

TREND

LINE

RECLAIMING A LOST LEGACY

The Challenge of Preserving the Postwar Era's Invisible Gardens

by Charles
Birnbaum

In the summer 2003 issue of *Common Ground*, preservationist Richard Longstreth argued that we would not question a modernist landmark's significance were it constructed 175 years ago. Time bestows import, he wrote, and the buildings of the modern movement do not have time to wait.

This is even more true for the era's designed landscapes. What comes to mind when preservationists talk about the great works? Usually pastoral places such as Central Park and the Golden Gate, or emblematic estates such as Biltmore or the Breakers. If a landscape is not picturesque, if it lacks the traditional scenic qualities championed by a Frederick Law Olmsted, it usually lacks a constituency.

A poll commissioned by Russian immigrant artists Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid sought to discern how Americans perceive art and beauty. Respondees preferred soothing, realistic scenes with soft curves and blended colors. Postwar modernist landscapes, by contrast, are often characterized by crisp lines, hard materials, abrupt juxtapositions, and lack of symmetry. One begins to see why these works are so often overhauled or demolished.

Postwar America was a new world. With the automobile ascendant and cities exploding exponentially, the future looked like an endless horizon of Levittowns and interstates. In stepped a small group of landscape architects whose bold new ideas were a counterweight to the sprawl.

A hint of change emerged in the 1930s, with Thomas Church. He designed some 2,000 projects, from tiny urban yards to the estates of wealthy Californians. His hallmark was the creativity he brought to the constraints of the suburban lot. Boundaries either disappeared with a clever arrangement of vegetation, or were celebrated with the use of cement asbestos board, aluminum panels, and fiberglass partitions. His 1948 masterwork, the Donnell Garden in Sonoma, became the international icon of the California garden.

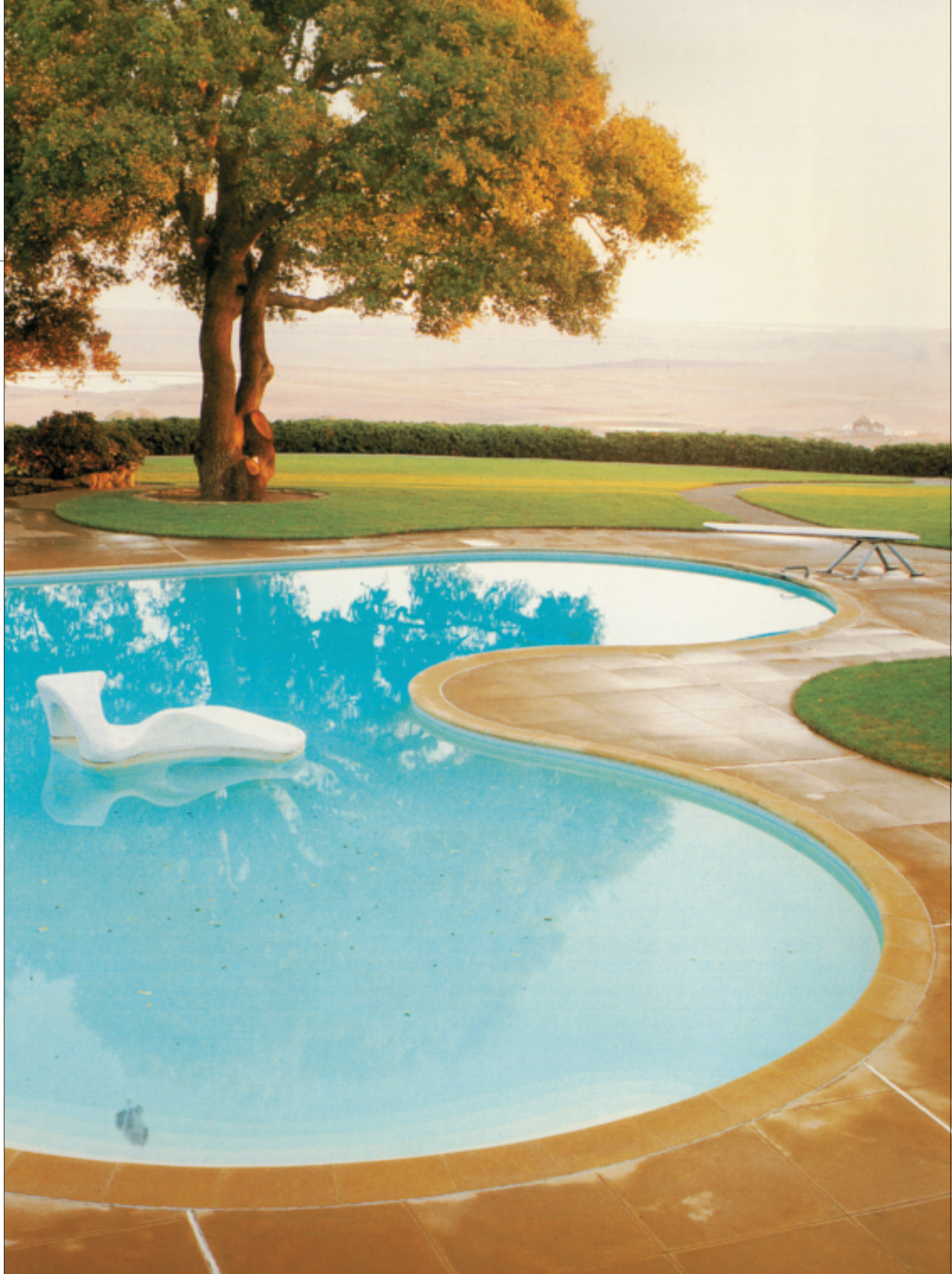
Garrett Eckbo, along with Harvard classmates Dan Kiley and James Rose, chafed against tradition, tapping into the social idealism of the Bauhaus. Eckbo derived inspiration from the latest architectural journals and contemporary fine arts. He saw the possibilities of the garden as an antidote to the built environment's stolid, linear forms. Circles, triangles, and irregular polygons recall the abstractions of Kandinsky and Miro. His pergolas and fountains dazzle with their glistening mesh aluminum. Some of his best-known works are the plaza in Old Monterey, Berkeley's waterfront, and the country's first pedestrian mall in Fresno.

Kiley numbers among his works the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado and New York City's Lincoln Center. Known for his seamless transitions of interior space to the outdoors, he maintained that there was no difference between designing buildings and landscapes. His work is a "series of roofless rooms defined by vegetation," writes Peter Walker in *Invisible Gardens*. Though he joined Eckbo and Rose in their disdain for the Beaux Arts, he was transformed by a trip to work on the site of the Nuremberg war crimes tri-

[THESE] LANDSCAPES ARE OFTEN CHARACTERIZED BY CRISP LINES, HARD MATERIALS, ABRUPT JUXTAPOSITIONS, AND LACK OF SYMMETRY—A SHARP DEPARTURE FROM THE CONVENTIONAL CONCEPT OF BEAUTY IN LANDSCAPE DESIGN.



Above: Oakland's Kaiser Center by Ted Osmundsen and David Abergast. Right: The Donnell Garden.



LEFT: TED OSMUNDSEN; RIGHT: FELICE FRANKEL

bunal, where he saw Europe’s formal gardens first-hand. His style evolved into a signature fusion of modern and classical. In 1997, Kiley was awarded the National Medal of Arts. His masterpiece, the Miller Garden, a residential garden in Columbus, Indiana, has been designated a national historic landmark.

Expelled from Harvard for refusing to follow Beaux Arts dogma, Rose was perhaps the most iconoclastic of the trio. Rose often incorporated the existing site into his designs, its rocks and trees. He regarded his work as outdoor sculpture. “Earth is a plastic medium,” he said, “which holds an infinity of sculptural combinations.” He believed that a design should arise from the site itself, from its inherent light and native forms. He called it his “organic style.”

Lawrence Halprin also gravitated to California, transforming the region’s hillsides and urban back-

yards. By the ‘50s, his work expanded to encompass urban revitalization. At San Francisco’s Ghirardelli Square, one of the first indoor malls, the site transcends its function as a retail space, with plants and fountains making a place for people to congregate. At his Freeway Park in Seattle, an ensemble of waterfalls, crevices, and plantings creates beauty and intrigue from the unlikely subject of a highway pedestrian crossing.

Robert Royston grew up on a ranch, building imaginary mountains, towns, and cities. His biomorphic playground sculptures—slides, chutes, and sandboxes—are modern art for children and adults.

In the end, the optimism of this group—and of their many compatriots and disciples in the field—was no match for the voracious appetite for land. By the 1970s, the promise faded.

IN THE END, THE OPTIMISM OF THIS GROUP—AND OF THEIR MANY COMPATRIOTS AND DISCIPLES IN THE FIELD—WAS NO MATCH FOR THE VORACIOUS APPETITE FOR LAND. BY THE 1970S, THE PROMISE FADED.

With time, we are starting to see their accomplishments anew. “Space was rediscovered as the great unifying medium,” says Walker. “People, no longer merely spectators, became actors in the modern landscape.” Postwar designs sculpted space and in so doing, shaped how it was experienced. With the striking contrasts, the subtle wedding of the natural and the manmade, the blurring of boundaries between indoors and out, these works offered a visual palette both serene and stark.

Yet, the poll implies that these works are hard to appreciate. Take Lyndhurst, a National Trust property in Tarrytown, New York, laid out in the mid-19th century by landscape gardener Ferdinand Mangold. It is a pastoral idyll, what the public seems to want. Then consider Boston’s Copley Square, where, in the 1960s, Sasaki, Dawson, and DeMay Associates traded the comfortable for a modernist masterpiece. To some, it may seem monochromatic, unfamiliar, and even unnerving.

The same could be said for Lawrence Halprin’s design for San Francisco’s Embarcadero Center, or Dan Kiley’s design for the Burr sculpture court in Hartford, Connecticut. Viewed in this light, it’s no surprise that the shelf life for any of these projects has been less than 20 years. They are often controversial, leading to deferred maintenance and ultimately demise.

There is more than an incremental downward spiral. In some projects little attempt is made to understand the work within its broad historical context. Site furnishings, materials, and features were site-specific, one-of-a-kind, designed by the landscape architect. Today, AstroTurf replaces grass and sycamores are dug up because their exfoliating bark is messy. The furnishings palette is homogenized with off-the-shelf items from a catalog.

As this legacy fades, the modern landscape is more and more out of sight and out of mind, the accomplishment obscure even to art historians. The National Register of Historic Places includes over a thousand buildings less than 50 years old, but landscapes from the postwar years are practically absent. While many of the designs have survived and are on the verge of reaching the 50-year mark, a National Register criterion, they still remain unstudied, their fate uncertain.

Many are the archetypes of the postwar landscape, including the first pedestrian mall (Fulton Mall) and the first vest pocket park (Paley Park). The first “recycling” of building and landscape, Ghirardelli Square in 1965, actually predates the National Historic Preservation Act by a year. Pittsburgh’s Mellon Square, the oldest surviving park over a parking structure, is also among them.



Left top: McCormick Pool by Garrett Eckbo. Left below: Piedmont Park Playground by Isamu Noguchi. Right: Eckbo’s ALCOA Garden, with aluminum screens and trellis.

LEFT ABOVE: GARRETT ECKBO; LEFT BELOW: ISAMU NOGUCHI; RIGHT: JULIUS SHULMAN





Across the nation, residential projects, roof gardens, streetscapes, squares, and plazas—the work of some of the best landscape architects of their day—are at risk of major alteration or destruction.

The past few years have seen many designs destroyed with little debate. Among them are M. Paul Friedberg's innovative play spaces for the Riis Houses in New York and Thomas Church's harmonious marriage between the formal Stanford Hospital and its courtyard, which turned traditional garden forms and features on their head. Boston's Christopher Columbus Waterfront Park, by Sasaki, Dawson, and DeMay, has gone down too. Today we take waterfront revitalization for granted; few seem to care about losing the project that pioneered the idea.

What can be done? Landmark status, and listing in the National Register, should be aggressively pursued. There have been some positive developments, namely the recognition of Kiley's Miller Garden, and a recent surge of publications. *New York Times* columnist Anne Raver recently noted that "these invisible landscapes are being taken up by a growing number of landscape architects around the country, who are organizing to protect their work, both as works of art



and as vessels of cultural history." If this signals growing interest, the future may be brighter.

Thanks to recent coverage in both professional journals and the popular press, a diverse constituency may be emerging that includes landscape architects, students, developers, and grassroots advocates. Hopefully the attention is timely. In the long run, preservation must embrace a spectrum of professionals, academics, planners, historians, and the public.

THE SECOND WAVE

Inspired by their predecessors, a new breed of landscape architects continued the modernist experiment begun by masters like Church, Eckbo, and Kiley.

Robert Zion Zion worked with I.M. Pei before starting his own firm in 1957. He designed Manhattan's Paley Park, the first "vest pocket" park, which led to a proliferation of similarly intimate spaces around the city. Later projects included the 2,000-acre Phillip Morris manufacturing plant, Cincinnati Riverfront Park, IBM world headquarters, and the landscape for Liberty Island.

Hideo Sasaki Sasaki produced such signature designs as Boston's Copley Square and Christopher Columbus Waterfront Park. He also crafted pioneering corporate campuses for Upjohn in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and John Deere in Moline, Illinois. John F. Kennedy appointed him to the U.S. Fine Arts Commission in 1961.

M. Paul Friedberg Friedberg emerged on the scene in 1965 with his redesign of the site for New York's Jacob Riis Houses. The project was a first: a playground for adults and children. He worked on projects as varied as Harlem River Park in New York and corporate headquarters for AC Nielsen in Chicago.



A STRATEGY FOR PRESERVATION

Nominate Sites for National Recognition Nominate properties for designation as national historic landmarks and listings in the National Register of Historic Places. Dan Kiley's Miller Garden, designed for a private client in Columbus, Indiana, was designated a national historic landmark in 2000—a first, giant step for recognition of modern landscapes. In March 2000, Thomas Church's General Motors Technical Center in Michigan was added to the National Register.

Express the Historical Context There has been a surge of interest in recent years. More is needed to keep the modern landscape from once again slipping out of view. Books, monographs, and oral histories are needed to capture the evolution of this art form and its cultural impact.

Create Partnerships Preserving and managing these works is a difficult job. There are excellent examples of what is possible. The Halprin Landscapes Conservancy was created in Portland to preserve Lawrence Halprin's downtown parks. An Atlanta partnership has restored the Noguchi Playground in that city.

Document Threatened Work The Historic American Landscapes Survey of the National Park Service provides permanent documentation for landscapes threatened by alteration or demolition. Halprin's designs for Denver's Skyline Park and the sculpture court at the Virginia Museum of Fine Art in Richmond were recorded before they were altered.

Consult with the Original Designer There is no better way to preserve an original design than to go to the source. Clients and caretakers of the original are excellent resources as well. This was done recently at British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology and the Museum of Modern Art Sculpture Garden in New York.

Catalog Drawings and Other Materials in Accessible Archives It used to be difficult to find a home for these materials but the situation is changing thanks to a handful of universities. The University of California at Berkeley, the University of Pennsylvania, and Harvard University are developing archives, which are essential to rehabilitating sites and inspiring scholarship.

Apply the Secretary of the Interior's Standards The standards require scholarship. The National Park Service recently produced reports on a pair of Dan Kiley landscapes—the mall at Independence National Historical Park in Philadelphia and the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial in St. Louis. Such research records the works in detail and informs management decisions.



Clockwise from lower left: Fountain in Denver's Skyline Park by Lawrence Halprin; Dan Kiley's Lincoln Center design "before"; Kiley's masterpiece, the Miller Garden; Lincoln Center "after," trees removed.

What we learn from these landscapes could inform our future. Consider the competition for the World Trade Center memorial, where the entries are, like their modern predecessors, minimalist. We know now that preserving the original intent of such designs will require special care.

The future of this legacy is in the hands of us all. The time to act is now, before it is too late.

Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, is the Coordinator of the National Park Service's Historic Landscape Initiative in Washington, DC. He is the 2004 recipient of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation Rome Prize Fellowship in Historic Preservation and Conservation. For more information, e-mail him at charles_birnbaum@nps.gov.