised the flag, lined ball fields, and cut grass.

At home, his father gardened and worked on the family yard. Before Madarash knew the language of landscape design, he understood the feel of maintained ground and the satisfaction of making a place work.

"It wasn't a family business by trade, but it was a family business by hobby," Madarash said. "So I was always kind of interested in it and around it."

By 14 or 15, he was making flyers and mowing lawns in the neighborhood. At 16, he built his first rock wall. In high school, he had a small design business with a couple of people working for him. What started as a boyhood interest became a path through UMass Amherst's Stockbridge School of Agriculture, where he earned a Bachelor of Science in soil science and landscape design with a minor in turf management.

For a while, golf courses seemed like a possible future. Madarash interned at Merion Golf Club near Philadelphia, then worked as an assistant superintendent after college. He learned about turf, crews, divisions, and large-scale operations. He also learned he wanted more variation, more contact with clients, and more room to create.

"Quite quickly, I realized I needed more creativity," he said. "I needed a different routine, working with different people, different homeowners, different companies. So after about a year of that, I moved in with my grandma in Queens, and started my first business, my first real business."



The backyard combines a free-form pool, cabana, lawn, and multiple seating areas within a cohesive landscape plan.

That business became Kokobo Green Scapes, which Madarash launched in 2001. Kokobo later became part of Blondie's Treehouse, where Madarash is now principal designer.

His work has moved from city terraces and rooftop amenity spaces to high-end Long Island backyards, resort projects, and outdoor rooms designed around how people gather, cook, play, host, and raise families.

Below the Surface

Soil science never left his work. It simply became part of his eye.

Plant material has to match the soil. Drainage has to be understood before walls, patios, pools, and lawns settle into place. Weak soil must be amended. A design may sell the dream, but the ground decides what can survive.

"Going for a four year bachelor's degree in soil science, you dig very deep," Madarash said. "I use that knowledge every day. We're choosing plant material based on soil makeup, amending soil when it isn't good, and thinking about how different soil types affect drainage."

In the early years of Kokobo, Madarash was drawn to the city. He designed balconies, terraces, courtyards, lobbies, and interior landscapes in Class A office buildings. Manhattan rooftops and amenity spaces were beginning to gain momentum, and he saw possibilities in those tight urban footprints.



An aerial view shows how the curved driveway and central planting beds organize the home's front landscape.

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"We were really focusing on bringing these amazing outdoor living spaces to smaller apartments, and sometimes adding another 30 percent of living space to a penthouse, which was incredible for the owners," he said. "So that was very cool in the beginning."

In recent years, Madarash's personal work has shifted heavily toward the suburban market.

Homeowners who once treated the backyard as secondary began seeing it as part of everyday life. The yard became a dining room, a play space, a pool club, a kitchen, a putting green, a fire lit gathering place, and sometimes all of those things arranged into one carefully planned landscape.

The Client Inside

For Madarash, "boutique" is not about scale or style. It is about designing a space around a client so closely that the finished landscape feels personal rather than assembled from features.

"The boutique approach is a very in-depth, detailed process of getting to know my clients, getting to know their lifestyle, and getting to know what their goals are for the space now, in three years, in seven, in 12, in 15 years," he said. "That helps me understand how to really lay out a property and what amenities and specific elements should be incorporated."

Clients arrive with wish lists, Instagram feeds, Pinterest boards, and, increasingly, AI generated visions of their yards. Madarash takes those ideas seriously, then brings them back to the site. Tropical foliage from Bali may not work on Long Island.

Some stone will not withstand Northeast freeze-thaw cycles. Some materials hold too much heat around pools. A small property can still carry several features, but only with careful traffic flow and restraint.

The early conversation can become the most important part of the job. A designer has to know when to say yes, when to adapt, and when to stop a bad idea before it becomes an expensive surprise.



A compact putting green turns a narrow side yard into a functional and inviting recreational space.



A covered outdoor room with a stone fireplace creates a comfortable gathering space protected from the elements.

"I like to have real conversations with people in the beginning," Madarash said. "Sometimes that means having a difficult conversation and saying, 'No, this is not possible.' But in a similar situation, we might have done something that could work for you, or we might need to eliminate one element in order to make room for two others. I'm a big believer in having long, detailed conversations and managing expectations at the beginning of the project so there aren't surprises later."

Once he is on a property, the design starts to move in his head.

"When I walk on a property, my wheels are turning immediately," he said. "Even sometimes before a wish list is given to me, I'm already thinking, oh, that would be amazing there, and then from that, their wish list can kind of dictate."

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