

A Heritage RENEWED

Navigating Change in Historic Landscapes

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The past is an integral component of the public landscape; many of North America's most well-loved public gardens trace their roots to prominent botanists, landscape architects, and estate owners of past eras, and even today's most cutting-edge gardens will acquire an historic dimension over the course of the decades and centuries yet to come. One of the great challenges of managing historic landscapes is that of preserving historic integrity while engaging the reality of—and in some cases, the imperative for—change over time. This balance between honoring the old and welcoming the new is of critical importance when undertaking capital projects to preserve, restore, or augment historically significant landscapes.

Such projects raise a host of questions for the public horticulture institution: What degree of fidelity should be maintained with respect to original landscape features? Should the historic landscape be faithfully reproduced down to the last plant specimen, or might a more expansive approach be adopted? In a landscape that has evolved dramatically over several eras, how does the institution determine what period of history—if any—should be afforded primary significance with respect to the development and implementation of cultural landscape plans? And finally, how might a public garden construct new landscape features or add modern amenities while preserving a site's overall historic integrity? Fortunately, numerous institutions have successfully grappled with these questions, and their experiences, as well as the suite of best practices developed by the Garden Conservancy, the National Park Service, the Cultural Landscape Foundation, and others, provide invaluable guidance.

Why Preserve?

Preservation of an historic landscape may be motivated by a number of factors, and may include multiple treatments. As is well known in the world of horticulture, a garden requires constant maintenance. In the absence of care, historic landscapes slide easily into disrepair, causing unique and defining characteristics to become obscured or even lost altogether. Preservation projects are often undertaken in order to restore degraded landscapes to a former, intact state from which they gradually diverged. Such was the case at San Francisco's Gardens of Alcatraz, where over four acres of gardens, originally maintained by inmates, military personnel, and their families, gradually disappeared between 1953, when the prison facility was closed, and 2003, when a comprehensive revitalization project was undertaken.

Preservation may also be necessitated by abrupt, destructive change. In the case of Vizcaya Museum and Gardens located in Miami, Hurricanes Katrina and Wilma wrought extensive damage throughout the property, damaging landscapes, buildings, and museum collections. With

the aid of FEMA disaster recovery funding, county monies, and other financial assistance, Vizcaya was able to restore its storm-damaged historic central courtyard in its entirety.

Finally, updates to historic landscapes may be required in order to accommodate new uses. Greenwood Gardens, in Milburn, New Jersey, recently opened to the public following a several-year-long capital project that sought to transform this formerly private estate for public visitation and use.

Documenting the Past, Planning for the Future: The Cultural Landscape Report

Prior to undertaking alterations to an historic property, it's important to first establish what makes the landscape unique, valuable, and worthy of preservation—in other words, to identify those features that make it a "cultural landscape." As defined by the Cultural Landscape Foundation, cultural landscapes are "sites associated with a significant event, activity, person, or group of people" and that "provide a



Officers' Row on Alcatraz Island, in full bloom following the completion of garden rehabilitation efforts.

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Original landscape features, such as Greenwood Gardens' stately Cascade Steps, are an important part of a landscape's history and contribute to a site's cultural significance.

(Left) Visitors attend a public program on the Rose Terrace at The Gardens of Alcatraz. The landscape and greenhouse were reconstructed during the Gardens' recent historic rehabilitation project.

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sense of place and identity, map our relationship to the land over time, and... [constitute] part of our national heritage.”¹ The tool most frequently used in this type of assessment is the cultural landscape report, which “identifies the landscape features, values, and associations that make a landscape historically significant... and outlines appropriate treatment for a landscape consistent with its significance, condition, and planned use.”² The National Park Service has established detailed guidelines for the preparation of cultural landscape reports. These guidelines have proven invaluable for many public gardens seeking to research their landscape's history, document existing conditions, develop restoration standards and priorities, and establish ongoing maintenance protocols following the completion of restoration efforts.

Implementing Change: A Range of Approaches

In general, four approaches are available to the public garden seeking to implement physical changes in an historic landscape: preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction. These approaches were

originally developed by the Department of the Interior to guide preservation efforts for historic buildings eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. More recently, they have been adapted for use in the responsible stewardship of cultural landscapes, and now serve as nationally recognized standards of practice in historic gardens.

In **preservation**, emphasis is placed on “maintaining the existing form, integrity, and materials of an historic property.”³ Generally, preservation focuses on maintenance and repair, and does not include extensive replacement or reconstruction of landscape features. This approach often results in the retention of landscape features that were developed at several different points in history. Rather than restoring a landscape to its appearance during a single moment in time, preservation aims at the protection of all historically significant features currently extant. In preservation, a conservative approach is adopted toward the retention of original plant material in the landscape. While historic plants may be replaced, if necessary, with new specimens of the same taxon, it is considered preferable to leave original plants intact. At Greenwood Gardens, Director of Horticulture Louis Bauer has

taken a preservation approach with respect to the boxwood hedges and parterres installed on the property in the 1950s. Over time, the plants had become overly large, in many cases entirely obscuring nearby garden paths. Rather than replacing the boxwood with new, smaller specimens, Bauer and his staff have embarked upon a campaign of rejuvenation pruning, restoring the hedges to their originally intended scale.

Rehabilitation constitutes a second possible approach to implementing change in the historic landscape. As in preservation, emphasis is placed upon protective maintenance and repair of historic features. However, in rehabilitation, allowances are also made for new landscape additions. The Garden Conservancy, the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and the National Park Service implemented a rehabilitative approach in their collaborative effort to revitalize the Gardens at Alcatraz. Those elements of the prison-era gardens that had remained viable over the years were repaired to reflect their original condition, while more ephemeral elements, such as garden beds and even a small greenhouse, were reconstructed following painstaking historical research. Shelagh Fritz, Conservancy project



Archival images often provide important documentation of cultural landscapes. This estate-era photo of Vizcaya's central courtyard was used as a reference point for recent restoration efforts.

PHOTO CREDIT: VIZCAYA MUSEUM AND GARDENS

manager, describes the rehabilitation of the Gardens at Alcatraz as a conscientious effort to restore historic integrity through the faithful recreation of significant garden features.

Restoration, a third approach to change, aims to recreate the historic landscape as it appeared at a single, significant point in time, often referred to as the "restoration period." Unlike preservation and rehabilitation, the restoration approach sanctions the removal of landscape features that were originally developed in the past but fall outside the designated restoration period. A strong case may be made for restoration when a property's significance during a particular period of time "outweighs the potential loss of extant materials, features, spaces, and finishes that characterize other historical periods."⁷⁴ At Vizcaya Museum and Gardens, extensive hurricane damage provided a unique opportunity to restore an historically significant landscape dating from the Country Place Era, removing later features that had obscured the original clarity of the design. Ian

Simpkins, chief horticulturist, describes Vizcaya's recent central courtyard restoration project as an attempt to "examine the existing landscape, redesign it, and recreate a more accurate representation of original design intent we can extrapolate from the [initial] landscape installation circa 1917."

A final approach, **reconstruction**, involves the wholesale recreation of non-surviving landscapes with new material. Reconstruction is often indicated when historically significant landscapes have been all but lost over the passage of time. The stories told by these "disappeared" landscapes are sufficiently compelling and culturally important as to warrant a comprehensive rebuilding effort.

Planning for change in historic gardens requires considerable diligence, attention to detail, and respect for the heritage these landscapes embody. As stewards of these unique cultural resources, we in the public garden field hold a great responsibility. However, we also hold a great opportunity: in preserving, safeguarding, and interpreting these significant landscapes, we serve as ambassadors of the past, bringing the visiting public into closer connection with its own cultural heritage.

If your institution is seeking guidance with respect to its own historically or culturally significant landscape, the APGA Historic Landscapes Professional Section is a great place to start. For more information on the Historic Landscapes Section, visit <http://publicgardens.org/sections/historic-landscapes-professional-section-0> or contact Linda Eirhart, section chair, at leirha@winterthur.org, or Ian Simpkins, vice chair, at ian.simpkins@vizcaya.org.

During publication, Shari Edelson was in transition from Reeves-Reed Arboretum where she was director of horticulture to the Arboretum at Penn State University where she is now the director of horticulture and curator. She welcomes comments from readers and may be contacted at ske13@psu.edu.

