

# LANDSCAPE PRESERVATION

Whether or not we are directly aware of their influence, landscapes have a profound effect on human life. The aesthetic, economic, and security values of our physical surroundings play essential roles in decisions about where and how we live. Some societies and individuals regard certain landforms as sacred. As a result, societies have both altered their physical surroundings and been altered and affected by them. The result of such interaction is a landscape.

Whether they are highly structured parks and formal gardens, or less structured farms, urban landscapes, or "roadscape", historic landscapes reflect U.S. cultural heritage. Yet, as one historian has noted:

Historians have been tardy in recognizing that the environment, natural and man-made, is an amazing historical document. In our teaching, we have not adequately explored the ways in which, rightly seen, a landscape reveals as much of a society's culture as does a novel, a newspaper, or a Fourth of July orations

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In a way, landscapes are the context of life, for the form of our landscapes embodies our material culture and our ideals.<sup>6</sup> For example, although visitors to historic buildings, such as Virginia's Gunston Hall, the home of George Mason, tend to focus on the building and its interior appointments, the appearance of the surroundings, including various outbuildings, fences, and other structures, as well as plantings, contributes significantly to their understanding of the building's historical context.

Compared to the efforts to preserve historic structures, only relatively recently has the international preservation community focused its efforts on preserving and protecting historic landscapes.<sup>7</sup> As one report expressed it:

**It seems . . . that an old landscape must still, somehow, be useful: it must be a teacher, a guide, a place for recreation, or a place of contact with the past. Establishing such usefulness requires a great effort, a lot of subjective suggestion, considerable ingenuity—and will have to be backed by more researches**

However, in the United States, the term "landscape" does not even appear in the formal listing of categories of sites that are eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places (National Register). Most National Register landscapes are there as a result of their association with other categories such as a building, district, or site. In other cases, a building may be included but the surrounding landscape, which may even have greater historic significance, might not be recognized or described. Very few landscapes have been nominated as a consequence of hav-

ing significance as historic Landscapes. Only in 1986 did the National Park Service (NPS) develop and publish a set of guidelines for nominating historic designed landscapes to the National Register.<sup>11</sup> Other categories of landscapes have not been fully examined by NPS.

In some respects, the management and preservation of landscapes is more complicated than historic structures because landscapes encompass a greater variety of elements, and include plants and structures as well as landforms. But more important, natural elements of landscapes are particularly susceptible to alteration and deterioration. Unlike historic structures, plants and trees grow too large or spread to other areas. In time, water may erode the soil and improper pruning and care may enhance potential damage from disease and pests. Because they are "so rooted in process," landscapes are highly vulnerable.<sup>12</sup> New agricultural practices, for example, can dramatically alter the look of the rural landscape.<sup>13</sup> Changing agricultural economics, such as the move from the predominance of family farms to agribusiness, alter both traditional patterns of the land and the ways of life that produced the patterns. Contemporary landscapes, while different, exhibit their own appeal.

The discovery and identification of U.S. historic landscapes is still in its infancy. In part as a result of a general lack of awareness of the value and vulnerability of landscapes, the constituency for locating and preserving significant historic landscapes has not yet developed fully, though it is growing. Table 1 lists some of the organizations that are especially active in landscape preservation.

<sup>6</sup>Marilyn Nickels, National Park Service, personal communication, 1987; see also D.W. Meinig, *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (Oxford England: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>7</sup>See the discussion in W.H. Tishler, "The Landscape: An Emerging Historic Preservation Resource," *The Association for Preservation Technology Bulletin* 11, No. 4, 1979, pp. 9-26. See also UNESCO, "Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding of the Beauty and Character of Landscapes and Sites," adopted by the General Conference at its Twelfth Session, Paris, Dec. 11, 1962, for a relatively early attempt to define landscape preservation values.

<sup>8</sup>State of New Mexico, "First Annual Report, Registry of Historic Landscapes," Historic Preservation Bureau, 1982, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup>"How To Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation" (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, June 1984).

<sup>10</sup>Lisa A. Kunst and Patricia M. O'Donnell, "Historic Landscape Preservation Deserves a Broader Meaning," *Landscape Architecture*, January 1981, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup>See J. Timothy Keller and Genevieve P. Keller, "How To Evaluate and Nominate Designed Historic Landscapes," *National Register of Historic Places Bulletin* 18, for a discussion of types of designed landscapes.

<sup>12</sup>Catherine M. Hewett, "Landscape Research: Keeping Faith With Today and Tomorrow," *The Yearbook of Landscape Architecture: Historic Preservation* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1983), p. 3.

<sup>13</sup>Orlando Ridout, V, "Agricultural Change and the Architectural Landscape," *3 Centuries of Maryland Architecture* (Annapolis, MD: Maryland Historical Trust and the Society for the Preservation of Maryland Antiquities, 1982), pp. 3-7.

**Table I.—Organizations Active In Landscape History and Preservation**

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Alliance for Historic Landscape Preservation  
 American Association for State and Local History (AASLH)  
 American Folklife Center  
 American Folklore Society  
 American Rock Art Research Association  
 American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA)  
 American Studies Association  
 Association of Living History Farms and Historic Museums  
 Association for Preservation Technology (APT)  
 National Association for Olmsted Parks  
 National Council on Public History  
 National Park Service  
 Organization of American Historians  
 National Trust for Historic Preservation  
 Society for Architectural Historians, Chapter for Landscape Architecture and the Allied Arts  
 Trustees of Reservations (Massachusetts private conservancy)

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SOURCE: Office of Technology Assessment, 1997.

The legislative activity surrounding the efforts in the 99th Congress to pass the Olmsted Preservation Act, which sought to “encourage the identification, preservation, and commemoration of historic designed landscapes,” reflects increased interest in landscape preservation in the

Congress. In part such interest has been sparked by the limited survey of Olmsted landscapes by the National Association of Olmsted parks, and by State landscape inventories. For example, the State of Massachusetts has begun an inventory of its Olmsted parks and other designed landscapes.<sup>14</sup> The States of Ohio<sup>15</sup> and New Mexico<sup>16</sup> have also initiated inventories of their historic landscapes. Finally, within its Park Historic Architecture Division, NPS has instituted a limited effort to coordinate NPS efforts in landscape preservation and to initiate several landscape preservation projects.

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<sup>14</sup>Eleanor M. Peck, Keith Morgan, and Cynthia Zaitzevsky (eds.), *Olmsted in Massachusetts: The Public Legacy* (Brookline, MA: Massachusetts Association for Olmsted Parks, 1983); Charles E. Beveridge, Carolyn F. Hoffman, Shary Page Berg, and Arleyn A. Levee, “The Master List of Design Projects of the Olmsted Firm in Massachusetts, 1866-1950,” Massachusetts Association for Olmsted Parks, Boston, MA, 1986.

<sup>15</sup>Ohio Historic Landscapes Survey, manuscript and survey form distributed by the Ohio Historical Society, Columbus, OH, n.d.

<sup>16</sup>Baker H. Morrow, “Old Landscapes, New Ideas: New Mexico’s Historic Landscape Architecture,” *New Mexico Architecture*, September-October 1985, pp. 11-17.