A Users Guide to Preservation: One Contemporary Designer's Perspective on History

By Thomas L. Woltz

I propose that a possible definition of landscape design could be ***the process of shaping the human experience in nature through the creation of form and space infused with narrative intent.*** This simple definition captures the universal human instinct to influence and configure our environment and to tell stories. For me, the process of design begins with endeavoring to see land and nature with deep clarity and to ask the land its own history before attempting to write the next chapter. This is why, as a contemporary landscape architect, I firmly believe in the importance of garden and landscape preservation as an essential resource – knowing our past in order to responsibly design our future. I will assert from the start that there is no blank slate, no tabula rasa, no "empty land" in the Anthropocene Landscape. Every site is filled with underlying ecological processes and cultural history, often erased or occluded over time, and the most authentic contemporary design instincts are rooted in an understanding of the continuum of culture and ecology. Without assiduous garden preservation and conservation, we lose entire chapters of self-awareness and knowledge of the human condition in relationship to the complexity of nature.

To begin a design is to enter into a personal dialogue, a partnership with the natural and cultural processes that shape land. Having designed projects over twenty-five years on several continents, I am convinced of the importance of learning the unique geology, soils, climate, plant communities, and hydrology of every site. Mapping the geologic evolution of a landscape from prehistoric time to the present reveals the origin of landforms, sources of mineral deposits, and hydrodynamics, and helps one decipher the unique conditions that exist today. In sites around the world, understanding this deep "lineage" of land offers clues to the resulting cultural responses to these natural assets. The migratory patterns of wildlife, the settlement patterns of First Nations Peoples, insights into the motivations for Colonial Expansion, agriculture, the enslavement of humans, the rise of industrialization, and essential factors shaping the modern city all find themselves rooted to some aspect of the ecologies that have shaped the landscape over time. I think of this as a ***continuum of ecology and culture,*** where a pre-existing ecosystem attracts a human response which then alters that ecosystem. The altered ecosystem then exerts changes on the culture, which, in turn, reshapes the environment, and so on in perpetuity. A continuum of unstoppable flows.

History is one of the most valuable resources in the initiation of a design, but as one works to understand a site's true history, one must be mindful of the lenses of the narrators of the past. Who told what story and why, and from what vantage point? Quite often, we discover dark and

Above and on opposite page: Cockrill Spring, Centennial Park, Nashville, TN
Nelson Byrd Woltz: Breck Gastinger, Chloe Hawkins, Joey Hays, Chris Woods, Alissa Diamond, Sara Myhre, Paul Josey, Jen Trompetter
Project Partners: Hodgson Douglas, Civil Site Design Group, Sherwood Design Engineers, Princeton Hydro, BDY Environmental, Wilmot Inc.
Photos courtesy of Nelson Byrd Woltz

uncomfortable history in landscapes, the traces of which have been intentionally erased to serve a more convenient narrative by those who have the privilege to tell the story. Historic maps, deeds, tax records, and even insurance maps are helpful clues to the biography of a site that gain color and texture when augmented with oral histories and personal letters. Learning the many layers of human experience on the landscape evokes the richness of context and leads to authentic inspiration for designed interventions. The resources for this research are essential to understanding our cultures and offer a strong argument for the preservation and conservation of landscapes and their associated documentation. Archivists, librarians, gardeners, and historians are an essential coterie diligently tending the documentation of our existence. Initiation of design without this process of environmental and cultural research feels tantamount to trespassing, in my mind.

With the body of research in progress, my attention turns to the land itself. Whether the commission is for a botanic garden, arboretum, farm, preserve, park, or urban square, the next step is to experience the site itself. Sensing and documenting the flows of energy in a landscape along with absorbing the topographic features are essential steps in knowing the site. In many cases the formal structure of a landscape design, the parti, emerges from observing the existing landform and bringing those forms into a coherent design relationship. Outcrops, mounds, ridges, and plateaus inspire the geometry of both path and place in the landscape. Groves, woodlands, meadows, and discernible plant communities reveal soil and moisture conditions and inspire a horticultural design response in harmony with the ecological context. This development of essential form is an exercise rooted in the application of all senses: sight, smell, sound, touch, and even taste, as the minerals in soils tell us so much information. This approach of seeing form as emerging from a site stands in direct opposition to the frequent application of pattern or alien forms in a landscape that is ill-suited to accept them. In contrast, this approach builds on long-standing theories of the human response to certain archetypal landscapes that offer prospect and refuge, and earth forms including theater, mound, grove, and allée.

Often, we incorporate discovered artifacts of human occupation that offer intriguing elements of inspiration for designed form. Historic occupation can be read through persistent traces such as roadbeds, abandoned rail lines, foundations, ruins, stone walls, fence lines, trenches, and terracing. Plant communities also reveal clues to past land management practices: forests of a singular species age can indicate the date of the last cutting; intense, invasive plant pressure might reflect the abandonment of former grazing land; the presence of a particular species could point toward historical settlement patterns. These remnants can offer the ***opportunity to hold hands with history*** by engaging with the actual artifact or plant community of the site's past. We embrace the disruptions to an idealized form that artifacts and historic traces provide in contemporary design and see our work as just the most recent layer of the evolution of the site in a dialogue with both past and future.

At this point in the design process, we have become familiar with the land's particular history and ecologies, land forms have been identified, and unique artifacts have been discovered. Here the contemporary programming of the design project begins to find its place within a site. New uses and patterns are adapted to the site's narratives and conditions in ways that offer compelling tensions between

past and present, continuity and disruption, and adaptation and preservation, providing context and depth to new interventions. This is a design philosophy that becomes difficult to classify into common stylistic categories, trends, or fashions. A design philosophy free of stylistics and so tailored to a given landscape that the resultant forms cannot be replicated elsewhere… rather than imposing a vision disconnected from what the land itself reveals, we have the honor of adding the next chapter to the fascinating continuum of culture and ecology.

To illustrate the design process I have outlined, I would like to share elements of projects we have designed that rely on landscape history and preservation to inspire new landscapes and engage people in deep narratives of the contexts in which they operate.

COCKRILL SPRING, CENTENNIAL PARK, NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

When engaged by Metro Parks Department of Nashville to construct new program elements within the boundary of historic Centennial Park, we suggested a period of historic research that might expand the Park's stated "period of significance" of only six months, during the 1897 Centennial Exposition of Tennessee. We suggested that it was worth knowing what the site had been prior to the Exposition. What groups of Native Americans might have occupied the region and what was the footprint of Colonial Expansion? The research process led us on a fascinating journey into the ecological and cultural history of Nashville in general and Centennial Park specifically.

We learned that the park had originally belonged to Anne Cockrill, the first colonial woman west of the Appalachian Mountains to own free title and deed of land, and a pioneer with the Donaldson Party that founded Nashville along the Cumberland River in 1797. Through letters from the early nineteenth century, we learned that a spring on her farm, then known as Cockrill Spring, was renowned for its water quality and for its location at the terminus of the heavily trafficked Natchez Trace.

After three major outbreaks of cholera in the nineteenth century, Nashville enclosed many of its urban streams and creeks in brick galleries to prevent the spread of the waterborne disease. What if Cockrill Spring still surged below the Park? What if we could daylight this ancient water flowing for thousands of years and bring it back to the people of 21st-century Nashville in this public landscape setting? Through investigation into historic sanitation maps,

photographs, and oral accounts, we closed in on what might be the location of the spring, and began exploration of the piping and subterranean waterways beneath the park. With great excitement, the original limestone wellhead was hit about six feet below the surface and a surge of fresh cold water came to the light of day for the first time in a century.

The resulting landscape design was a simple terrace built of local limestone that holds a basin in which the original wellhead stone is submerged. The water flows up through the basin and into a limestone channel of water that meanders through a meadow of native Tennessee shrubs and perennials, evocative of the plants Anne Cockrill would have seen on this site in 1789. Today, thousands of annual visitors learn the story of this pioneer woman, her role in establishing the first frontier school, and the historic connection to the Natchez Trace. Children and adults splash in the cool fresh water of the ancient spring that has supplied drinking water to passing humans from the Woodland Era of Native Peoples to the modern citizens of Nashville.

The millions of gallons of water produced by the spring annually, previously piped to the sewage treatment plant, are now captured into cisterns and a lake. The abundant spring water is used to irrigate the contemporary park, dramatically reducing the park's consumption of potable City water. In the case of Cockrill Springs, we see proactive historic landscape research uncovering and preserving unique histories of a site, that in turn inspired authentic new amenities that contribute to improved long-term sustainability of the park and its water usage. The comingling of ecology and culture that had been erased was brought back to light through creativity and a research-based design process.

BOK TOWER GARDENS, LAKE WALES, FLORIDA

Tasked with doubling the size of the public landscape at the famous Bok Tower Gardens, we recognized the first step was to study the dialogue between the founder, Edward Bok, and his designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., to understand the original vision and how the expansion could best harmonize with that vision. The original design brief envisaged by Bok in 1921 was to create a bell tower at the highest point on the Lake Wales Ridge, nearly 300 feet above sea level, surrounded by meandering paths, a reflecting pool, and collections of native trees and shrubs designed to attract native wildlife. From the start, the garden was created as a public landscape, intended to immerse people in nature and inspire gratitude. Over many years of dialogue and evolution, that native plant mandate was occluded by exotic and tropical introductions that were not native to the region but that were now well established, spectacular, and beloved nearly a century later. We concurred with the garden directors that rather than didactically restoring the original concept, we would apply that vision to the many new gardens while making careful insertions in the existing gardens that would allow universal accessibility for the first time.

One important observation was that the original spatial sequence of the Olmsted project had been entirely lost, given the location of a visitor's center and parking lot within eyeshot of the tower. We learned that many visitors entirely missed the experience of hide-and-reveal of the tower, the topographic drama, and the sinuous paths curving along carefully calibrated geometries through groves of oaks, palms, azaleas, and camellias. The brief our firm received was to expand the gardens to regain more of the original concept of wildlife stewardship and native ecosystems, so we worked to use those gardens to seamlessly convey the visitor to the origin point of the Olmsted landscape. It was like writing the seamless prequel to a novel by another author and was an exciting exercise in harmonic thought and posthumous "collaborative design."

With our new gardens completed in 2016, the visitor arrives to a massive elliptical green, scaled to the greater landscape, and dotted with iconic longleaf pines. This central green serves as an intuitive guide to the distributed experience of newly built native landscapes radiating outward. The visitor winds through pollinator gardens, bog and pond gardens, oak hammocks, and a wiregrass palmetto meadow that is the rare habitat of gopher tortoises. To order these experiences, we used the spiral curve geometry for the

Above: Bok Tower Gardens, Lake Wales, FL Nelson Byrd Woltz team: Jen Trompetter, Nathan Foley, Sandra Nam Cioffi, and Sarah Myhre. Project partners: Coyle and Caron Landscape Architects, Mary Wolf Landscape Architect, Lake Flato Architects, Parlier Architects, Envisors Engineers, Henkelman Construction, and Bok Tower Gardens staff. **On opposite page: Naval Cemetery Landscape, Brooklyn, NY** Nelson Byrd Woltz team: Jeffrey Longhenry, John Ridenour, Maggie Hanson, and Simon David. Project Partners: Marvel Architects and Larry Weaner Landscape Associates

path design, a signature of the Olmsted firm. The large geometric forms of ellipse and axial relationships is augmented by meandering secondary paths, offering both a sense of orientation in a vast landscape and immersion in the distinct ecologies we were establishing from zero. The circulation seamlessly delivers the visitor to the sequential approach to the tower designed by Olmsted, Jr. To mark this important location, we relocated a large stone marker that served the purpose of a cornerstone for the garden upon opening in 1929.

There were other exciting gardens included in this design that further expanded the contemporary appeal to audiences of all ages. A vegetable garden, outdoor cooking and teaching facility, and a children's garden inspired by the habitats of animals native to the Lake Wales ecosystem. Children can develop an empathetic relationship to animals by crawling through a Gopher Tortoise tunnel, occupying a giant globe spider nest, and playing in sand surrounded by an installation referencing Indigo Snakes. In summary, the contemporary landscape interventions made in this historic garden work to increase relevance to issues of climate resilience, food security and biodiversity, while preserving the historic experience and artfully inserting universal accessibility into the nearly century-old gardens of Bok Tower.

NAVAL CEMETERY LANDSCAPE, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

The Naval Cemetery Landscape is an example of a site whose cultural history was entirely erased from the land and from memory, from which historical research was uncovered to create a meditative and immersive garden experience in New York City. The original Naval Yard Hospital was built in 1895 and by the very nature of hospitals, included a site for burial of the dead. Over the coming century, the cemetery accumulated an estimated two thousand bodies, many of which remained unidentified. In 1926, nearly one thousand bodies were exhumed and reinterred in Cypress Hills National Cemetery, and the Navy installed recreational ball fields on the site. The bodies, and the memory of them, were erased until the property was given to the Brooklyn Greenway Initiative, which hired our firm in 2010 to design a park for repose and contemplation along their eighteen-mile bike lane.

Through our research we learned that prior to being a hospital, the site was home to Wallabout Creek, a meandering coastal wetland and stream complex. Early maps show the sinuous nature of the water body making its way to the bay through land behind the hospital that was later filled to expand the cemetery. We also learned about the thriving agricultural communities here in the nineteenth century, managed by European immigrant communities and focused on the production of cherries and other stone fruits. Given these ecological and cultural histories of the site, and the likelihood of further remains on site, regrading or disturbing the soil at any significant depth was considered off limits.

So how do you memorialize the history of the site and create a thriving park for repose and meditation along the shadow of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway? The narrative for the park and the resulting design scheme drew from the diverse factors contained in the land to create a cohesive experience for the user, allowing them to see a layered past and a resilient future at once. The narrative is rooted in an embrace of the collective human condition of life and death, celebrated through the establishment of a rich meadow of pollinator-attracting plants drawing an abundance of life into the site. This meadow ecology is installed by scraping away existing invasive vegetation but not tilling or excavating the soil. To move people through the meadow while respecting the ground plane that once held human remains, we designed an elevated boardwalk that meanders, like Wallabout Creek once did, as a wooden river through a sea of native grasses and perennials reminding people of the fecundity of life and the cycle of death. A circular grove of cherry trees inspired meditation and recalls the historic orchards. A bench installed by Nature Sacred Foundation, a major funder of the project, holds an all-weather journal where people write their most private reflections on the mental and physical benefits of the space. The entries in this book are amongst the most moving and gratifying results of my professional career.

Each of these examples describes a contemporary landscape that resulted from a research-based process reliant on the discoveries history can offer us. ***Our human history is embedded in the soil beneath our feet*** and we must attune our instincts and attention to listen carefully. I hope that what I have shared here supports an impassioned argument for the preservation of landscapes and their histories, so that future generations may come to see the Earth that we tend as a continuum of flows, a thrilling dance of culture and ecology.

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