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A Critical View of Landscape Preservation and the Role of Landscape Architects

While architects have played an important role in historic preservation in the twentieth century, the landscape architecture profession has been slower to assume responsibility as stewards and advocates of the historic landscape. To some degree, this is due to differences in the way architects and landscape architects are trained and the way landscape is perceived. But it also stems from preservation values which, since the founding of ICOMOS and UNESCO, have privileged the permanence of brick, stone, and concrete. However, in the past half century, preservation philosophy has gradually begun to change from emphasizing the durable aspects of materials and buildings to caring for human practices, natural wonders, and landscape at a much larger scale. For landscape to be treated as a meaningful historic artifact, landscape architecture as a profession must embrace its stewardship role more actively, acquiring a far greater depth of historical knowledge and expertise in preservation practice than is currently required in most educational programs.

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The field of historic preservation is changing rapidly from a field driven by attention to the material fabric of architecture and art to a more theoretical one, expanding its scope to include other categories of heritage, such as performance, language, and landscape as evidenced by the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Silverman and Ruggles 2007; Ruggles and Silverman 2009). Because preservation has shifted, the cadre of experts called upon to participate in the identification and documentation of sites and practices and to serve as stewards has also changed. Architects and archaeologists served as the experts and stewards in the first half of the twentieth century; in recent years, planners and landscape architects have begun to define landscape as an arena of both creative practice and historic reflection.

CHANGING VALUES IN PRESERVATION

The evolution in the way that preservation is construed is partly due to the conventions written and ratified by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization); however, UNESCO itself responds to the concerns of heritage managers and cultural theorists in its member nations. Thus, as a heritage body, UNESCO is both reflective of the cultural values of the nations it serves and catalytic in its ability to identify and promote new directions in heritage management through advisory and legally binding instruments (UNESCO 2006). UNESCO was founded in 1945, at the end of World War II, with the intention of safeguarding both human society and its cultural artifacts. Faced with the devastating reality of enormous postwar destruction to

major historic monuments and urban areas, UNESCO drafted the Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, called The Hague Convention (UNESCO 1954). In response to emerging concerns, UNESCO continues to write and ratify new instruments, such as declarations, recommendations, and conventions. Whereas a declaration is simply a statement of principles, and a recommendation requires only a majority vote, a UNESCO convention requires ratification by a two-thirds majority of its member nations. Because they reflect a high degree of international consensus, UNESCO conventions on preservation provide a kind of map to chart the changing values accorded to heritage around the world in the past half century (Ruggles and Silverman 2009).

ICOMOS is another important global body for the protection and preservation of cultural monuments. The International Council on Monuments and Sites is a group of professional architects, archaeologists, preservationists, and historians who joined together in 1964 as a non-governmental offshoot of UNESCO (ICOMOS 2005).

Although today the spectrum of cultural and historic heritage that UNESCO and ICOMOS aim to protect has widened considerably, it is important to note that at the outset, both were primarily concerned with the preservation of places and objects. UNESCO's Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (UNESCO 1954) defined cultural property as entirely material, consisting of buildings, works of art, and books and manuscripts (UNESCO 1954, opening article). Similarly, early instruments of ICOMOS, such as the Venice Charter (1964), outlined the procedures for restoring, excavating, and documenting the fabric of

damaged built works. However, the charter states that “The concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting...” (ICOMOS 1964). The words “rural setting” opened the door to a much wider definition of which aspects of the environment merited protection, but it was by no means explicitly developed as a concept.

Slowly, gardens and landscape gained increased attention in ICOMOS. In 1970, an International Scientific Committee for Cultural Landscapes, created by ICOMOS with the International Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA), identified three categories of landscape in need of recognition and protection: designed, natural or “organically evolved,” and cultural. In 1982, ICOMOS adopted an important charter on historic gardens, the Florence Charter. It specifically included “small gardens and... large parks, whether formal or ‘landscape,’” and stated that gardens belong to larger environmental contexts that themselves must be protected to maintain irrigation resources and prohibit road encroachment (ICOMOS 1982). However, the charter’s odd tone imposes an unduly aesthetic and even romantic interpretation of the meaning of gardens: “As the expression of the direct affinity between civilization and nature, and as a place of enjoyment suited to meditation or repose, the garden thus acquires the cosmic significance of an idealized image of the world, a ‘paradise’ in the etymological sense of the term, and yet a testimony to a culture, a style, an age, and often to the originality of a creative artist.”

This definition does not include landscapes of sorrow (historic battlefields) and shame (sites of genocide and oppression), a lamentable omission since these may be worthy of preservation for historic and political, if not aesthetic, reasons. Nonetheless, the Florence Charter was a milestone in landscape preservation. It proposed that the originality and historic meaning of a garden could be preserved, as in works of architecture, while characteristics peculiar to landscape, such as natural change, could likewise be addressed. It advocated a “perpetual balance between the cycle of the seasons, the growth and decay of nature and the desire of the artist and craftsman to keep [the garden] permanently unchanged.” This reflects not only a new category of object designated

for protection—a shift from stone and brick, to plants and water—but a significant transformation in the practice of historic preservation.

ICOMOS’s 1987 Washington Charter focused on the historic preservation of “historic urban areas, large and small, including cities, towns and historic centers or quarters, together with their natural and man-made environments” (ICOMOS 1987). More recent instruments have departed even further from the material object and the value of permanence, emphasizing the preservation of other forms of heritage, for example, UNESCO’s 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity and the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, implemented in 2006. The latter includes oral tradition and language, performing arts, social practices and rituals, and craft tradition. More importantly for gardens and landscape preservation, it includes “Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe” such as “know-how, skills, practices and representations developed and perpetuated by communities in interaction with their natural environment” (UNESCO 2003).

In 1994, the U.S. National Park Service (NPS) published *Preservation Brief 39*, by Charles Birnbaum (1992, 1994). This important document provided a taxonomy of historic sites and historical designed, vernacular, and ethnographic landscapes. It emphasized that the “interconnected systems of land, air and water, vegetation and wildlife” demanded interdisciplinary preservation methodology. It should be noted that this brief extended its scope beyond the actual stewardship of the NPS by providing standards that could be applied to all American landscapes—indeed *any* landscape deemed worthy of preservation and restoration. Journals such as the NPS’s *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* contributed to the increased visibility of landscape preservation; in 1978, the editor noted that in addition to historians, archaeologists, and museum curators “historical landscape architects” were joining the ranks of preservationists (Holland 1978).

The Alliance for Historic Landscape Preservation was founded in 1978, followed by the National Association for Olmsted Parks two years later. They emerged out of the same period as the ICOMOS Florence Charter and reflect a growing awareness of the distinct problems posed by landscape preservation.

EDUCATION OF A LANDSCAPE PRESERVATIONIST

Because the earliest preservation documents were intended to protect material objects and buildings, the agents of protection were primarily architects, archaeologists, and government administrators. At sites of historic significance, architects still serve as the conservators of the built fabric and as authors of policies that guide restoration and preservation, though it should be noted that they are increasingly joined by urban and regional planners. This stewardship role is so important and so widely recognized that many universities specifically train future architects and planners for it. In schools of architecture across the world, students are typically required to take courses in architectural history and to gain experience with historic works through field studies. In many schools of architecture and planning, students may choose courses that train them specifically to work in historic environments as conservators.¹ Increasingly, there has been a shift toward offering historic preservation and heritage studies as separate degree programs or curriculum tracks. This emphasis on specialized expertise for some is undoubtedly good for preservation education, but it releases other architectural students from the obligation to work in environments where sensitivity to history matters more than innovation. Despite the increasing separation between preservation and mainstream architecture and urban planning, these professions continue to demonstrate a commitment to preservation of the built and natural environment.

Such professional commitment is less discernible in the field of landscape architecture. With a few heroic exceptions, landscape architects as a group have not assumed significant responsibility as historians, preservationists, and stewards for historic gardens and landscapes.² Educators are more likely than practitioners to engage in preservation projects. However, compared to the related fields of architecture and planning, there are few landscape architecture programs that offer courses in historic preservation or that train designers to work knowledgeably and specifically in historic environments. Much of this may be attributed to the smaller size of the programs, but it also reflects the way that heritage and preservation

have been historically defined by UNESCO and ICOMOS. Most preservation programs have focused on the architectural fabric of buildings, neighborhoods, and cities, not on the changing organic forms of gardens and landscape. However, it is encouraging to see that a few programs are sensitive to this issue. For example, the Historic Preservation Program at Clemson University (South Carolina) and the Department of Architectural Conservation at Delhi University (India) include landscape architects among their faculty. The Department of Landscape Architecture at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, has recently begun a graduate minor in cultural heritage for its master's and doctoral students.

CHALLENGES OF LANDSCAPE PRESERVATION

Several challenges in landscape preservation may explain the reasons for the difference in its development in relation to other fields. Whereas the architect can date the stone of a building to the moment the block was carved or set in place, the landscape architect deals with spaces that do not – and never did – have a single historic moment. They experience seasonal changes, and their development may be measured in decades. As trees and shrubs grow, they have to be trimmed and replanted regularly. One does not preserve a diseased rose bush. It is simply replaced and too often by an exemplar that lacks historic character and reflects modern hybridizing practices. In many historic settings, vegetation is regarded as a damaging intrusion rather than an artifact in its own right. For these reasons, among others, it can be difficult to assign a specific date to a garden.

The garden of the Taj Mahal in Agra is a case in point (Fig. 1). The mausoleum's superb white marble relief carving and inlaid *pietra dura* that enchant viewers today are architectural materials that can be securely dated to the time of the tomb's completion in 1648. In contrast, its garden (an Islamic cross-axial plan called a *chahar bagh*) has experienced many transformations as a result of its various stewards: from the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658) and his Mughal successors, to Lord Curzon (British Viceroy of India, 1899-1905), and

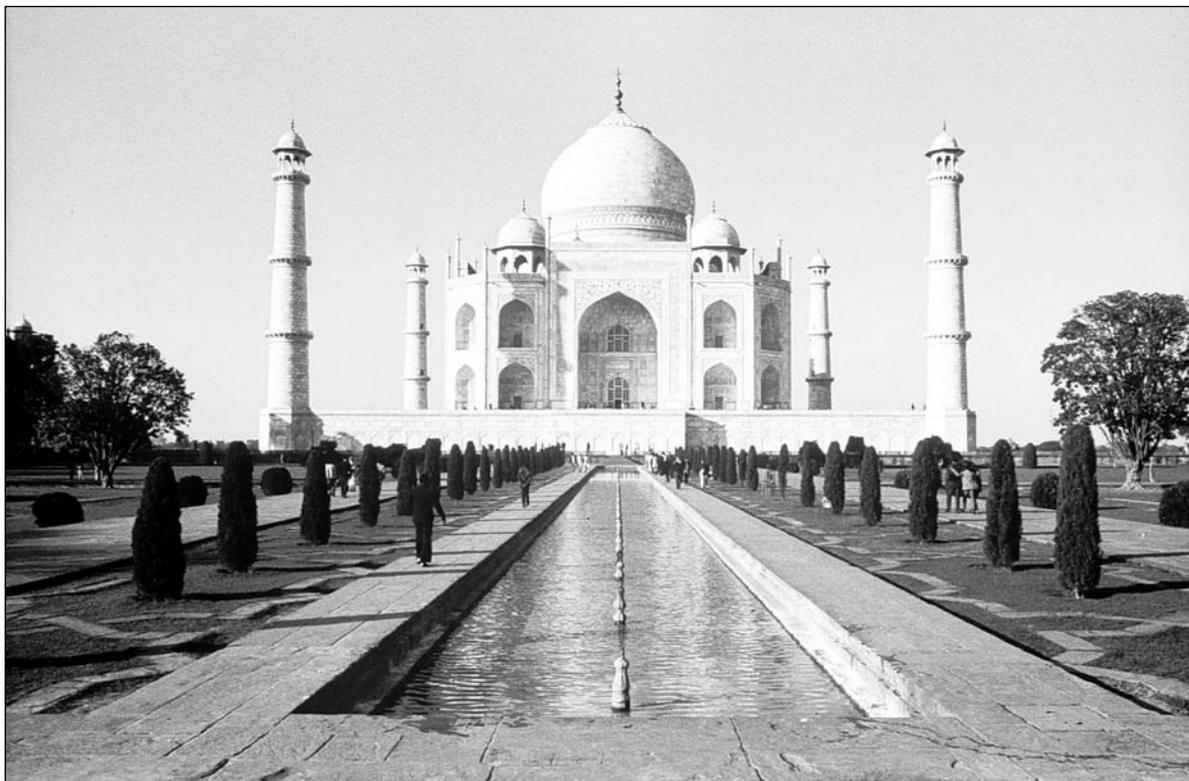


Fig. 1. Taj Mahal, Agra (built 1632-1643) as seen in 2005 (Photograph by D. Fairchild Ruggles).

the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI). Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century paintings, prints, and photographs show different versions of the garden—sometimes filled with dense tree cover, at other times with open vistas (Pal 1989; Herbert 2005; Bowe 2007) (Fig. 2). It is hard for a viewer today—even a knowledgeable historian—to ascertain the garden’s original state.

Sometimes the loss of historical accuracy at sites is prompted by a desire to forget or a battle over interpretation. For example, while the lush and colorful gardens at many California missions delight visitors, they were originally sites where Native Americans were converted to Catholicism, their sweat and labor supporting the settlement (Kryder-Reid 2007) (Fig. 3). The beauty of the gardens today thus serves to hide a contentious past.

In cases such as the Taj Mahal or California missions, landscape archaeology can supplement archival research to reveal plantings, stages of growth, soil structure, and instruments. Garden archaeology was born from the excavations of gardens and fields

at Pompeii and Herculaneum under the direction of Wilhemina Jashemski in the 1960s and 1970s (Jashemski 1979-1993), and it has been used on more modern sites such as those in colonial America. One hopes that as archaeological methods improve, especially in the realm of landscape, they can reveal the changing character of other sites as well (Miller and Gleason 1994).³

Preservation is also more likely to address architecture than landscape because of the scale of engagement. Large landscapes are dependent upon resources like water or human labor that may lie outside the perimeter designated for protection. For example, in Ithaca, New York, in the 1990s, when an enormous commercial complex was proposed at a site directly across from Buttermilk Falls State Park, the community protested vigorously on the grounds that the beautiful view from the waterfall would change from a scene of woods and river to asphalt, excessive lighting, and automobiles. But the park’s grounds did not officially include viewshed, and the public ultimately lost to an ugly, big-box retail development (Glover 1994; Ortega 1998:298).



Fig. 2. *Taj Mahal in the 1880s. The vegetation is dense and obscures the view of the garden* (© The British Library Board. Photo 430/5, fol. 34).

Similarly, while the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is committed to architectural preservation, the enormous number of monuments requiring protection means that one of the key strategies is simple fencing to limit access and discourage theft of sculpture and architectural ornament. The spatial field created by the fence reflects preservation values: the building—preserved as well as can be expected within the financial constraints of ASI—stands at the center of the designated precinct, while the surrounding gardens are either ignored or replanted in a contemporary style (Fig. 4). Invariably, the ornamental pools stand dry, their fountains silent. It is often impossible to advocate for authentic water features when surrounding communities have barely enough clean water for drinking, bathing, and farming. This underscores one of the fundamental challenges of garden preservation: it cannot be disconnected from larger ecological and social issues.

In some historic gardens, the buildings are very carefully preserved but the gardens are planted with species that are historically inaccurate. Garden preservation at Versailles has held to a very high standard,

despite (or perhaps necessitated by) the disastrous windstorm of 1990 (Lablaude 1995). But in Spain, bougainvillea still adorns many Islamic-era palaces of the period 711-1492 (Fig. 5), despite the fact that this New World plant did not arrive in Europe until after 1768. Still, the conservators apparently have seen no discrepancy between their pursuit of historically correct built fabric on the one hand and arbitrary plantings on the other.

Architectural fabric is much more likely than landscape to be treated as a historic artifact. In the choice to privilege architecture over landscape through much of the past century, the implication has been that while architecture is a work of history, a garden is not. Herein lies an opportunity for landscape architects to lay claim to the preservationist role that architects have already assumed. Many individual landscape designers are deeply concerned with landscape preservation and do serve as consultants in preservation projects, but the profession is most vocal only at moments when landscape icons are threatened with destruction, as in the case of Lawrence Halprin's Skyline Park in Denver (Komara 2006).



Fig. 3. Mission Santa Ines, California, c. 2000 (Photograph by E. Kryder-Reid).



Fig. 4. At the Shehri Masjid in Champaner, the Archaeological Survey of India has encircled the site with a metal fence, which cuts through the mosque's original landscape context (Photograph by D. Fairchild Ruggles).



Fig. 5. At the Generalife Palace, Granada, brilliantly colored but historically inaccurate bougainvillea climbs the walls (Photograph by D. Fairchild Ruggles).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The history and the challenges of landscape preservation show the need to strengthen the field. For this to occur, the schools where American and international landscape architects are trained, and especially the American Society of Landscape Architects, must provide an expanded vision.⁴ For designers to serve as knowledgeable stewards, they need to have a thorough education in the history of the built and natural environment. In addition to a comprehensive survey of international landscape history, the historical education of design students should require depth in at least one area, whether it be American city parks, Italian Renaissance and baroque villa landscapes, or Native American/First Nation community and land use. In the case of American studies, the curriculum should address not only the high style of great (white) landscape designers like Olmsted, Jensen, and Kiley but also vernacular landscape and the lived experience of other communities, including those of Native Americans, African Americans, and immigrant groups. Furthermore, landscape students should be taught more than the facts of a site's natural and built history: they should learn how to conduct research using field work and archives in addition to secondary sources. Students must learn to think theoretically about complex, global landscape history and its preservation.

Some landscape architects may be sufficiently engaged to pursue a research degree at the doctoral level. But master's students, whose primary objective is professional practice, can be encouraged to pursue preservation as a subfield so that when called to work at a historic site, they will already be familiar with international conventions such as those of UNESCO and ICOMOS, as well as the guidelines and advocacy work of the U.S. National Park Service (especially *Preservation Brief 36*), the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and others. In order to make a strong case for preserving the endangered works of great landscape architects, advocates have to be steeped in the work itself and in its historical context. If landscape is to be treated as a meaningful historic artifact instead of a disposable frame for architecture, landscape architecture as a profession must collectively and more actively take on the role of stewardship. For Lawrence Halprin's Skyline Park in Denver, it is too late. But there are a great many extraordinary landscapes from

antiquity to the present that still exist but are vulnerable to development, neglect, natural disaster, or thoughtless redesign. As the role of the landscape architect expands from that of designer to steward, scholar, and advocate, these historic gardens and landscapes have a better chance of receiving the recognition and sensitive preservation that they deserve.

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ENDNOTES

1. The US National Council for Preservation Education (NCPE) consists of sixty historic preservation programs/schools that offer undergraduate and graduate degrees and certificates in historic preservation. For details and a list of the schools see <http://www.ncpe.us/>. Some international examples of historic preservation programs/schools include the Australian National University in Canberra and the University of Melbourne; Middle East Technical University in Turkey; Universidad de Guanajuato and Universidad Michoacana De San Nicolas De Hidalgo in Mexico; Delhi University in India; University College (Cork) in Ireland; and in the United Kingdom, the University of Portsmouth, Bristol; South Bank University, London, and York, to name but a few.
2. The American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) includes historic preservation among its professional interest groups. But its 2006 chair, David Driapsa, admitted in a newsletter that landscape architects did not begin to take an interest in preservation until after the 1970s (ASLA 2006). The U.S. National Park Service, the Cultural Landscape Foundation, and the newly founded Foundation for Landscape Studies are organizations whose advocacy for landscape heritage is more visible. Together with the relatively recent attention to landscape paid by UNESCO and ICOMOS, these organizations are helping to bring landscape preservation to the public eye.
3. A recent example of successful archaeological investigation of a garden site is the 2003 restoration of Humayun's Tomb, a joint project of the Archaeological Survey of India and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (2003).

4. I have deliberately discussed national and international sites and programs because, in our increasingly globalized world, American landscape programs train a great many international students, American design firms work all over the world, and international designers also work in the U.S. Likewise, the capital with which major building projects are financed is increasingly globalized. Perhaps more important, knowledge is no longer purely local: learning from environmental practices around the world is essential, as well as participation in preservation and stewardship on the international stage. Indeed, UNESCO and ICOMOS are predicated on this principle.

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