Garden Conservancy to Support Renovation of Landmark Landscape
Re-imagining Dan Kiley’s Modernist Masterpiece at the Oakland Museum of California

Last year, the Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) completed a thorough renovation of its extraordinary brutalist building, refreshing interior and exterior galleries and educational spaces, and launched a campaign to renovate its campus. In addition to revitalizing its plantings, a key goal is to better connect the museum’s campus with the surrounding community. Kate Rittman, a former OMCA trustee who also recently became a member of the Garden Conservancy Society of Fellows, promptly reached out to James Brayton Hall, president of the Garden Conservancy.

Some twenty years earlier, on a visit to the San Francisco Bay Area, James, then a recent graduate of the landscape architecture program at the Rhode Island School of Design and in charge of the school’s campus design, had been first introduced to OMCA by Kate, then a trustee of the Rhode Island School of Design. Upon hearing of the renovation plans, he was eager to engage in dialogue with the museum.

Kate Rittman is passionate about the museum’s collections as well as its architecture, educational programs (including docent tours and student programs), landscape, and place in the community. She notes that the museum’s innovative landscape, which was designed by landscape architect Dan Kiley, “serves as the site of many public events, and, because of the way it is laid out, also offers quiet retreats on different levels.”

OMCA, a historic mid-century modernist landmark by renowned architects Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo, contains exceptional collections of art, science, and history. Its distinctive tiered landscape serves as a popular gathering space, while also integrating seamlessly with the building. Access to the campus is free and open to the public.

In July 2018, the museum applied for preservation assistance from the Garden Conservancy to support the renovation of the museum’s gardens and campus. After review by our staff and approval from our board of directors, the two organizations have agreed to enter a five-year partnership beginning in 2020. “We are delighted with the opportunity to collaborate with this dynamic institution, a ‘museum of the people’ serving 400,000 individuals a year in one of the country’s most diverse communities,” says James.

A distinguished history
The Oakland Museum of California opened in 1969, merging three existing museums to “tell the extraordinary story of California.” It was hailed as a breakthrough in combining museum and landscape design. Kevin Roche worked with landscape architect Dan Kiley to create an urban community

continued on page 4
Oakland Museum to Renovate Landmark Modernist Landscape continued from page 1
downtown Oakland. Along the museum’s 10th Street side, to the south, better pedestrian access will also be made possible through alterations to provide direct entry into OMCA’s café and public event space and to improve the museum’s outdoor gathering spaces. The project will also add two new ADA-accessible ramps to the campus. These exterior changes, along with improved wayfinding, will also improve ease of access to the museum’s galleries.

Garden Conservancy Director of Preservation Pamela Governale comments, “Preservation of this significant brutalist landscape is essential. Doing it in a way that honors Dan Kiley’s vision and also embraces today’s and tomorrow’s challenges will provide important opportunities for people to connect with nature, art, and one another.”

A new, permanent stage will also be created to accommodate expanded outdoor performance, music, and film programs. Along with additional enhancements to the terraces and patios, central courtyard, and seating options throughout the campus, the renovations will provide a more welcoming and comfortable environment serving a wide range of recreational and community needs.

Our new partnership
The Garden Conservancy will provide financial support for the renovation of the gardens and will partner with OMCA on educational programming opportunities. The Conservancy will also help raise visibility for the renovation project.

Tiered terraces and plantings created a “hanging gardens of Babylon” effect in the original Dan Kiley design. Sculpture by major California artists is featured in the gardens.

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