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Author

Lyndon, Donlyn

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The Configured Landscape

Donlyn Lyndon

What might one expect from an “inhabited” landscape? Something lived in? Dwelt upon? Nurtured? Might not one expect to find a place in process? A recognizable extension of one’s self, an extension of society, and a place of the intersection of both? More precisely, would one not expect to find in the inhabited landscape the presence of people? Not just viewers, but makers. Not just strollers, but doers. Not just takers, but givers. Not just the obvious, but also the subtle.

The inhabited landscape would also body forth some view of the world we live in—a world of natural processes, a world of conceptual orders, a world of care for resources both inanimate and animate. This would be a rich, various landscape; it would speak of clarity, of secrets, of dalliance, of purposefulness, of whispering sounds, of varying smells.

What, by contrast, would we *not* expect to find there? Curiously, we seem to ask that landscape not be disordered. Even though we expect clashes in our cities, strife in the marketplace and cacophony in our headsets, we still preserve in our minds the dream of landscape as a place of harmony. This is doubtless because natural processes, left to their own devices, represent a comparative stability: they move slowly, while we change precipitously. The natural order of the universe is at a time scale that makes Stonehenge seem but a passing phenomenon. The order of nature has seemed, and does seem, the enduring matrix in which

our various human acts and meditations take place, the ground in which our hoe sticks.

Of what are these inhabited landscapes made? Earth, trees, ground cover, building materials, paving, walls and roofs, of course. But these are arranged in ways that encompass the person: canopies that cover; paths, platforms and terraces that provide for easy movement; frames that select views, bound domains and filter the relations between inside and outside; markers that invest particular spots with significance. These are the elements of the architect’s art, whether practiced in landscape or in buildings. In landscape, the materials change and fluctuate seasonally if not daily, while the materials of buildings are meant to endure and the architect of buildings is meant to keep things warm and dry (or cool and breezy, as the case may be). In the inhabited landscape, the materials of building and of growing are used interchangeably and the intersection of professions is productive.

Commitment to a place and its potential is the first step. Imagining ways of dwelling there is the second. The rest is skillful work. The twelve examples shown in this exhibit are only suggestions of the rich interweaving of people and circumstance that can result from conceiving the land and the structures set into it as one inhabited entity.

It is worth examining how the fundamental configurational elements (canopies, paths and

platforms, frames and markers) recur in diverse materials. The specific character of a place or course depends on just which materials—hard or soft, natural or synthetic, geometric or organic, resilient or immutable, durable or ephemeral—form these elements of our surround.

Canopies are the quintessential image of shelter: the umbrella of a shade tree, the gabled roof of a house, the tent in a meadow.

Tree canopies, grouped and trimmed together, are a recurrent image in the tended landscape. They welcome our presence there. They may be pruned into figurative elements as at the Bloedel Preserve, or more noticeably measured out in a regular order as at Tiffany Plaza. Set in the islands of Fountain Place in Dallas, they act perhaps as surrogates in a fantasy of an idyllic dwelling among cooling waters.

Canopied roof structures are most poignant when they are open, when they are evidently available to us as places of refuge and outlook. It is not coincidental that centered pavilions appear so frequently in these examples. They are focusing points, places where you may gather in the world around and feel yourself at the nub of it. At Cold Spring Harbor, the little gazebo invites you to direct your attention away from the project itself by making you the center of a larger scene.

The great suggestive power of open pavilions resides in our tendency to imagine ourselves inside them. The

porch at the front of the Sheldon House invites us to take a commanding position at the edge of the meadow, while the shadow-dappled miradores of the Fuller House offer fragile respite from the New Mexico sun. The far outlook these latter offer stands in sharp contrast to the encompassing shelter suggested by the sequenced pyramid at the center of the composition.

Gazebos and pavilions come in many shapes and sizes, all of them ultimately referring back to the upright human figure. They may provide a variety of shifting vantage points as in the Reed Garden, or they may serve to mark gathering spots in a larger landscape, as they do in Coulon Beach Park.

The ground is the first condition of an inhabited landscape. How it is modified and shaped for use, how buildings are joined to it, how platforms, floor and terraces extend its usable surface; these are all critical determinants of the character of a place.

By shaping and surfacing the land itself or by making floors that create large, perfectly simple areas for use and stairs that lead from one level to another, the architect is building choreography. How we may move in a place is derived from how the irregular, unpredictable natural land is transformed into flat usable spaces for the foot. How the land is perceived, in turn results from the delicacy with which those transformations are made. The

architect, builder of foundations, of necessity plays surgeon to the land.

At Thorncrown Chapel, the built, flat surfaces are literally cut into the land and made of stone, itself a form of earth. At Bloedel Preserve, surfaces to walk on are intricately interwoven with the growing surfaces of the land, which are themselves sometimes made flat as a floor. At Coulon Beach Park, the carefully considered edges of the water and extended lawns and terraces are made playful by a multiplicity of levels that offer users differing kinds of involvement with the place. At Fountain Place, cascading platforms tumble water through the park and unexpectedly abrupt pavement edges sharpen the artificiality of the areas created.

Often the control of our footing is very subtle—the light step up to a wood porch from the clipped grass in front of the Sheldon House; the changing surfaces of the floor in the Reed Garden, from stone to wood chips to soft plant materials deliberately underfoot. Often, too, the play of paths across the land and up through structures to varying points of outlook is one of the principal pleasures of the place. At Cold Spring Harbor, the invitation to stand on a flat terrace raised off the slope of the land provides just enough place of repose to induce renewed interest in the harbor and its surroundings.

Markers abound in the inhabited landscape. Objects, isolated specimen trees, floral groups, towers: things to stand next to, things that

are distinct, things that have been invested with special imaginative care and which invite us to store meanings in their midst.

In the Reed Garden, various gazebos mark out and differentiate positions within the garden. By their differing silhouettes creating added distinction, they are further impressed upon our memory by details—a curious window, an oversized weather vane. Most poignantly, at one unforgettable point, a bronze figure nearly our size interrupts the path looking intently into our eyes.

Surprising size turns most anything into a marker. The great bollards at the ARCO complex that stand above our heads in a ring turn a serviceable dropoff turnaround into a stunning figure of entry, and a group of mature maples, isolated from any others and from subsidiary undergrowth, stand up as markers in a court between anonymous buildings. In contrast, the diminutive, stand-alone pavilion of Cold Spring Harbor is more a companion that invites us to use the terrace rather than to actually enter the building.

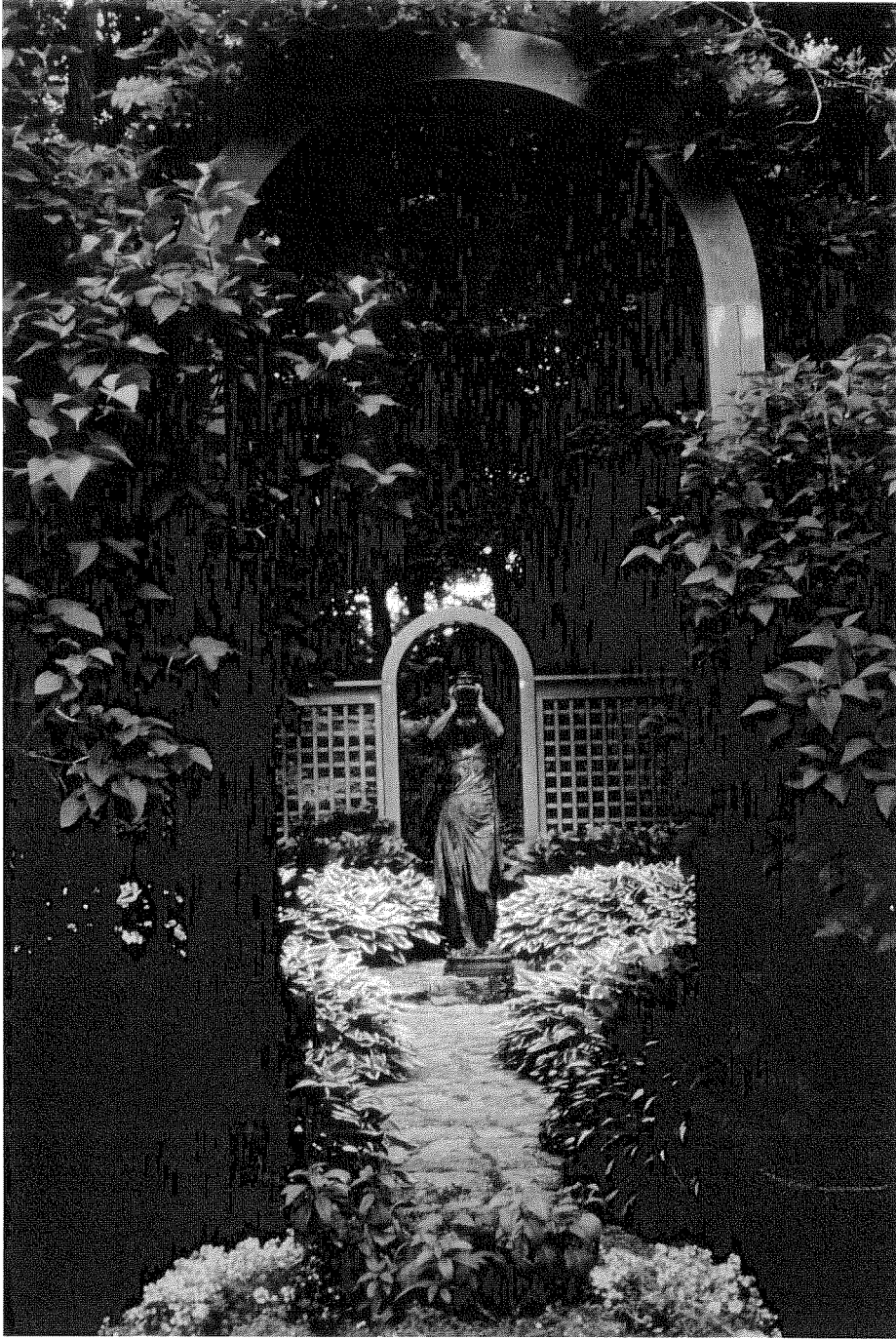
Configurations that stir us into unintended reverie also make a particular mark in the landscape. The lionheads and scrolls of the Tiffany Plaza fountains almost merge, from a distance, into still more mysterious, unexplainable masks; the dormers at the thin end of the Sheldon House tease us into seeing a mask in front of the trees (or, as Turner Brooks would have it, a locomotive surging into the meadow). At Bloedel Preserve, the

stark, startling rectangularity of a still pool set in grass embeds the place forever in our minds.

At Ceres Farm, the walled frame of an outdoor room, with its oversized door opening to the adjoining meadow, marks the transition between objects specially selected or configured for temporary display and the more constant, less willful landscape of the surrounding farm. Referral across the frame from a place of one sort to a place of another is intense and dramatic here, but it is in less insistent ways the very stuff of walled enclosures.

Such framed transitions are evident in each of the examples—as rows of trees framing paths, or bordering meadows; as great building enclosures sheltering a special view of the world; as fragile, intricate transitions such as those of the Thorncrown Chapel that is, for all its merger with the forest, a place meant to be apart, an appointed place of meditation.

The inhabited landscape is, by definition, a landscape turned to human purpose.



Reed Garden
Eisenman Robertson Architects