

## *Landscape Architecture at Harvard*

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*Remarks at the Centennial Celebration  
of the Department of Landscape Architecture  
Graduate School of Design, April 8, 2000*

HARVARD WAS the first university to offer a four-year course leading to a degree in landscape architecture. That began during the forty-year reign of our greatest president – Charles William Eliot, who held sway over the University from 1869 until 1909.

It was under Eliot that so much of the configuration of Harvard – as landscape, architecture, and incipient urban design – began to take shape: partly planned, partly through sheer accident, and partly by way of recognizing opportunities as they presented themselves.

I mention this partly because it was Eliot's own interests, as well as those of his son and grandson, that helped to spur the growth of all the studies in art, architecture, landscape design, and planning which ultimately resulted in Harvard's School of Design.

In addition, however, Eliot also had a quite clear sense that this particular university would not take the form of a unified, coherent campus – an academic parkland – but would inevitably be

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compelled to interdigitate with the city growing up around it. He also decided not to adopt a single architectural norm, but moved from Georgian to muted Victorian as he filled out the Yard; then to high-pitched Victorian Gothic at Memorial Hall; then to the idiom of H. H. Richardson at Sever and Austin Halls; and then to sophisticated versions of neo-Georgian buildings designed by McKim, Mead, and White.

Harvard would be various and peculiarly textured, with quadrangles and the Yard to serve as refuges, but elsewhere with sharp juxtapositions and abrupt adjacencies, with street crossings and a mid-center square, and with all the stylistic discordances that we know and love so well. Where else could one stand, rotate, and take in (from a single point) the atonalities, not quite orchestrated, of Sert's Science Center, Memorial Hall, Busch Hall, Yamasaki's William James Hall, the Swedenborg Chapel, Gund Hall, the Sackler Museum and – looking up Quincy Street – the Fogg, Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center, Robinson Hall, and heaven knows what else?

It is interesting that if you compare the prose written about Princeton's campus and that about Harvard's, you see immediately in the syntax, and the length of sentences, not to mention the diction, how Princeton beckons writers to create sinuous, curvilinear, lengthening lines that always seem to yearn for long vistas and romantic crescendos before they come to a close. By contrast, Harvard's passages very occasionally begin to open out in a similar way, only to come very soon to quite sudden, mundane endings, because there simply are no sweeping vistas to sustain very much deep purple prose.

Does Princeton succeed visually, in space and time, as one satisfying version of landscape architecture? Does Harvard succeed, on its own terms, as one (or more) versions, or do we have to move to a much more abstract level of conceptual understanding before we can begin to make sense of it? If movement, crowds, energy, streets, stores, automobiles, visual variety – with some sense of

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order in the movement from one kind of precinct to another – if all of that matters, then the landscaped architectures and urban non-design of Harvard does seem to be very appealing to students and even adults. It apparently makes up in vitality what it lacks in a certain kind of stylistic unity or apparent coherence. Or else it represents a different sort of coherence, where we can consider and evaluate the built and natural environment only in relation to the particular styles of life of a particular set of converging communities in a complex series of collegiate, commercial, residential, and other spaces.

I raise all these questions and issues partly for selfish reasons. As Harvard now tries to create a few remaining important structures or architectural landscape environments on this side of the river, it has been a major challenge to decide what might constitute successful designs for them. One project is a possible museum of modern art on the river, downstream from here; the other is an international studies center, just around the corner, consisting of two buildings – one on each side of the street.

Neither of these projects is so idiosyncratic as to require unfettered genius for a solution. But each raises quite central questions about the interrelationships between urban design, architecture, landscape, and streetscape, environmental concerns, and the kinds of human communities (including the program of activities) that we hope to foster in each place.

Thankfully, members of this School's faculty are helping us, so I have absolutely no doubt about the ultimate outcome, assuming that we will receive permits allowing us to build anything at all. But I have been led by this entire process to believe not only that the field of landscape architecture is very much alive and well at Harvard, but also that it is faced with exceptionally complex problems at the present time, problems that force us to think about the nature of the field itself – its edges, its center, its fundamentals, and its extensions.

Fortunately, the duties of Harvard's President do not require

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him to define the nature of academic fields, quite apart from their possible applications in practice. It is more than enough for me to try to assess results in terms of talent and quality of performance. With respect to those criteria, I want to take this opportunity to say that I – and the University – take enormous pride in the distinguished present, and the equally distinguished past, of landscape architecture at Harvard.

It is no exaggeration to say that Harvard's faculty (and graduates) invented and reinvented the field; that thanks in large part to you, there is now a far deeper understanding of the many disciplines that the field comprises; that whether we are talking about plants, about grasses, about gardens, or different forms of natural landscape, or architecture, design, urban planning, regional planning, environmental planning, and any number of other considerations, this department and School have the capacity to analyze, to imagine, to create, to preserve, to restore, and to intervene at a level of excellence that no analogous department or School has realized.