2013

Negotiating Postwar Landscape Architecture: The Practice of Sidney Nichols Shurcliff

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NEGOTIATING POSTWAR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE:
THE PRACTICE OF SIDNEY NICHOLS SHURCLIFF

A Thesis Presented

by

JEFFREY SCOTT FULFORD

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

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Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning
NEGOTIATING POSTWAR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE:
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis represents both an end and a beginning. While it is the culmination of a three-year graduate program, it is also the beginning of a second career of which I only dreamed a few years ago.

I am grateful to many people for the recollections and insights that were instrumental in this project. In particular, visits and conversations with Sidney N. Shurcliff’s nephews, Arthur Shurcliff, Il and Charles Shurcliff, provided deeper understanding and lasting impressions of a remarkable family. Conversations with Thomas Paine, whose first employment after graduate school was with Shurcliff, Merrill and Footit, created a portrait of Shurcliff’s professional and personal life as well as a foundation for defining his legacy. Marlene Salon recalled Shurcliff’s work in professional organizations and his kindness as a mentor early in her career. I remain struck by the affection Shurcliff’s family and colleagues hold for him.

This undertaking was also facilitated by the suggestions and assistance of various professionals whose work I admire. Historian Melanie Simo’s concept of Shurcliff as a transitional figure helped define my research and its purpose. Landscape historian Elizabeth Hope Cushing’s suggestions for information sources were valuable in my search. Patricia McGirr, Ethan Carr, and Timothy Rohan deserve many thanks for their suggestions and encouragement over the past year. I am also grateful for the knowledge and experience I gathered through their classes, seminars, and studios.
In the course of this project, I gained tremendous respect for archivists, the guardians of professional memory. At the Frances Loeb Library of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, I had the good fortune of working with Mary Daniels just before her retirement and with her successor, Ines Zalduendo. Zephorene Stickney and Megan Wheaton-Book at the Marion B. Gebbie Archives and Special Collections at Wheaton College in Norton, MA are due thanks for their professionalism, organization, and graciousness. At Chatham University, Rachel Grove Rohrbaugh, Archivist of the Jennie King Mellon Library, and Mary Whitney, University Sustainability Coordinator, generously shared both their time and their infectious enthusiasm for history. Judy Farrar of the Archives and Special Collections at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth provided documents and images from the school’s collection. During a visit to the Nichols House Museum early in the project, Flavia Cigliano, Executive Director, kindly provided contacts and publications that were valuable in beginning to understand Shurcliff’s life.

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ABSTRACT

NEGOTIATING POSTWAR LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE: THE PRACTICE OF SIDNEY NICHOLS SHURCLIFF

MAY 2013

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While documentation of the work of a select group of modernist landscape architects of the mid-twentieth century is available, little is known about the professional contributions of transitional landscape architects active in the period following World War II. Using selected projects framed by existing literature covering contemporary social, economic, political, and artistic influences, this study examines the career of one such transitional figure, Sidney Nichols Shurcliff (1906-1981). Project descriptions and analysis measure the scope of Shurcliff’s work and the degree to which he contributed to the discipline and its transition to modernism, thereby augmenting the history of landscape architecture practice.
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CHAPTER 1

FROM IPSWICH TO MODERNISM

In the preface to his memoir, Sidney N. Shurcliff wrote:

For me, being a landscape architect has constituted a long, frequently exciting, and sometimes hilarious adventure. There have also been blows, defeats, and an occasional tear. By and large my clients and teammates have treated me better than I deserved. ... Many others have written authoritatively about landscape and garden design. My purpose is quite different, for I hope to convey the flavor of my intimate relationships with people rather than places, and with emotions rather than methods.¹

Looking back on his work and his life, Shurcliff inadvertently suggested some perplexing life questions: What is the difference between work and vocation? For what should we hope to be remembered? Can our descendants learn only from our successes or do our failures hold equally valuable lessons for the future? Looking specifically through the lens of landscape architecture, Shurcliff’s comments raise additional questions: Should we remember only the iconoclasts, the perfectionists, the celebrated? Or do the transitional figures, the producers of the quotidian, the unknown deserve our esteem as well? Compiling and analyzing selected works by Shurcliff, this study will attempt to answer these questions with regard to Shurcliff in particular and, by extension, other designers whose lives and work steadfastly
remained in transitional periods--the cracks between defined moments in history.

To grasp a life's work, it becomes necessary to first give an account of the life itself. In Shurcliff’s case, life was filled with extraordinary advantages and connections as well as rather mundane struggles.

![Figure 1: Ipswich (c. 1912)](image)

**Biography**

Sidney Nichols Shurtleff was born in 1906, the first of six children of Arthur Asahel and Margret Homer (Nichols) Shurtleff. At his father's behest, the family name was changed to Shurcliff in 1930. While growing up in Boston and coastal Ipswich, Massachusetts, Sidney Shurcliff developed keen lifelong interests in photography and automobiles and was exposed to his father's expanding practice in the emerging field of landscape architecture. After completing his undergraduate degree at Harvard in 1927, Shurcliff began graduate study in landscape architecture
at the university. He left Harvard in 1928 for a year-long anthropological expedition by sailing ship to the South Pacific for the Field Museum of Chicago sponsored by Cornelius Crane, a friend from Ipswich. Shurcliff’s accounts and photographs of the voyage were published as *Jungle Islands, the Illyria in the South Seas* in 1930. On his return to the United States, Shurcliff resumed graduate studies at Harvard until 1930 when he began work in his father's firm.³

![Shurcliff on Crane Expedition (1928)](image)

**Figure 2: Shurcliff on Crane Expedition (1928)**

After the stock market crash of 1929, the Shurcliff firm was sustained by work for the Boston Parks Department, the Metropolitan District Commission and on development of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia.⁴ The younger Shurcliff worked as his father's apprentice, draftsman and office assistant on these projects. For Williamsburg, he produced photographic records and measured drawings of extant colonial-era gardens in Virginia and England.⁵ His father made him junior partner in
the firm in 1934. Throughout the 1930s, Shurcliff produced documentary films on the South Seas, Williamsburg and the recently popular sport of skiing; he traveled around the country showing the films and lecturing to community and civic groups, earning additional income. He married Katharine Noyes Balch in 1935 and five years later, the couple became foster parents to two brothers sent to safety from wartime London. From 1942 to 1945, Shurcliff served in the United States Navy and was stationed in Hawaii where his understanding of landscape and architectural planning and his knowledge of Pacific islands proved useful in the analysis of aerial reconnaissance photographs.

![Shurcliff in Hawaii (c. 1944)](image)

**Figure 3: Shurcliff in Hawaii (c. 1944)**

After the war, Shurcliff returned to work with his father. In addition to work for public entities in Boston, the firm’s projects included town planning and residential, campus, and commercial design. Just after the war, the Shurcliff firm
became involved in the nascent field of regional shopping center design. Vincent Merrill became a partner in the firm in 1954. Shurcliff, Shurcliff and Merrill continued work with many long-term clients of Arthur Shurcliff including Mount Auburn Cemetery and Mount Holyoke College.

Campus work eventually became a focus of the firm’s practice. Even prior to Arthur Shurcliff’s death in 1957, Sidney Shurcliff led the firm’s work at Mount Holyoke. The college, originally planned by the Olmsted office, engaged Arthur Shurcliff, a former Olmsted apprentice, as its principal landscape architect in 1922. Sidney Shurcliff’s lineage and interpersonal acumen maintained his firm’s connection with the college through succeeding administrations until the early 1970s. In 1956, the firm was hired to design a major expansion at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. As seen in the firm’s 1957 master plan for the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, the insertion of new facilities and accommodation of automobiles on campuses became an objective of the newly defined discipline of campus planning. Shurcliff and Merrill’s work at the University of New Hampshire led to more than a decade of campus planning projects at Chatham College in Pittsburgh beginning in 1964.

Within twenty-five years of the war, the Shurcliff firm was involved in aspects of landscape architecture that Arthur Shurcliff and his contemporaries would have found unimaginable. But even while veering into new areas of practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Shurcliff’s firm never exceeded three partners and three draftsmen after the addition of Douglas Footit as a partner in 1968. Likewise, the firm relied upon traditional business practices supported by personal
relationships and referrals. But the practice of landscape architecture was changing swiftly, filling new niches created by expanding economies and advancing technology. For example, in 1971 Shurcliff, Merrill and Footit devised a garden for the 39th floor of architect Edward Larrabee Barnes’ New England Merchants National Bank, a focal point of Boston’s modernist makeover of its financial district. A year later, the government of Taiwan invited Shurcliff to tour the island and make recommendations for the development of its growing tourist industry.

Throughout his life, Shurcliff wrote many descriptions, reviews, critiques and commentaries for Landscape Architecture and other publications. In addition, he published three other books: Upon the Road Argilla (1958), The Day it Rained Fish (1978), and Roughing it at Roughwood (1979). Together the books document, often comically, the monumental transitions in American life, society and landscape architecture practice Shurcliff witnessed during his twentieth-century lifetime.

Between his birth in 1906 and his death in 1981, Shurcliff lived through the introduction of Ford’s Model T and the construction of interstate highways, two World Wars and several other wars, women’s suffrage and civil rights movements, economic collapse and economic expansion, the introduction of television and the development of commercial aviation, and many other changes in the fabric of American life.

Shurcliff’s landscape architecture career carried with it threads of the profession’s early focus to its development as a dispersed discipline. The son of an early and prodigious landscape architect, it is likely that Shurcliff’s father prodded him into the field. As noted, Arthur Shurcliff trained in the Olmsted office and soon
after founded the first landscape architecture program in the country at Harvard with Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. in 1900. Until World War II, the elder Shurcliff was a leading figure in landscape architecture practice in Boston, New England and much of the rest of the country. He received numerous commissions for large residential and public landscape design projects and he was the leading consultant to the Metropolitan District Commission and the Boston Parks Department. The younger Shurcliff recalled that when he was at Harvard, his father "made it clear that he would like to have me as an assistant, and slowly I realized that it was a marvelous opportunity." While Sidney Shurcliff seemed to consider himself a junior partner in the firm until his father's death, the exact nature of the father-son relationship remains unclear. In his 1978 memoir, Shurcliff reminisced:

No matter how happy a relationship may exist between a father and son engaged in the same enterprise, there always comes a point when the son would like to be his own boss. This happened to me in 1931. I wanted at least a few clients who came to me directly, and not through my father. Then I could solve the design problems in my own way without fear of being countermanded, and at the same time would retain the advantage of having my father's advice.

And in 1980, he observed that his father "went into retirement at the right time because he no longer would have fitted with the scale of operations today." It is clear, however, that both early and later opportunities came to the younger Shurcliff at least in part on the basis of lineage.

Shurcliff took seriously his responsibilities as an heir of the profession of landscape architecture. He was deeply involved in many commissions and organizations such as the Trustees of Reservations, the Hubbard Educational Trust, the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) and the International
Federation of Landscape Architects (IFLA). In these groups, Shurcliff’s affinity for connecting people and his skills as a raconteur and conversationalist were particularly instrumental. He became a mentor and good friend to many people whom he met through these organizations and his landscape architecture practice. He held various leadership positions in the ASLA and in 1962, he led efforts by the organization to raise interest and awareness of the immense contributions of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. that had been overlooked for more than half a century.\textsuperscript{10} Shurcliff served as president of IFLA from 1958-1962. In a 1962 speech at the group’s annual meeting in Haifa, Israel he decried the growing encroachment of architects, engineers and planners onto the traditional roles of landscape architects.\textsuperscript{11} He called for the discipline to define itself, strengthen its training programs, and collaborate effectively with other professionals. His speech and his involvement with IFLA foretold landscape architecture’s inner struggles and outward global reach to come.

**Landscape Modernism**

Shurcliff also witnessed shifts in the philosophy, teaching, and form of design, that is, the succession of modernism over the Beaux Arts school. Shurcliff’s design education was steeped in the latter’s formalism and rigorous rules of symmetry, geometry, and adherence to the axis. Nevertheless, since the inception of landscape architecture studies at Harvard, naturalistic, informal design was taught alongside obviously man-made, geometric, formal design,\textsuperscript{12} a dichotomy consistent with much of the work of two of the program’s founders, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. and Arthur Shurcliff. Legendary, heated debates between proponents of "informal" design and
those of "formal" design took place at Harvard and in landscape architecture in
general. But Shurcliff's studies at Harvard ended just six years before a fundamental
realignment of the schools of architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design
and abandonment of Beaux Arts ideals. In 1936, Harvard dean Joseph Hudnut
created the Graduate School of Design (GSD) to encompass the three schools and
embarked upon an ambitious program to reorient the GSD toward modernist theory
and away from the Beaux Arts tradition in which Shurcliff had been educated. The
realization of Hudnut's mission with the appointment of Walter Gropius to lead the
school of architecture resulted in change but also considerable resistance
particularly by the landscape faculty.13 In the ensuing years, this climate at the GSD
gave rise to some of the figures in landscape architecture most famously associated
with mid-twentieth-century and modernist landscape design: Dan Kiley, James
Rose, and Garrett Eckbo. Having just missed the paradigm shift at the GSD, Shurcliff
would either have to hold onto the past, propel himself toward the future, or land
somewhere in the middle.

A new medium--space--became the core of modern design theory in general
and, somewhat later, landscape design theory in particular. In his 1948 essay "The
Modern Garden," Hudnut wrote:

Our arrangements of space will be less evidently the consequence of
gemetric principles; they will rely less upon balance, proportion,
symmetrical rhythms; their separation from the outward cosmic
space will be less definite; but they will escape, nevertheless, purely
functional adaptations. From variety in shape and relationship, and
from the consequent freedom in the relations of distances, the
ordering of intervals, the harmony or contrast of measured or
dissonant volumes, there has been created a new material of
expression whose range and resourcefulness we have until now scarcely guessed at.14

Eckbo crystallized the move away from the Beaux Arts towards a modernist approach to landscape design in his 1950 book Landscape for Living. He advised the abandonment of axial and two dimensional design for "spatial design, as a larger and more complete concept than plane, plastic, or structural design. . . ." For Eckbo, space was "developed through the establishment of relations both functional and esthetic between elements which do not necessarily have any physical connection."15 Spatial design, based on a new construct of "space," delivered postwar designers from the restrictions of Beaux Arts codes and endless debates over "informal" and "formal" gardens.16 Most importantly though, Eckbo declared an end to two-dimensional landscapes based on patterns and designed primarily for viewing. Of landscape architects, he announced:

Our work is done for people, to provide settings and surroundings for their life and activities. Therefore all its forms must relate definitely to the forms of people: to their size, their shape, the way in which they move about and relax, their requirements as to air, sun, shade, the way in which they perceive their surroundings, and so on.17

The modern landscape was a sculpture of space intended for use by people and their experience in the landscape was key. Forty-three years after Eckbo's book, historian Marc Treib summed up the axioms defining modern landscape architecture; he added denial of historical styles, destruction of the Beaux Arts axis, use of plants for their individual qualities and as sculpture, and indoor-outdoor connection to Eckbo's concept of space and requirement for human centrism.18 These six tenents are generally accepted as a retrospective manifesto for modern landscape design.
Purpose of Research

Extensive documentation of the work of Eckbo, Rose, Kiley, and other celebrated landscape architects of the mid-twentieth century such as Thomas Dolliver Church, Lawrence Halprin, and Hideo Sasaki is available. On the other hand, the historical position and professional contribution of transitional mid-twentieth-century landscape architects trained in the waning days of Beaux Arts education and professionally weaned in the era of the New Deal’s nostalgic landscape design is limited to a few such figures as Church. While often elusive, an understanding of lesser-known transitional figures such as Shurcliff offers a potential mirror on and a new view of the forces driving change. While Shurcliff’s personal and professional advantages and connections may render him somewhat atypical of his peers, it was just those attributes that enabled him to leave behind extensive writings and archived materials for study today.

This analysis will examine selected pieces of Shurcliff’s body of work framed by the existing literature covering the social, economic, political, and artistic influences of the postwar period. An account of Shurcliff’s landscape architecture practice will measure the scope of his work, the degree to which he contributed to the discipline, and his relationship with modernism. Evaluating his work with respect to the modernist precepts of space, human centrism, denial of historic style, destruction of the axis, use of plants, and indoor-outdoor connection will both determine Shurcliff’s position in the transition and add to understanding of landscape modernism. Establishment of Shurcliff’s contributions will augment the history of landscape architecture and add to knowledge about mid-twentieth
century American life. Finally, understanding of Shurcliff’s work will expand the concept of heritage landscapes and facilitate preservation, rehabilitation and adaptive use of the landscapes and other remnants of the recent past.
Notes

2 Shurcliff’s biography was pieced together using information gleaned from interviews of family and colleagues, archived correspondence and other documents, and his four published books.

3 It is thought that Shurcliff left Harvard without his graduate degree in order to assist his father in his busy practice. Charles Shurcliff, telephone interview, September 12, 2012.

4 Arthur Shurcliff’s work at Williamsburg is the focus of Hope Elizabeth Cushing, Arthur Shurcliff and the Making of the Colonial Williamsburg Landscape (Amherst, MA: Library of American Landscape History, forthcoming).

5 Shurcliff’s schedule of foreign travel submitted to the War Department on July 30, 1941 includes a trip to England in 1932 as a "professional trip in connection with the Williamsburg Restoration . . . includes five weeks residence in England with intensive study of 18th century gardens and place layouts." (From Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design, folder G008.)

6 Although Shurcliff does not state this outright in Melanie Louise Simo, An Interview with Sidney N. Shurcliff on Arthur A. Shurcliff, 1980 (Watertown, MA: Hubbard Educational Trust, 1992), interviews with his nephews Charles Shurcliff on November 10, 2012 and Arthur Shurcliff, II on September 23, 2012 indicated the family’s belief that Shurcliff’s career was determined for him by his father.

7 Simo, 23.

8 Shurcliff, Rained Fish, 47.

9 Simo, 24.

10 Shurcliff’s involvement in various ASLA projects to commemorate Olmsted is detailed in his letter "The Olmsted Deluge by its Head Rainmaker," Landscape Architecture 65, 2 (1975): 160-161. The preface to Julius Gy Fabos, et. al., Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr.: Founder of Landscape Architecture in America (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1968) confirms Shurcliff’s role in the commemorative activities.


17 Eckbo, 73.


CHAPTER 2

METHODS

The following four chapters offer a portrayal of Sidney N. Shurcliff’s mid-twentieth-century landscape architecture practice. Each chapter is focused on one of the major areas of his practice to emerge in the course of research: residential, commercial, public, and campus design and planning. It is evident that Shurcliff’s contributions to practice also included significant commentary and critique as well as participation in local, national and international landscape-related organizations. The latter often provided him a platform for the former. These activities are included where they apply to his practice but are not considered independently. Each chapter begins by framing the area of practice in a historical context using accounts of contemporary social, economic, cultural, and artistic issues. Selected pieces of Shurcliff’s work are then presented with descriptions and images. Finally, his work is evaluated in light of its historical context and with respect to modernism in landscape architecture.
Primary and secondary sources contributed to all aspects of this project. Historical context framework was built using the existing literature about the mid-twentieth century as well as the writings of Shurcliff and others who were active during the period and interviews of surviving family members, colleagues, and acquaintances. A hopefully accurate depiction of Shurcliff’s work was woven together using archived materials, Shurcliff’s and others’ writings, interviews, and site visits by the author. Evaluation of Shurcliff’s work was the result of distillation of all sources and reflection upon the body of his work.

Historical context for Shurcliff’s work came by way of research ranging from broad aspects of mid-twentieth-century American life to specific planning, landscape, and architectural topics of the period. In all cases, both current and mid-twentieth-century literature proved helpful in developing a comprehensive picture. In the latter category, academic, professional, and popular publications were used. Shurcliff’s writing for professional and popular publications and transcripts of his speeches to professional groups provided guidance into the context in which he personally worked. The role of popular publications in influencing tastes and the economics of postwar landscape architecture practice was pronounced and therefore such publications were used to develop the historical context. Interviews of Shurcliff’s relatives and colleagues added to a contextual synthesis.

Accounting of Shurcliff’s body of work began with perusal of published descriptions of his projects (mostly written by him) and sifting through archived materials. While Shurcliff’s descriptions in both the professional and popular press
were undoubtedly biased, they did offer some indication of the projects he believed most significant. Plans, perspectives, and photographs included in these articles were often the only visual sources of information currently available. Drawings, photographs, letters, memoranda, meeting minutes, and other materials currently held in archives offered a wealth of information not only on Shurcliff’s projects but his practice style and personality as well. While the bulk of these materials are held with Shurcliff’s father’s collection at the Frances Loeb Library at the Harvard Graduate School of Design, the archives at Mount Holyoke College, Wheaton College, Chatham University, and the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth hold significant collections of materials specific to those institutions. These collections certainly yielded a more thorough depiction of Shurcliff’s campus design and planning work as compared to the other three areas of his practice studied. Piecing together archived fragments required revisiting published materials, seeking secondary descriptions, and discussions with Shurcliff’s relatives and colleagues as well as archivists and other college personnel familiar with his work. While much of Shurcliff’s work is no longer extant, site visits to Ipswich and four campuses provided additional insight, allowing for changes wrought by time and subsequent development. Selection of projects for inclusion and analysis was based upon availability of information and potential relevance. While Shurcliff worked on numerous projects during his long career, only scattered bits of documentation and few physical aspects remain.

Each of the following four chapters concludes with an analysis of Shurcliff’s work in light of the transition toward modernism in landscape architecture.
Fundamentally, the analysis is based on the concept of "space" as defined contemporaneously by Garrett Eckbo and others. This single construct was chosen to facilitate analysis and avoid diversion into discussion of "modern style." While this may be an oversimplification, it provides a lens through which to view Shurcliff’s work as objectively as possible. Shurcliff’s work is further analyzed in terms of its human centrism, relation to the axis, denial of historic style, use of plants, and indoor-outdoor connection. In many cases, Shurcliff’s descriptions of his own work heralded modern stylistic elements and revealed his desire to be seen as modern. On the ground, however, the work sometimes lacked modern substance. For example, Shurcliff’s Shoppers’ World (1951) was designed for human use and loaded with "modern style," but lacked modern "space," use of plants, and so on.

Finally, an overall assessment of Shurcliff’s body of work and its application to the current practice of landscape architecture is presented. In its entirety, this study attempts to illuminate and legitimize the claim transitional figures and producers of everyday landscapes have to our esteem.
CHAPTER 3

GARDENS BEAUTIFUL

Nearly half of a 1957 book review Sidney N. Shurcliff published in Landscape Architecture was devoted to a topic clearly of importance to him at the time. In praising The New Small Garden by Lady Allen of Hurtwood and Susan Jellicoe, Shurcliff wrote:

The San Francisco Bay area type of new small garden design, so widely acclaimed in our glossy home magazines, finds no echo in these pages. Despite the undoubted virtues of egg-crate grilles, raised masonry plant boxes, serpentine steps, concrete play forms, redwood benches and terraces with dramatic angles, plywood fences in Mondrian patterns, and other well-known impedimenta dear to the heart of Elizabeth Gordon and other Church converts, the authors are able to produce a wealth of ideas which are stimulating and noteworthy without resorting to the use of a single one of these trans-Atlantic features!¹

Shurcliff's references to Elizabeth Gordon, the crusading editor-in-chief of House Beautiful from 1941-1964, and Thomas Dolliiver Church, a celebrated, Northern California-based landscape architect of the time, underscores the influence exerted by popular media over residential garden design in the postwar period. It also hints at the effect this influence and other social and economic forces had on Shurcliff's own landscape architecture practice.
While the Great Depression largely curtailed his father's work at large Beaux
Arts estates like the Crane family's Castle Hill in Ipswich, the Shurcliff firm
continued some work on large properties into the 1940s.² For the most part, this
work ended after World War II. Smaller suburban lots, the rise of a middle class,
consumerism, women entering the work force, changes in taste, and new
technologies were just some of the phenomena that reconfigured the postwar
garden and therefore design practice. Articles included in House Beautiful's
Practical Gardener of 1947 vividly illustrate these forces: "Can I Afford a Landscape
Architect?;" "Your Town Needs a Garden Center;" "Care-Free Gardens Don't Just
Happen;" "You'll Live Outdoors If You Have Terraces;" "How to Build a Terrace;" and
"What Hormones Can Do for Your Garden."³

Magazines like House Beautiful had burgeoning, rapt, mostly female
audiences who had growing financial power, especially with respect to purchases
for the home and garden. For example, paid subscribers of House Beautiful more
than doubled to six hundred thousand from 1945 to 1955 and increased to almost
one million by 1965.⁴ Increasingly, Gordon (the magazine's editor) advocated for a
"good" or "American" modernism in the design of buildings and gardens. To her, the
work of foreign-born architects like Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe and Walter
Gropius was "sterile, cold, thin, uncomfortable."⁵ She cautioned against accepting
non-American modernism: "For if we can be sold on accepting dictators in matters
of taste and how our homes are to be ordered, our minds are certainly well
prepared to accept dictators in other departments of life."⁶ She went on to use her
role as editor of a wildly popular magazine to dictate to her audience an acceptable
from of house and garden modernism. Because her good modernism featured the importance of indoor-outdoor connection, garden design received as much attention as architectural and interior design. The magazine showcased the residential work of landscape architects like Garrett Eckbo and Lawrence Halprin but none more prominently than Church. For Gordon, Church's work embodied everything she found appropriate. At this point, Church's practice focused on relatively small residential gardens in Northern California and the forms and esthetics of his work fit tidily with Gordon's ideals of good modernism: privacy, fluidity, and subtlety. Church's gardens were featured in lavishly illustrated spreads in House Beautiful and he frequently contributed articles about garden design to the magazine. He described the fundamental changes in the garden's function in a 1952 article:

> The new kind of garden is *still* supposed to be looked at. But that is no longer its only function. It is designed primarily for living, as an adjunct to the functions of the house. How well it provides for the many types of living that can be carried on outdoors is the new standard by which we now judge a garden.

How did this new and highly popular sense of the garden apply to areas of the country where carrying on life outdoors was more challenging than in California? How did this sentiment affect the practice of landscape architects in New England for example?

A heated discourse on the pages of Landscape Architecture in July 1957 provides answers to these questions. An article in this edition of the magazine is a transcript of a panel discussion at the 1958 Bay Area Landscape Show moderated by Joseph E. Howland (former Garden Editor of House Beautiful) that included Edward Williams of Eckbo, Royston and Williams of Los Angeles and Sidney
Shurcliff of Shurcliff, Shurcliff and Merrill of Boston. Williams explained that the popularity of Bay Area design was due to various factors including the rapid growth and prosperity of the area, an educated and "prepared" clientele (he acknowledged the role of House Beautiful here), suitable climate, and a "moderate social atmosphere." Shurcliff acknowledged that Bay Area landscape designers had created a completely new residential style allowing people to really live in the garden. But he further explained, "we are full of admiration for the Bay Area work, but we feel that on a national basis its influence is out of all proportion to its importance." He attributed the popularity of Bay Area design to the ease with which tiny west coast gardens could be photographed. He was critical of reliance on low maintenance planting, sinuous paving, and fences to serve as backgrounds for gardens. Shurcliff faulted the national press for focusing its attention on California backyards and omitting other parts of the country and other aspects of landscape architecture practice. He expressed frustration with "friends and associates [who] show more familiarity with the names of landscape architects in California than in their own home towns . . . " and exasperation with "the architect next door [who] has imported a landscape architect from California to do a local job because all the publicity for the Bay Area has dazzled him to the extent that he begins to believe that anyone who gets such publicity must per se be more able than one who does not." Shurcliff may have been heartened by the appearance of The Museum of Modern Art's Modern Gardens and the Landscape in 1964. The book presented only one of Church’s works (the Donnell garden in Sonoma, California); all but two of the other American landscapes were on the East Coast. On the other hand, of the six
American gardens in Susan and Geoffrey Jellicoe’s 1968 Modern Private Gardens, four were in California. This may have been a disappointment to Shurcliff who was a close friend of the Jellicoes, but by that time, Shurcliff and Merrill had little involvement in residential design.

While residential design was not the most significant aspect of Shurcliff’s later practice, examination of three of his projects from 1947-1951 reflects the influences of the postwar period and complements established knowledge currently limited to the work of his better-known contemporaries. Incorporating the elements of modern landscape design to varying degrees, the three gardens indicate that while Shurcliff expressed disdain for the California landscape modernism of glossy magazines, he did not feel similarly about landscape modernism in general. Instead, perhaps, he felt stymied by climate and other factors in the development of an identifiably New England landscape modernism, a feat arguably more difficult than the application of architectural modernism to the region. In addition, Shurcliff was likely envious of the commercial and popular success of his West Coast compatriots.

**Brookline Garden**

By 1948, Shurcliff seems to have been swayed by Bay Area design. His description of a residential garden he designed in Brookline, Massachusetts bears the hallmarks of the West Coast gardens he would deride ten years later on the pages of Landscape Architecture. For this project, the homeowners requested a garden for year round use by adults, children, and dogs, with an “appearance to be notably different and beautiful; and minimum maintenance….” The one-tenth
acre backyard was surrounded on three sides by a new fence and reached from the house by steps angled from the face of the building to create a dynamic effect. The design was aimed at achieving a unified whole, visually rotating in a clockwise direction. Shurcliff described the elements of the garden:

No grass or earth-grown flowers are present in this garden, yet the result is a decorative and as restful to the eye as if grass and flowers were present. Its dog-proof center panel is of asphalt buried under purple crushed stone. The center panel is rimmed on two sides by a curving bluestone walk, and on all sides by a curbing of granite paving blocks paralleled by evergreen hedges and backed up by broad-leaved evergreens, hemlocks, and azaleas.²⁸

![Figure 4: Brookline Garden (1948)](image)

An additional aspect of Shurcliff’s description of this project is the pedantic style in which it is written. Citing "unity," "rhythm," and "arithmetic progression," he describes design elements in functional terms like "For purposes of emphasis" and
"mobilizes qualities which completely neutralize the basic disadvantage..."19 His style here raises questions about his intended audience--colleagues, academics, homeowners, magazine editors, or all four--and his motives. In any case, this tract, like the garden itself, stands out among much of his other published and unpublished writing as stiff and dispassionate.

**Figure 5: Ipswich Garden Plan (1951)**

**Ipswich Garden**

Shurcliff’s design for his own property in Ipswich, MA incorporates aspects of West Coast landscape design but is decidedly adapted to its coastal New England location.20 His property was one of several adjacent parcels of land originally
purchased by Arthur Shurcliff along Argilla Road and eventually distributed to family members. The Crane estate is at the end of the road facing out toward the Atlantic Ocean. Shurcliff’s property sits on a bluff overlooking salt marsh gradually giving way to the ocean. George W. Brewster, a friend of Shurcliff, designed the clapboarded two-story house. Its traditional form reflects the coastal New England vernacular while expansive glazing capitalizes on the house’s siting and mid-twentieth-century technology.

Figure 6: Ipswich Garden (1951)
Begun soon after his return from military service, Shurcliff’s landscape design here represents a clean break from his father's typical residential work. A simply curved driveway climbs from the road to the house, providing a glimpse of the salt marsh, and terminates in a biomorphic turnaround flanked by the garage and parking for five automobiles. A curved flagstone path leads from the drive to the main entrance of the house. Espaliered fruit trees line a trellis at the front entrance area in the ell created by the house and garage. Three elms planted along the south-east facing aspect of the house provide shade and frame views of the marsh from inside the house. A small, approximately one-eighth acre south lawn is divided into three terraces by low stone retaining walls. Two of the walls are linear and the third, curved wall creates an elegant turf ramp between the upper and middle terraces. A low yew hedge whose shape and color echo the horizontality and form of the landscape beyond extends the height of this wall. Stone steps set into the turf also connect the upper terrace with the middle one that in turn is connected to the lower terrace by broad, rectangular turf steps retained by simple metal or wood perrons. Besides the trees, plantings consist of low evergreen shrubs along the house and masses of hardy perennials adjacent to the retaining walls. Simplicity, biomorphic forms, and ease of maintenance resemble the gardens popularized by House Beautiful and other influential sources of the time. But this small garden’s embrace of sky and marsh views and its use of local stone and rugged, weather- and salt-tolerant plantings distinguish it as a New England modern garden.
Solaray House

Another aspect of Shurcliff’s residential work in the early postwar period is seen in his collaboration with architect Nathaniel Saltonstall on his prototypical "Solaray" house (1947). Saltonstall designed this passive solar house for his mother, Mrs. Joel Goldthwait, in Medfield, MA and Shurcliff assisted in site planning and landscape design.\textsuperscript{21} The house was "oriented to make maximum use of the sun for both light and heat by facing the long facade, constructed almost entirely of double glazed windows, to the south."\textsuperscript{22} Shurcliff’s description of his design for the property notes provisions for privacy, reduced maintenance, use of existing plants and on-site materials, and outdoor entertaining space "... contributing still further
to the indoor-outdoor effect.” Saltonstall’s Solaray Corporation undertook at least one suburban housing development project in Natick, MA in 1947 although it is uncertain whether Shurcliff remained involved. Nevertheless, Shurcliff’s brother, William A. Shurcliff, a physicist, focused his later career on the development of solar power technology.

Figure 8: Solaray House, Architecture and Landscape Plan (1947)

Analysis

In his residential work, Shurcliff gave varying degrees of attention to the tenents of landscape modernism. All three of the projects described are arguably geared toward human use (but not necessarily human scale) and do not rely on historic styles or axial layouts. Shurcliff’s provisions for indoor-outdoor connection and modern use of plants are variable. Interestingly, the Solaray project reflected twenty-first century ideas about sustainability in preservation of vegetation and use of on-site materials. But given that Shurcliff based his comments about the "indoor-outdoor effect" of his design solely on the basis of flagstone paving adjacent
to the house, it is likely that this was simply lip service, indicating that he was monitoring trends in landscape design. Shurcliff's 1948 Brookline garden was redolent of "modern style" with little modern substance. The non-axial layout and use of plants and other materials to define the garden appeared more geared toward low maintenance and "decorative" quality than creating meaningful space in the modern sense. Furthermore, the garden had little relationship to the house and seemed more like a jewel to be viewed in its box rather than a composition of space. In stark contrast however, Shurcliff's own 1951 garden in Ipswich embraced "space." Human-scaled spaces close to the house were elegant and inviting. The terraced lawn was molded for relaxation and appreciation of the spectacular setting. Earth, shrubbery, trees, marsh, and sky were crafted together in a way that connected occupants of the house and property with the surrounding landscape. Where the Solaray and Brookline projects might question the applicability of the indoor-outdoor concept so readily achievable in California to the climate of New England, Shurcliff's garden in Ipswich demonstrated its possibilities.

As noted, Shurcliff's involvement in residential landscape architecture was ultimately focused on more on commentary than on design. Nevertheless, he did strive to shape space to make gardens for human occupation. In many ways, Shurcliff's boyhood experiences in Ipswich were likely the most familiar and happiest of his life and his garden reflected his contentment there.
Notes

1 Sidney N. Shurcliff, Rev. of The New Small Garden, by Lady Allen of Hurtwood and Susan Jellicoe, Landscape Architecture 47, 2 (1957): 370. The same issue of the magazine lists five recently published books on the gardens and architecture of Japan--subjects that would become Gordon’s focus as well as major influences on West Coast and other postwar gardens.


5 Elizabeth Gordon, "Threat to the Next America," House Beautiful 95 (1953): 129.


7 Harris, 183.


15 Letters between the Jellicoes and Shurcliff from the late 1970s demonstrate their on-going fond acquaintence. (From Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design, folder G.)


17 Shurcliff, 1948, 68.

18 Shurcliff, 1948, 69.

19 Shurcliff, 1948, 68-69.

20 The description of Shurcliff's property was developed from photographs and a plan included in Landscape Architecture, a publication of the Graduate School of Design, Harvard University, Eds. Lester Collins and Thomas Gillespie (Cambridge, MA, 1951). (From Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design, folder B132.) A true sense of Shurcliff's work at his Ipswich house and its connection with the surrounding landscape was gained during a visit to the site with Charles Shurcliff on November 10, 2012.

21 Letter from Shurcliff to Nathaniel Saltonstall regarding "Medfield house" dated January 17, 1947 and undated memo entitled "Landscaping of Goldthwait House." (Both from Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design, folder B033.)


23 Undated memoranda entitled "Landscaping of Goldthwait House." (From Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design, folder B033.)

CHAPTER 4

CONSUMERS' WORLD

Monumental traffic jams clogged the roads of Framingham, Massachusetts on October 4, 1951. Thousands converged on the small town eighteen miles west of Boston for Opening Day of Shoppers’ World, billed as the most modern and convenient retail destination in the world. All of the 5,000 parking spaces at the center were filled by eleven o’clock in the morning, leaving many curious visitors stuck in traffic and unable to experience the grand debut. Those fortunate enough to leave their cars behind carefully traversed the massive parking lot surrounding the center and effortlessly glided down gentle ramps and into a central grassy mall bounded by shimmering glass-fronted stores displaying the latest goods. The central mall, where "everything that could be done to delight the eye was carried out"¹ was the work of Sidney N. Shurcliff. Along the paths crossing the mall, Shurcliff arranged seating benches "to form very sophisticated 'conversation group patterns,' a new phrase [he] had just read in some architectural magazine."² He chose backless benches "in order not to obstruct vision up and down the mall and to discourage sitting on them for very long, since a customer sitting on a bench isn’t in the act of buying anything."² Shurcliff’s design choice epitomizes a fundamental goal
of postwar commercial landscape design: creation and enhancement of consumer experience through stylish currency in the service of greater profit.

Figure 9: Shoppers' World, Opening Day (1951)

At the vanguard of postwar commercial development, Shoppers’ World represents both the result of and a cause for major transformations in postwar American life. Contemporary and historical accounts demonstrate the growing wealth and discretionary income of the American family unit between 1940 and the 1950s. With more money to spend on goods and services beyond basic needs, the populace required and supported more retail outlets. Limited space and high land prices in urban centers made retail expansion outside of cities attractive to developers and merchants alike. As automobile ownership grew, so did city dwellers' ability to travel outside of the city center to shop. At the same time, more
and more Americans were lured from crowded, automobile-choked urban centers by new suburban developments that frequently grew around new retail outlets. The history and implications of the postwar cycle of income, retail development and suburban growth are well documented. The components of the cycle developed in the years prior to World War II.

A trickle of shopping developments outside of urban centers began in the early years of the twentieth century. Typical retail developments of this period consisted of five to ten small local stores offering basic goods. With little attention given to planning and design and haphazard expansion and duplication, the value of many of these developments and nearby residential property declined precipitously. Gradually, the rise of planned residential development in the two decades after World War I led to the genesis of the community shopping center, a complex of buildings with twenty or more stores offering both everyday and specialty goods and services. These centers became foci of activity for the communities around them. An example of this type of shopping center is real estate developer J. C. Nichols’ Country Club Plaza located four miles south of downtown Kansas City, Missouri (1922). With professionally designed buildings, layout and grounds, Country Club Plaza offered shoppers a distinct and memorable setting. Over time, compatible residential development grew around the periphery of the shopping center. While large by contemporary standards, developments like Country Club Plaza were intended as complements to downtown shopping districts rather than replacements. World War II put most commercial and residential development on hold.
With few exceptions like the Levittowns in New York and New Jersey, most early postwar suburban residential developers did not address residents' commercial needs. Instead, suburbanites were expected to make do with small local stores for basic goods or drive to the city for both basic and large purchases. At the same time, suburban dwellers found themselves alienated from cultural and social resources. The concept of regional shopping centers targeting both consumer needs and community needs of suburbanites resulted.7

In addition to reflections on postwar commerce and development, the story of the regional shopping center provides insight into other aspects of American society of the time such as women’s rights, class stratification, racism and the changing concept of public space. Historical analysis of these issues is available.8 Extensive documentation of postwar retail architectural design and site planning also exists.9 On the other hand, analysis of the landscape elements of early postwar retail development is often a mere side note in the architectural literature.

There is even less literature, particularly with respect to landscape, on another phenomenon of postwar commercial development: the appearance and dispersion of banking facilities. After 1929, various pieces of New Deal legislation led to the transformation of banking from a staid tightly controlled endeavor to that of a mass-market retail operation.10 Growing wealth in the postwar period allowed bank officials to see the design of banking facilities as a means of appealing to burgeoning markets. Many institutions turned to well-known architects to design flagship buildings in renewing urban centers. Simultaneously, along with the growth of postwar suburbs came relaxation of restrictions on bank branches and
locations leading to the development of new suburban outlets. With convenience and new technology as marketing tools, the suburban drive-up bank was born.\textsuperscript{11} Clearly, site planning and landscape design were considered essential to the success of banks' investments in these new suburban facilities.

Shurcliff’s commercial landscape architecture practice offers both a mirror and a window for historical study of postwar consumer-driven development. Through selected aspects of his work, many of the social, economic, artistic, and political forces at play during the time are given form. Similarly, as a lesser-known figure whose career increasingly depended on his own resources for success, his work illustrates that of his contemporaries whose work on parking lots, signage, and shopping center landscapes is rarely considered.

**Shopping Centers**

In June 1947, *Architectural Forum*, heralded plans for North Shore Center in Beverly, Massachusetts (18 miles north of Boston), the country’s first regional shopping center:

In the disintegration of downtown Boston and short-sightedness of merchants who decentralized, a group of local realty investors has seen an opportunity to make life easier for thousands of harassed suburban shoppers, business better for a select group of merchants and investment safer for themselves. They envision for Boston (and ultimately the nation) a series of huge regional shopping centers, up-to-the minute in every respect and stoutly protected against all foreseeable contingencies. To plug every possible loophole, they have staffed their subsidiary, National Retail Recentralization, Inc., with experts in all fields of building and selling.\textsuperscript{12}

Headed by developer Huston Rawls, aptly named National Retail Recentralization, Inc. turned to landscape architects Arthur A. Shurcliff, Sidney N. Shurcliff and, Thomas D. Church for site planning and landscape design and the firm of Ketchum,
Giná and Sharp for architectural design. At the time, the Shurcliff firm was widely known for work at Williamsburg and since the proposal included the relocation and rehabilitation of a collection of "historic colonial houses" their selection was advantageous. While his notoriety was certainly beneficial, Church's involvement in the project is unclear. Architect Morris Ketchum was well known for his prewar interior and exterior designs for specialty shops.

Situated on a sixty-two acre site, North Shore Center would boast at least thirty retail stores "dominated by a circular department store and supplemented by a fifteen-hundred-seat theater, twenty bowling alleys, a restaurant, exhibit hall, professional offices and service establishments--all built around a traffic-free grass mall." Most notably, three thousand parking spaces would encircle the shopping center that would be located at the convergence of three major roads, including the projected six-lane ring highway, Route 128. The site plan called for one road to run under the center's central mall. The shopping center was to be buffered from the highway by a densely planted belt and further enveloped by a reconstructed village of historic houses, an existing school, and new residential development.

Much attention was paid to the visual environment and resulting effects on shoppers' experiences. It was hoped that intermittent plantings of trees would improve the appearance of the large parking lot so it "will not be as forbidding as the usual sea of asphalt." Similarly, peripherally located warehouse and delivery facilities were intended to minimize both physical and visual intrusions by unsightly large trucks. Buildings reflected "outstandingly straightforward design" (tellingly not labeled "International Style") with large display windows. Covered walkways
would enable shoppers to promenade in all weather from one end of the center to the other and around a central lawn scattered with trees. Flanked by a dining terrace, a reflecting pool at the end opposite the large circular department store would also be used in winter for skating. Given the nature of the project and the parking and landscape design proposals, it is unlikely that the aging Arthur Shurcliff was deeply involved in it.\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, it appears that the North Shore Center proposal was the work of Sidney Shurcliff (possibly with Vincent Merrill who had worked at the firm for more than five years) potentially in collaboration with Church.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure10.png}
\caption{North Shore Center, Schematic Drawing (1947)}
\end{figure}
Despite extensive market analysis showing the viability of the North Shore Center scheme, National Retail Recentralization, Inc. was unable to attract sufficient capital for construction. The untried novelty of the regional shopping center concept likely discouraged investors. Problems with permitting drew the planning process out until its eventual demise five years after it was begun.

Meanwhile in Seattle, department store president Rex Allison and architect John Graham succeeded in building Northgate Shopping City (1948-1950). Northgate’s lone department store was linked to smaller shops by a street-like central promenade, contrasting with North Shore Center’s open central space concept. Designed as a shopping environment offering a spectrum of goods with a wide price range, Northgate immediately proved the efficacy of the regional shopping center concept.\(^{18}\)

Developer Huston Rawls quickly emerged from the failing North Shore Center project, formed Suburban Centers Trust and set about the design and construction of Shoppers’ World (1949-1951) in Framingham. Again, Rawls engaged Ketchum, Giná and Sharp for architectural design and Shurcliff and Shurcliff for site planning and landscape design. Sidney Shurcliff led his firm’s work on this project.

Shoppers’ World was built on seventy acres adjacent to Route 9, the major east-west route across Massachusetts, and just south of the projected Massachusetts Turnpike. Given its automobile-accessible location, "Parking for 5,000 Cars" soon became a promotional slogan.\(^ {19}\) In contrast to the North Shore Center project, permitting for Shoppers’ World was successful but required the developers to
convince citizens of Framingham that the town would gain more from its new shopping destination than its downtown merchants would lose in sales.20

Morris Ketchum again designed a "necklace" of buildings. At Shoppers' World however, the necklace was a total of fifty stores stacked in two stories containing an immense half-million square feet of interior space. The necklace surrounded an open pedestrian mall 100-feet wide by 600-feet long with a 227-foot diameter domed department store serving as "pendant" and a second department store as "buckle."21 In both plan and elevation, the complex resembled the building mass around a traditional New England common or even an academic campus. Prior to construction, the developers successfully lured the Jordan Marsh department store to occupy the pendant. A theater offered space for meetings, lectures, and expositions during the day and the latest movies at night. Eight percent ramps with landings between tiers connected stores to parking lots and four pedestrian bridges across the mall connected the second level stores.22 The automobile and pedestrian circulation patterns were designed to minimize both real and perceived distances between automobile and store entrance. The developers used promises of big-name department store tenants, up-to-the-minute design and convenience, and parking for five thousand cars to attract retailers to the suburban location.

Shurcliff's initial landscape plan for Shoppers' World called for lavish use of trees and shrubs, flagstone paving, fountains, stone seats, and sculpture to create an elegant counterpoint to the "straightforward" architecture. Like North Shore Center, a reflecting pool filled with lilies and lotuses was planned for the buckle end
of the mall. The surrounding parking lot would complement the scene as was intended at the failed Beverly project. Shoppers' World would be a chic suburban oasis, a destination for suburbanites and city dwellers alike.

![Image of Shoppers' World](image.png)

**Figure 11: Shoppers' World (1951)**

During construction, severe budget shortfalls resulted from failure to attract a tenant for the buckle store and a low negotiated rent for the pendant store. Shurcliff was forced to alter his plan significantly. The parking lot was repeatedly reconfigured in order to squeeze in the advertised five thousand spaces; tree plantings in and around the lot were not possible. In a shortsighted move to reduce costs, Rawls insisted on using construction techniques that ultimately led to collapse of areas of the parking lot. Plantings were limited to a few large evergreens and
small deciduous trees placed in the mall and at the main entrances to it in order to avoid obscuring storefronts. In the pedestrian mall, concrete was substituted for flagstone, asphalt for concrete, flower beds replaced fountains and wood benches took the place of stone seats. The number of sculptures was halved and were either rented or loaned by the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art. The reflecting pool was never built.

![Image of Shoppers' World (1951)](image)

**Figure 12: Shoppers' World (1951)**

Nonetheless, Shurcliff soldiered on in his role to support the quest for consumer experience and greater profit. He used limited materials to the best advantage. Small trees would grow in time, inexpensive annual flowers would be flashy, and a relationship with the Institute of Contemporary Art might lend a highbrow aura to the suburban setting. He even championed the use of benches.
without backs to discourage loiterers and the placement of shrubs to keep people off
the grass and reduce maintenance costs. His portrayal of the project in a
Landscape Architecture article described a slick, up-to-the-minute environment and
divulged none of the struggles in its completion.

Despite immense initial popularity, Shoppers' World was a financial failure
due to market miscalculations, inadequate lease income, perceived problems with
the two-story layout, and parking issues. Suburban Centers Trust filed for
bankruptcy in 1955. Negative publicity resulting from the project damaged Morris
Ketchum's reputation as a shopping center architect and compromised his ability to
continue in the expanding field. Likewise, the Shurcliff firm did not participate in
later significant shopping center development. Nonetheless, Shurcliff did maintain
notoriety as a shopping center expert for some time. In 1954, he reviewed two
books on the subject for Landscape Architecture, highlighting the importance of the
role of the "landscape architect-site planner." The lessons of Shoppers' World informed those involved in the planning and
design of its descendants. Writing in 1957 about his work at the Roosevelt Field
Shopping Center (I.M. Pei, architect), landscape architect Robert Zion emphasized
the importance of "floorscape" to unify shopping centers and combat boredom and
immense plantings to create space. He also celebrated shopping centers as an
opportunity for landscape architects to collaborate with architects and engineers. In a 1955 speech, Victor Gruen, arguably the central figure in postwar shopping
center development, extolled the life-transforming positive effects of the regional
shopping center on the lives of suburban residents. He also cheered consumers
shopping "with so much joy, intensity, and gusto. . ."29 With the proper recipe of architecture, site planning, parking, and landscape, regional shopping centers would become a generator for the postwar American economy and a central focus for the nation’s social life.

**Banking Facilities**

Turning to the less-studied aspect of consumer-driven postwar development--banking facilities--Shurcliff's practice again both reflects and offers views of contemporary landscape architecture practice.

![New England Merchants National Bank](image)

*Figure 13: New England Merchants National Bank, Brighton Branch (1962)*
Responding to consumer demand for more convenient banking, New England Merchants National Bank, one of the largest banks in the country at the time, constructed Boston’s first drive-up bank in 1962. The new branch was located in Brighton, six miles from the center of Boston. The bank hired Shurcliff and Merrill for site planning and landscape design and Griswold, Boyden, Wylde and Ames for building design. The architects devised a set of futuristic buildings to house the bank branch and drive-up windows. The landscape plan for the site called for variations in paving materials and patterns to add visual interest and demarcate lanes leading to tellers' booths, an important safety aspect given the novelty of the drive-through bank. Existing significant trees were preserved and augmented with plantings of evergreens and ground cover. A huge lighted sign was incorporated into the site using supports reflecting the architecture and an underlying cobbled surface relating to other paving details. Writing about the project, Shurcliff noted that the new buildings and landscape had had positive impacts on the upkeep of neighboring properties in the industrializing area.30

The reach of banks into the suburban market and the booming postwar economy fueled an unparalleled growth of major urban banks. With big budgets and in pursuit of both modern efficiency and a fresh public countenance, many banks invested in significant downtown structures. One such bank building was Edward Larrabee Barnes’ New England Merchants National Bank (1970), a focal point of Boston's modernist makeover of its financial district. Near completion of the building, the firm of Shurcliff, Merrill and Footit was asked to consult with Barnes on a roof garden adjacent to the thirty-ninth floor staff dining room, one of
the highest roof gardens to be built. The garden had been part of the building’s program since its inception and had been a factor in the Boston Redevelopment Authority’s acceptance of the building’s design.

![Image of New England Merchants National Bank, Roof Garden (1971)](image)

**Figure 14: New England Merchants National Bank, Roof Garden (1971)**

The 52-foot by 172-foot garden was intended for public and private events and marketing purposes. The landscape architects devised a plan with a central raised brick terrace flanked on either side by two smaller brick terraces, each with a modern sculptural water feature. Collaboration between the landscape architects and the architect met with obstacles. While Barnes had constructed the garden platform to support the tall lindens he specified, Shurcliff worked to persuade him
that such large trees would not survive weather conditions on the thirty-ninth floor. Instead, thirty dwarf crabapples were planted on a grid based on the architecture, creating a symmetrical arrangement of three distinct and elegant spaces with views of Boston and its harbor. The trees were underplanted with ivy and annual flowers. Shurcliff also insisted on surrounding the perimeter of the garden with a tempered glass windscreen, making the spaces habitable by blocking the fierce winds coming off the harbor. Proud of the project and resolution of problems related to wind and temperature, Shurcliff mused that he hoped the project "will lead to more such beauty spots in other downtown areas from Boston to Hong Kong, and who knows, even Moscow?"
Analysis

In evaluating Shurcliff's commercial work in terms of landscape modernism, the roof garden, his latest project, is clearly the most modern and successful. Using architecture, paving, plants, trees and the atmosphere at the thirty-ninth floor, the garden created well scaled, serial spaces for human occupation and enjoyment. Most notably, the garden intimately connected interior spaces of the bank with the surrounding cityscape, nearby hills, Boston Harbor, and the Atlantic Ocean beyond by providing an accessible and inviting foreground. On a different scale, Shurcliff's 1962 drive-up bank also created modernist space for very different and peculiarly mid-twentieth-century occupants--people in automobiles. While the layout of the bank property was dictated by its location and traffic flow, paving materials, plantings, and even the well-incorporated sign were used in the service of directing traffic and improving bank patrons' experience. The project's functional and esthetic connections to the neighborhood beyond were evidenced by improvements in other properties. Both the drive-up bank and the roof garden were prototypes of landscapes of postwar consumer-driven development and were without historic precedent. On the other hand, North Shore Center and Shoppers' World, the earliest projects, barely embraced space as a foundational design element. Symmetric and axially aligned, the landscape in both projects was sealed off from the outside world by buildings and massive aprons of parking. In both, the landscape was clearly designed for viewing and possibly passing through, as illustrated by Shurcliff's comments about seating. Trees, shrubs, and plants were used for decorative purposes. At Shoppers' World, the pedestrian bridges further isolated the
landscape from both people and architecture. The proportions of the central area at both shopping centers were based on Beaux Arts principles; grand, two-dimensional compositions for viewing resulted. Shopping, perhaps with a view, was the goal. In contrast, at Gruen’s highly successful Northland Shopping Center in Detroit (1954), architecture was used to create a variety of human-scaled spaces that encouraged gathering and habitual shopping. Nevertheless, North Shore Center and Shoppers’ World were early attempts to use landscape to create experience for occupants, albeit wholly in the service of greater profit.
Notes


6 Longstreth, 268-272.

7 Cohen, 1051-52.

8 Lizabeth Cohen's work argues that economic segmentation, privatization of public space, and changes in women's financial power were effects of the spread of shopping centers in the postwar period.


11 Dyson, 46.


13 "Shopping Center," 85.
"Shopping Center," 84-85.

"Shopping Center," 86.

"Shopping Center," 93.


Shurcliff, Rained Fish, 152.


Shurcliff, Rained Fish, 152. Shurcliff's photographic documentation of Shoppers' World was essential in the development of a comprehensive account of the project. (Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design, folders E034, E069.)


Shurcliff, Rained Fish, 153.

Shurcliff,"Shoppers' World," 149.


Longstreth, 2010, 185-186.


31 Shurcliff, Rained Fish, 187-189.

CHAPTER 5
FOR THE PUBLIC GOOD

In a 1948 address to the American Institute of Park Executives, Sidney N. Shurcliff observed that the design of public open space "has become increasingly complex in proportion to our civilization; so complex that specialization within the field has become necessary." He warned, "No longer can one man or one firm master all aspects of park design." While commenting on changes in landscape architecture practice since the time of Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. and his own father's solo work, Shurcliff also reminded his audience (which included Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr.) that Charles Eliot's half-century old social, environmental and economic precepts for the creation of public parks still held true.²

Shurcliff's comments about public parks offer a window into the broader history and growing complexity of mid-twentieth-century landscape architecture practice in the public realm. In order to define themselves and even survive, landscape architects of the time had to adapt to the demands of an ever-changing world, especially with respect to public projects. Staggering developments in
transportation, growth of cities and suburbs, and shifts in recreation all contributed to changes in the design, location, and uses of public parks. Urban renewal for socioeconomic goals and emerging interest in the livability of cities produced both opportunities and dilemmas for landscape architects. Advances in travel and communication, new environmental concern, and broadening social perspectives opened the door for large-scale planning projects. In short, publicly funded projects sustained, challenged and defined twentieth-century landscape architecture practice.

With the demise of commissions, especially for large private estates, after 1929, landscape architects sought work in other areas, most notably for public entities. During the New Deal era, up to ninety percent of the members of the American Society of Landscape Architects were employed by governmental park, planning, and development agencies. As an exception, Arthur A. Shurcliff maintained his private practice during this period but produced work for the Metropolitan District Commission and the Boston Parks Department. After World War II and with ensuing economic expansion, most landscape architects returned to private practice and many collaborated with those working for public agencies in the design or redesign of public spaces.

The automobile drastically altered postwar parks and park making, both in a practical sense and theoretically. More easily accessed National Parks had to accommodate more visitors, campers and traffic. Cities were increasingly drained of more affluent citizens who chose to live in new suburban developments and drive to urban areas for work. As a result, greater demand for suburban parks arose and
urban parks often became victims of neglect and potential locations for new
highways, public housing, and municipal institutions. All parks, urban and far
removed, had to offer parking facilities. But most fundamentally, automobiles and
new speed of travel transformed public perception where, as landscape architecture
theorist Elizabeth K. Meyer writes, "The landscape is increasingly experienced as a
place of movement, of speed, of a cinematic rather than a pictorial way of seeing." Shurcliff saw this transformation and noted in his 1948 address, "it is no longer as
important to provide close to the city, as urged by Mr. Olmsted in 1885, 'opportunity
for a form of recreation to be obtained only through the influence of pleasing natural
scenery upon the sensibilities of those quietly contemplating it."

Again referring to Olmsted, Shurcliff depicted new uses for public parks:

Photographs taken in parks fifty years ago show a majority of the men
wearing derby hats and some with long-tailed frock coats. The women
wore ankle length skirts and voluminous sleeves. Both sexes strolled
about in the type of "quiet contemplation" described by Mr. Olmsted.
Now men and women customarily wear sport clothes, shorts or blue
jeans which means, of course, that they can be and are far more active
in outdoor sports than their progenitors.

Even prior to World War II, public parks and properties would provide fields, courts
and facilities for athletic activities but the trend would accelerate in the postwar
period, the result of population and economic expansion and user demand.
Landscape historian Ethan Carr notes that "By the 1950s reservations around
Boston and elsewhere were being redeveloped with recreational complexes
including ball fields, tennis courts, golf courses, ice rinks, indoor swimming pools,
and parking lots to meet the demands of larger, more urban populations in formerly
rural counties." Increased demands on public parks led to increased need for
efficiency in their design and operation. Eventually, park design developed from that of an individual park to that of a park system, leading to standardized and conventionally appearing parks.⁹

Construction of new parks began in the 1950s throughout cities but mostly in congested inner city areas and in or near newly built public housing projects. Municipal administrators took pride in the numbers and distribution of these parks, citing altruistic sociological reasons. Nevertheless, architecture professor Galen Cranz writes, "The establishment of parks in the projects and older areas often involved or abetted slum clearance, though the park commissioners never mentioned land values, business interests, or political-economic considerations of any kind in their reports…"¹⁰ Still, work on public parks was not a mainstay for postwar landscape architects. Most public landscapes from the late 1950s through the 1960s were civic plazas or "bonus plazas" owned or sponsored by private corporations, making them "semipublic" urban spaces.¹¹ However, around this same time, new interest and a reorientation of urban design was fueled by the publication of The Image of the City, Kevin Lynch’s seminal work in 1960, giving landscape architects new fodder for the improvement of the existing urban fabric.¹²

Planning is a final branch of landscape architecture practice in the public realm that advanced during the postwar period. Again returning to Olmsted, historian Melanie Simo and landscape architect Peter Walker write about postwar landscape architecture practice, "Altogether Olmsted spent some forty years building the profession of landscape architecture on the foundations of art and design theory, agricultural sciences, engineering, social theory, and the broader
environmental context, which has since evolved into specialties of city and regional planning."¹³ Long after Olmsted, the trajectory continued. Writing in 1961, landscape architect Lawrence Halprin described the importance of the landscape architect in the planning process as a designer who understood the dynamics of change and therefore the one with the ability to guide and encourage change. Halprin declared the role of the landscape architect in planning was to "strive continually to emphasize the importance of landscape open space as the very matrix of life, as the dominant part of the environment and structures as simply part of the complex relationship occurring within it."¹⁴ By the mid-twentieth century, planning had become a branch of practice to which landscape architecture had evolved and landscape architects could aspire.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, landscape architects bestowed the public with parks to meet perceived needs for scenery and fresh air. After World War II, the public demanded of landscape architects access to open space for physical activities and cultural events, accommodation of automobiles, and safer and more attractive streets. As the nation and its economy grew in the postwar period, so did opportunities for development of open land and redevelopment of older cities. Still, designers of postwar public space were not given unlimited or unquestioned budgets for their projects as in the past.

Finally, and on a broader front, the world was awakening to the possibilities brought by expanded air travel, communication and tourism. Shurcliff’s public sector projects in the postwar period mirror the forces afoot at the time and
illustrate the multiple dimensions in which many landscape architects worked and the ways in which the discipline of landscape architecture was evolving.

**Storrow Embankment**

A 1949 plan sponsored by Massachusetts Governor Paul A. Dever and administered by the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC) created a new, nearly three-mile parkway along the Boston shore of the Charles River. An example of a typical postwar urban road construction project, the parkway would be built on the Storrow Memorial Embankment, parkland developed in 1930 by Arthur A. Shurcliff with fill along the shore of the Charles River Basin. The four-lane road would cut off access to the park from the adjacent neighborhood, reduce the audience area and interfere with concerts at the popular music shell, eliminate two playgrounds and a ball field, and destroy a boat and skate house, three memorials, a refectory building, and public toilets. Fierce opposition to the project led to provisions for replacement of twenty-two acres of lost parkland with new fill, improvements in access with pedestrian bridges, replacement of play areas, construction of a pool and bathhouse, reconstruction of other facilities, relocation of memorials, and notably, reduction in the width of the parkway by twenty-four feet. With passage of legislation and appropriation of funding for the project by the state legislature, the landscape architecture firm of Arthur A. Shurcliff and Sidney N. Shurcliff was engaged to undertake the project in cooperation with the road engineers.

In his earlier work on the Storrow Memorial Embankment, Arthur Shurcliff had conceived of the idea of creating a series of barrier islands along the river’s shore. Since funding was not available at the time, the islands were not constructed.
With the 1949 project however, the idea was revived. Writing about the firm’s redevelopment proposal for the area, Sidney Shurcliff described the advantages of the scheme. The series of barrier islands would create a lagoon adjacent to the music shell area allowing both the replacement of lost dry-land audience area and creation of a new area for boaters to enjoy concerts. In addition, the barrier islands would create interesting and inviting variations along the shoreline creating both open and intimate spaces for pedestrians and boaters.

![Figure 16: Storrow Embankment (1949)](image-url)
Figure 17: Storrow Embankment, Charlesbank Recreation Center (1949)

The proposed improvements to the area known as the Charlesbank (between the Longfellow Bridge and the Charles River Dam) in the 1949 Shurcliff plan warrant particular attention. With more than five acres of additional fill, the area would include a new recreation center comprised of a playground, pool, bathhouse, and baseball, softball, and football fields. This area was adjacent to the residential section of the West End, contemporaneously considered by city officials and prominent citizens as a slum. Interestingly, Shurcliff stated, "The facilities planned in this area have been carefully worked out in close coöperation [sic] with representatives of the West End residents..."16 It is unclear if Shurcliff was aware of plans first formulated in the early 1940s and carried out in 1956 for the wholesale clearance of the West End under the guise of urban renewal. The Charlesbank facilities also presented technical challenges for construction. Built on
fill, the swimming pool required underlying pilings for support and a plan to use river water (known to be polluted in 1949) to fill the pool necessitated extensive filtering equipment. Shurcliff lamented that financial limitations would likely curtail completion of all aspects of the proposal.

![Image of Metropolitan Boston Arts Center (1959)](image)

**Figure 18: Metropolitan Boston Arts Center (1959)**

**Metropolitan Boston Arts Center**

Ten years later and five miles west of the Charlesbank, the Metropolitan Boston Arts Center began to take shape on sixteen acres of MDC land along the Charles River. The vision of a group of socially connected corporate leaders and philanthropists, the center would boast a new theater, contemporary art museum, and opera house. The theater would be surrounded by a moat crossed by a bridge terminating at a tunnel under a massive earthen berm meant to minimize traffic.
noise from nearby Soldiers Field Road. A permanent home for Institute of Contemporary Art, itinerant since its founding in 1936, would also span the moat. A third bridge would connect to the opera house.

The landscape architecture firm of Shurcliff and Merrill was hired by the MDC for site planning and landscape design. The firm's preliminary historical research revealed that the site had been salt marsh up until construction of the Charles River Dam in 1910. Soundings showed that a thick layer of peat lay just six feet below surface in some places and under the peat, heavy clay. The firm consulted with a soil scientist to determine how to support building foundations and the massive berm on the site. In addition to screening out noise from the adjacent roadway, the berm would be terraced into four levels for gatherings and performances on the side facing the theater. The landscape design promised that "trees and shrubs will grow in abundance to shade a maze of charmingly circuitous walks; picnic areas will dot the Charles; parking for over 300 cars will be available..."18 The center's 1959 debut program praised the landscape plan as an antidote to a very contemporary problem: "All too often today venerable trees give reluctant way to an Expressway for speeding cars; factories and houses replace virgin land; and we are poorer for nature's destructions."19 Other features planned for the future included a 200-foot dock for those arriving by boat. The centerpiece of the arts complex was a circular theater designed by architect Carl Koch. Vinyl-coated nylon stretched over a steel ring supported by steel columns formed the structure's roof. Ultimately, concrete would be sprayed over the fabric to create a permanent roof.20 The theater was hastily constructed in three months in the spring
of 1959 to allow for a summer performance season. From its conception, the project and Shurcliff’s site plan complete with moat and berm had the aura of a highbrow but nonetheless fantastical theme park for adults.

The Metropolitan Boston Arts Center never achieved its mission of bringing culture to the people "...at prices which are as low as are consistent with the necessity for defraying the costs of maintenance in operations." Poor management, political disputes and indifference, MDC resource constraints, and ultimately neglect and vandalism of the site resulted in its abandonment and demolition. Little of the landscape plan was ever executed.

![Figure 19: Tremont Street, Before Improvements (c. 1957)](image)

**Tremont Streetscape**

While the Metropolitan Boston Arts Center project was developing, Shurcliff and Merrill oversaw improvements to the streetscape along Tremont Street, the southeastern border of the Boston Common. When the Boston Parks Department
commissioned the firm for this work in 1957, billboard-clad subway entrances sat on the barren, 35-foot wide sidewalk separating the Common from the street.23 This area was long seen as the inelegant foyer of the Boston Common and the State House and a potentially dangerous stretch for both pedestrians and motorists. Forty years earlier, having recently completed the development of Lafayette Mall, the formal axial approach from Tremont Street to the State House, Arthur Shurcliff turned his attention to this same area. Writing in 1917, the elder Shurcliff wrote about "the wide expanse of granolithic surface at the lower end of the Mall along Tremont Street. In the summer these open spaces become baking hot under the heat of the sun, and they also invite pedestrians to make diagonal crossings of Tremont Street." He proposed "to reduce the areas of these granolithic deserts by the addition of planting beds . . . [that] . . . will extend to the curb line and will provide openings for foot-passers only at points where crossings are desirable."24

Figure 20: Tremont Street (1958)
In 1958, Shurcliff and Merrill did just what Arthur Shurcliff had suggested. Visual and physical width of the sidewalk was reduced by a series of alternating rectangular and circular seating-height brick planters filled with small trees and flowering plants. Just twenty inches below the surface of the pavement, the underlying subway tunnel prohibited the use of larger structures and trees.\textsuperscript{25} The sidewalk was resurfaced in two tones of concrete, creating visual interest and formality. Parkman Plaza, a Baroque circular space ringed with flags and statuary and a central fountain was created at the intersection of Tremont and West Streets.\textsuperscript{26} While generally acclaimed, the project came under criticism for its cost of $350,000; however, Shurcliff noted, the project was funded by a private endowment expressly for the improvement and maintenance of existing Boston parks.

![Figure 21: Tremont Street, Parkman Plaza (1958)](image-url)
Taiwan Tourism Development Plan

One of his last public-sector projects took Sidney Shurcliff far from Boston. The Director of the Tourist Bureau of the Republic of China (Taiwan) invited him in 1972 to tour the island and make recommendations for development of its nascent tourist industry. Noting that Taiwan had "no surplus scenic features which can be squandered . . .,"27 Shurcliff recommended "a policy to prohibit the formalization of areas of outstanding natural interest or beauty by introducing foreign elements such as monuments, formal city type flower beds, ugly structures for serving food or selling souvenirs, unsightly parking lots, inharmonious bridges and railings, and the like."28 He went on to suggest specific sites for hotels and other tourist destinations as well as infrastructure improvements such as roads and utilities to support tourism. Shurcliff's consultation in Taiwan occurred the same year President Richard M. Nixon visited China. American landscape architecture's tentative embrace of the outside world (and Asia in particular) mirrored the reaching out of the superpowers.

Analysis

Like his Taiwan recommendations, Shurcliff's work in the public realm was driven by utility, not theoretical considerations of landscape modernism. The new Boston streetscape--particularly the historicist Parkman Plaza--was stylish but hardly human-centered. While the design addressed an unnecessarily wide sidewalk and traffic safety, reliance on strict geometry and the Baroque plaza did little to connect with the adjacent Common or even the urban setting on the opposite side of Tremont Street. Plants were used as decoration rather than for
textural or sculptural qualities. The failed Metropolitan Boston Arts Center had potential for the creation of human-scaled space and indoor-outdoor connection but became mostly a spectacle of constructions, including the ridiculously large protective berm. Parts of the Storrow Memorial Embankment redevelopment joined function with esthetics, creating spaces for people where land, river, and city came together. Notably, these aspects were part of Arthur Shurcliff’s original 1930 plan. On the other hand, the Charlesbank recreation area was purely a functional collection of facilities. Perhaps the increasing complexity of creating meaningful and modern public open space by one individual or one firm in the postwar period was just too great for Shurcliff to overcome.
Notes


2 Shurcliff, 1948, 622. In his speech, Shurcliff paraphrases Eliot's 1892 basic reasons for park creation: "1. Preservation of open spaces with outstanding natural charm which otherwise might be destroyed by urban encroachment or human exploitation. 2. Control of water level in water courses (especially where drainage is difficult as in tidal inlets) so that no meddler can produce swamps or floods. 3. Control of sea shores and shores of water courses so that they will not be abused, polluted and defaced by the population living on their banks or near them. 4. Protection of public financial policy by acquisition of land of sub-marginal character (low lands, rocy crags, flood plains, etc.) so as to prevent the building of shacks, makeshift structures, dumps, etc., which cannot be assessed high enough to pay their own way. 5. Provision of playgrounds of ample size in addition to the small playgrounds which are normally supplied in urban areas."


4 Carr, 205.


6 Shurcliff, 1948, 624. In this passage, Shurcliff quotes Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. (source not noted).

7 Shurcliff, 623.

8 Carr, 205.


11 Carr, 216.

this work, Lynch describes the aspects of urban design—landmarks, nodes, paths, edges, and districts—that make cities "imageable" or readable to citizens and visitors and therefore unique and user-friendly. Coming in the wake of massive and often generic urban renewal schemes, Lynch's work focused attention on the power of traditional urban environments and their potential application to redeveloping cities.


16 Shurcliff 1949, 21.

17 While spanning several years and involving many notable Bostonians in political, social and artistic spheres, little has been written about the Metropolitan Boston Arts Center. The center's program: The Metropolitan Boston Arts Center: First Season 1959 provides a comprehensive, albeit glowing, account of planning and construction of the project. Architect Nathaniel Saltonstall was one of the founders of the Boston Institute of Contemporary Art and designed the proposed art gallery for the arts center.

18 The Metropolitan Boston Arts Center: First Season 1959: 35.

19 The Metropolitan Boston Arts Center: First Season 1959: 35.

20 The Metropolitan Boston Arts Center: First Season 1959: 12. Arthur Shurcliff constructed the roof for a small shed on his property in Ipswich using the process of spraying concrete over a bed sheet stretched over the walls of the structure.


23 Like the arts center, little has been written about the streetscape renovations on Tremont Street. Shurcliff's photographic documentation of the area both before and after construction was used for this account. (Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design, folders E005, E029, E058, E087.)


26 The Parkman Plaza design bears a striking resemblance to Arthur Shurcliff's design for the War Memorial at Amherst College (1946). But where the Amherst site opens to a majestic vista of the Holyoke Range mountains, Parkman Plaza opened onto Tremont Street and the buildings on the other side of the street.

27 Sidney N. Shurcliff, Development and Improvement of Landscape Attractions for Tourism in Taiwan (Republic of China, Tourism Bureau, 1972): 10.

28 Tourism in Taiwan: 12.
CHAPTER 6

CAMPUSES AT CROSSROADS

Of the many changes in American society after World War II, the transformation of higher education was one of the most dramatic. Marked increases in students, new fields of research, and a reorientation of education strained the facilities of existing colleges and universities and led to the development of many new ones. Explosive postwar growth of student enrollments was first fueled by veterans taking advantage of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (the G.I. Bill), then by higher proportions of the general population entering higher education, and finally by the "baby boom" generation reaching college age in the 1960s.¹ Total enrollments grew from 2.7 million in 1955 to 7 million by 1970 and more women entered higher education, comprising thirty-eight percent of students in 1960 and fifty-one percent by the late 1970s.² The Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957 especially spurred the demand for scientific research and development facilities, bringing public and private investment and more students to universities. Both state-supported and private institutions grew and "junior" colleges and later, community colleges, were founded. By 1962, nearly all of the approximately two
thousand colleges and universities in the country had expansion plans and two
hundred new campuses were planned or under construction.³

Concomitant with growth, the built form of American colleges and
universities also metamorphosed during the postwar period. Obsolete traditional
forms of campus design no longer met contemporary educational or social goals.⁴ In
addition to new libraries, classrooms, and laboratories, campuses also had to
respond to evolving concern for the social needs of students, faculty and staff.
Architectural historian Stefan Muthesius argues that the postwar campus
increasingly was the result of a sort of utopian effort "when educational reformism
united with a new social and architectural impetus."⁵ In designing campuses,
educators, psychologists, and higher education administrators became equal or
greater partners with architects and other planners and attention was given to
student life beyond the classroom. Spaces for living, working, and interacting, all
components of a new view of education, became as important as lecture halls and
libraries. Dormitories and dining halls were no longer seen as inconvenient
necessities to be placed on the periphery of the academic heart of the campus. A
more fluid, evolving idea of campus took hold. Muthesius adds that, as buildings
alone were no longer the sole determinant of campus form, the emergent role of the
campus planner gained significance.⁶

Certainly, transformation of the American campus did not come easily,
particularly during the early transitional phase and especially for the campus
planner. In a 1958 speech to a joint meeting of the International Federation of
Landscape Architects and the American Society of Landscape Architects in
Washington, D.C., Sidney N. Shurcliff admonished his audience about campus planning:

The planner faced with such a task is involved in an undertaking of very considerable magnitude for he will find himself dealing with a total number of persons equal to about twice the enrollment. . . . Usualy the planner must start with an existing physical plant which in many respects is ill-laid out and obsolete and with a site which is hemmed in by undesirable topography or structures, or both. He not infrequently wishes to discard or disregard much of the physical situation with which he is confronted but for economic reasons this is usually impossible; therefore the best solution that can be devised will be necessarily a compromise between the theoretically desirable and the practical.  

And finally he warned,  

The consulting architect must be charged with the responsibility of seeing that the plan is followed. New architects and new administrators may be expected to take the place of previous ones, and they will be tempted either by ignorance or willfulness to deviate from the plan or even to ignore it. The consulting architect must either keep them in line with the plan or see that the plan is revised in a satisfactory manner before any deviation is permitted.  

Shurcliff's comments place him closer to a historicist view of planning as a stone-etched directive than Muthesius' utopian concept or the current view of planning as a dynamic process but still within the postwar transition. To better understand the transition, it becomes necessary to examine its precedents.  

While design and construction of American campuses began as far back as the colonial era, campus planning as an endeavor was initiated in the second half of the nineteenth century. Around 1865, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. began preliminary plans for the University of California in Berkeley. The Olmsted office would later draw campus plans for other institutions, among them Mount Holyoke College and Chatham College. William Burges' plan for Trinity College in Hartford,
Connecticut (1878) and Henry Ives Cobb’s plan for the University of Chicago (1893) relied upon English models at Cambridge and Oxford, using buildings to enclose space as was typical of campus plans of the period. A new direction in campus planning emerged after the Columbia Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. Increasingly, buildings were considered parts of compositions and instead of simply enclosing space, buildings were located within space, a concept ultimately giving rise to the modernist ideal of "space" as described by Garrett Eckbo in Landscape for Living (1950). Additionally, landscape architects like Olmsted espoused considerations for natural features like topography, climate, views, and vegetation in siting buildings and creating designed landscapes. One of the earliest practitioners in this new more expansive mode of campus design, Boston architect Ralph Adams Cram, drew plans for what would become Wheaton College, a college for women in Norton, Massachusetts in 1897. Using Beaux Arts elements like a multiaxial layout, scaling of buildings and central public spaces, Cram and others produced unified plans for both new and existing campuses that arranged buildings in space in concert with the landscape.

As mostly conservative institutions, American colleges and universities resisted modern architecture as it filtered in from Europe in the first three decades of the twentieth century. But growing attention became focused on collegiate architecture, pitting traditionalists against modernists. At last in 1938, Architectural Forum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York cosponsored a competition for the design of an International Style art center at Wheaton College. While the building was ultimately not built, tastes in collegiate architecture had
began to change. Meanwhile, campus planning was given little attention and even less progressive intervention. Even Mies van der Rohe's complex of International Style buildings for the Illinois Institute of Technology (1938-40) was arranged symmetrically and axially around a central quadrangle. A notable exception was at Goucher College in Baltimore, Maryland. Again in 1938, a competition was held for a master plan for a new suburban campus for the women's college on a hilly, forested site. The program for the competition called for the master plan to reflect progressive education, preserve the natural setting and that "emphasis should be upon the informal rather than the institutional or monumental." The winning plan created a campus that responded to the topography of the site and allowed expansion without disruption of an overall cohesive scheme. This facilitation of growth anticipated the greatest demand on campus planning when it resumed after World War II.

In 1947, Joseph Hudnut, dean of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, decried "corseted" Beaux Arts campus designs and proclaimed,

That which is true of buildings is true of groups of buildings whenever, as in a university, these are united by the invisible threads of purpose and use. Not alone the individual buildings--library, dormitory, laboratory--are to acknowledge in mass and plane the task which they have to perform, the methods by which they have to perform, the methods by which they were built, but these must also be clearly revealed in the pattern of the university as a whole.16

In short, functionalism in architecture and planning was the new goal. In practice, this became functionalism of design in association with the social, economic, and educational aspects of postwar America as previously discussed. In his 1958 speech and again in a 1965 address to the National Association of Physical Plant
Administrators of Universities and Colleges, Shurcliff spoke of the imperatives of campus expansion, assimilation of women, accommodation of automobiles and inclusion of facilities for programs like the Reserve Officers Training Corps (R.O.T.C.).

**Mount Holyoke College**

Almost a century before Shurcliff made those comments, Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts embarked upon a first expansion of its facilities. Founded as Mount Holyoke Female Seminary by Mary Lyon in 1837, the college required additional buildings for new courses and a growing number of students. In the late nineteenth century, the college turned to the Olmsted office to configure a campus on a rolling, partially wooded site. The original Olmsted campus plan accommodated an impressive array of classically detailed collegiate buildings. By 1922, Arthur A. Shurcliff, a former apprentice in the Olmsted office, had been engaged for further development of the campus. Upon joining his father in practice in 1930, Sidney Shurcliff became increasingly involved in the work at Mount Holyoke and by the mid-1950s was solely responsible. Much of Shurcliff’s initial work involved relatively minor adjustments of earlier plans such as placing plantings, siting parking lots, and adding to athletic facilities. By 1960 however, the college embarked upon ambitious expansion plans to include contemporary architecture.

As part of this expansion, Mount Holyoke hired architect Carl Koch to design a new student spiritual center and with Pietro Belluschi, an adjacent amphitheater, both of which were completed in 1960. Shurcliff and Merrill collaborated with the
architects on the siting and landscape for these new structures at the center of campus. Merging the new architecture with the existing campus fabric and screening distracting views were priorities in the landscape plan. The amphitheater required additional interventions that illustrate aspects of landscape architecture practice of the period. While construction of the amphitheater was completed in the fall of 1960, the college intended to use it for graduation ceremonies the following spring. Given that the structure included turf seats and stairs that would endure heavy use, the landscape architects relied on new and untried technology as a solution—a product called "Troyturf," matting "with the seeds and nutrients embedded in the needle body...." Despite problems with seed germination, the manufacturers of the product were anxious to publicize its use at Mount Holyoke in trade and consumer publications. Letters between the company's publicity agent, Shurcliff and Merrill, and Carl Koch and Associates indicate the urgency each placed on controlling publication of the project. Shurcliff especially hoped for publication in Landscape Architecture and Koch in Architectural Forum and Architectural Record, underscoring the professional influence and commercial advantage offered by these publications.

![Image of Mount Holyoke College, Amphitheater (1960)](image)

Figure 22: Mount Holyoke College, Amphitheater (1960)
Completed in 1971, Shurcliff, Merrill and Footit's last major project at Mount Holyoke was a renovation of the 1904 Garden, a favorite project of influential alumnae of the time.\(^{23}\) Located on the north side of architect Hugh Stubbins' Art Building (1971), the garden's original size was reduced by two-thirds with the building's construction. The sentimental design of flowering plants, a sundial, and benches was reminiscent of Sidney Shurcliff's earliest, constrained work at the college.\(^{24}\)

Meanwhile, Shurcliff and his firm were delving into broader campus planning projects. The firm's master plan for the University of Massachusetts in Amherst produced in 1957 gave urgent responses to an overall increase in students, more female students, and a surge of automobiles on campus among other issues.\(^{25}\) The plan provided a functional assessment and approach to needs for more buildings and athletic facilities, roads, and parking lots. Of particular note was a recommendation to convert a major road bisecting the central portion of the campus into a pedestrian way. Despite, or because of, burgeoning numbers of commuters, the idea of keeping automobiles to the periphery of campus cores was beginning to take hold at this time. In general, however, the plan did not offer suggestions on planning for a cohesive community setting where educational reform was joined with new social and architectural values--the utopian concept. But Shurcliff clearly saw campus planning as a viable business venture and distributed copies of his well-illustrated University of Massachusetts Master Plan to college and university administrators as a marketing tool.\(^{26}\)
Wheaton College

While no longer the sole determinant of campus form, architectural design maintained a significant role in postwar campuses. For example, interest in modernist architecture at Wheaton College grew in fits and starts after the 1938 competition for a new art center. A dramatic reversal by the school’s administration and a directive for historicist architecture for new construction led to protests and the resignation of a prominent art professor. Agreeing to change course once again, the college’s administration hired architect Howard L. Rich and his firm Rich and Tucker Associates to design several new International Style buildings for the school soon after World War II. By the mid 1950s, with the need to expand clear, Wheaton’s governing board voted to construct three additional dormitories and a new dining hall. Soon after, two additional classroom buildings and another dormitory were authorized. Obviously, the original campus designed by Cram could not accommodate such growth, so a distinct, new sector was planned. Without apparent deliberation, Wheaton’s president turned to the Shurcliff firm in 1955 to design this new area with Rich and Tucker.

College-owned land east of the original quadrangle was tagged to accommodate these ambitious expansion plans. Working together, the landscape architects and architects devised a scheme to site the first three dormitories and the dining hall in a cohesive grouping seemingly independent of the older portion of the campus. In contrast to the Cram campus where living space was peripheral to academic space, the addition created a community where facilities to meet students’ needs were given precedence. The three dormitories—Young Hall (1957), McIntire
Hall (1959), and Clark Hall (1960)--and Chase Dining Hall (1959) formed a residential compound. Rich's distinctly modern architecture incorporating tan brick, stone, steel, and glass contrasted starkly with the somber red brick buildings of the existing campus. Certainly, Wheaton's expansion was striving for the architectural aspect of utopian efforts in campus planning emerging at the time. Nevertheless, the new student community could not exist in isolation from the rest of the campus. The challenge of uniting the new area with the old campus was made greater by the former sitting at a grade more than twenty feet below the latter. The Shurcliff master plan for Wheaton, finalized in 1962, shows the few bold gestures employed to unify new with old and architecture with education--in short, to create one campus closer to the utopian ideal. The new residential compound was knit together with a network of paths, creating an abstract composition in plan and non-axially carved spaces in elevation. A serpentine wall separated the central mall between the dormitories from a drop-off area, adding a third dimension to the biomorphic form of paths. Students could choose to walk between dormitories and the dining hall on the series of outdoor paths or along covered walkways. Parking was conveniently located adjacent to the dormitories but outside the grouping of new buildings. An existing pond was enlarged and wrapped around the new residential area, forming both distinction between and visual connection with it and the upper old campus. Construction of the Humanities Building (1959) and the Fine Arts Center (1962) and a plaza between the two, just west of the pond at the base of the slope leading up to the old quadrangle, created functional connection. A sturdy, straight pedestrian spine ran between the dormitories, across a bridge over the
pond, through the plaza between the two new academic buildings, up the slope and into the north end of the old quadrangle. Educational, architectural, and social unity was achieved in the form of a consolidated academic campus.

Figure 23: Wheaton College (c. 1962)

While work was underway at Wheaton, Shurcliff and his firm were developing a master plan for the University of New Hampshire in Durham. The acting president of the university at the time, Edward D. Eddy, would soon become president of Chatham College in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When Chatham embarked upon expansion in 1964, Shurcliff's firm was engaged for the next decade. For a campus planner, Chatham presented formidable topographic and historic obstacles.
Chatham College

Founded in 1869 as the Pennsylvania Female College, Chatham would grow in piecemeal fashion over the next century.\textsuperscript{32} The school’s original campus was an estate composed of a large house and eleven acres of land on a steep hill overlooking the Shadyside district of Pittsburgh. With expansive views to the north, the estates of some of the wealthiest families of Pittsburgh’s industrial golden age would eventually hem in the site. By 1931, the original house had been expanded and dormitories, a library, and a science building were added. In 1940, the adjacent eight-acre estate of Andrew W. Mellon, including a Tudor Revival mansion and large carriage house, was given to the college. Just twenty years earlier, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. had designed the Mellon estate landscape. When the property passed to Chatham, there were formal gardens, an orchard, a pond, tennis courts, and a large greenhouse. Interestingly, the main entrance of the mansion opened onto a formally planted garden court that was built on the roof of a structure housing a large swimming pool. On the hilly terrain, the portion of campus near the Mellon estate sits thirty to forty feet below the grade of the original Chatham campus structures. As late as 1947, Olmsted consulted on the landscape plan for the enlarged Chatham campus. Between 1947 and 1953, the architectural firm of Ingham, Boyd and Pratt oversaw the replacement of the oldest structures of the original campus with an academic building and a new chapel that along with the 1920s library and science buildings formed a quadrangle perched on the northeast hillside of the property. All of the red brick buildings of the quadrangle were of Georgian Revival style. From
1949 to 1953, landscape architect Ralph E. Griswold collaborated with Chatham’s architects on landscape design for the campus.

The Chatham campus was essentially two distinct entities when Shurcliff and Merrill began work in 1964—the upper quadrangle and the lower Mellon estate. A few buildings and a large parking lot were sandwiched between the two. Many students either commuted to the school or lived in scattered peripheral housing that had been acquired by the school over the years. In addition to the topographic and historic obstacles to be confronted, the firm would face an additional challenge: distance. Labor issues, communication problems, and litigious neighbors would complicate and delay the Boston-based landscape architects’ efforts.33

After initial evaluation and in light of changing student needs, it became clear that the school required better library and dining facilities and a concert/lecture hall. Given restricted possibilities for construction, the Shurcliff master plan recommended expansion to the west of the quadrangle, on the site of the parking lot and adjacent private homes. Eventually, Chatham acquired the residential properties and became committed to growth. An obvious difficulty with this site was the configuration of the 1950s academic building that essentially turned its back on the site slated for expansion. An early scheme for the new facilities was labeled, "The Chatham College Forum: A New Concept for the College Campus."34 According to promotional materials, the somewhat utopian proposal was "an attempt in structural form to bring together in close proximity the primary concerns of the student: reading and studying, listening and learning, and the enjoyment of intelligent conversation."35 The scheme called for the construction of three separate
but connected buildings--concert hall, library, and dining hall. In time, it became clear that such a massive structure would dominate the constrained site, offer little useable outdoor space, and further segment the upper quadrangle from the lower part of campus. With Shurcliff’s urging, the plan was reconfigured and it was decided that the library and concert/lecture hall would occupy the proposed site and the dining hall would be made a companion to the historic Mellon mansion. With this separation came the possibility for meaningful outdoor space and better cohesion, both physically and functionally, of the campus.

Figure 24: Chatham College (c. 1975)
Architect Philip Chu of the firm Kilham, Beder and Chu was selected for the design of the new library and lecture hall. His modernist 59,000 square foot library and adjoining 10,000 square foot concert hall were constructed of precast concrete and opened in 1973. Melding these imposing structures and the defined open space created by their construction into the existing campus fabric proved difficult. One gesture by the Shurcliff firm did however help to bring the disparate elements together. Replacement of a lawn in front of the chapel with a bold, geometrically paved forecourt of limestone on a concrete base visually unified the quadrangle entrance with the library. A broad and gentle stair leading from the forecourt and on axis with the library added to the unifying effect. A miniaturized version of Mount Holyoke’s grass and concrete amphitheater was placed adjacent to the concert hall at some point after the building’s construction. Without physical or functional connection to its surroundings, the amphitheater seemed orphaned in the surrounding space. Likewise, the new open space in front of the library, although defined, still suffered from the indifference of the adjacent architecture, awkward proportions and a lack of defining features and focus.

Also opened in 1973, the dining facility attached to the Mellon mansion was designed by Kenneth Johnstone of the architectural firm Johnstone, Newcomer and Valentour. The design and materials of this building were more sympathetic to the existing historic architecture. While addressing this area, the landscape architects took care to preserve some of the existing elements of Olmsted’s work, including several trees and flower borders. The Shurcliff renovation of the roof-top garden court at the main entrances to the mansion and the new dining hall removed
an existing circular driveway and created a lushly planted space overlooking the lower campus.

Despite major obstacles, Shurcliff achieved some success at Chatham in creating a campus where educational, social and architectural forces came together. Conversely, his efforts for Southeastern Massachusetts Technological Institute (SMTI) in South Dartmouth were less fruitful. Architect Paul M. Rudolph conceived of the SMTI campus as a single oeuvre that was designed and built between 1962 and 1972. Rudolph devised the campus around a central spiraling mall inspired by the open spaces at Thomas Jefferson’s University of Virginia and Frank Lloyd Wright’s Florida Southern College. As a new institution designed for commuter students, Rudolph planned the campus to appear larger and more established and accommodated parking in peripheral lots ingeniously screened by the landscape. Contemplating expansion, the administration of SMTI engaged Shurcliff and Merrill to develop a master plan in 1967. The resulting 1971 plan shows a heavy-handed addition of academic buildings, dormitories and large parking lots to Rudolph’s plan. Blocking vistas and centrifugally destroying the surrounding landscape, the Shurcliff plan would essentially obliterate the intent of the original campus design. As a result of overwhelming resistance, the Shurcliff plan was never implemented at SMTI.

Analysis

At first glance, the emerging postwar ideal of the utopian campus appears aligned with landscape modernism. Creating campus that brings together educational reformism with social and architectural forces appears to mirror the
modernist ideal of combining function and esthetics through a marriage of planar, plastic and structural design. In practice, the utopian ideal, however elusive, seemed more easily attained than the modernist ideal. Creating human centric space out of existing campuses was hindered by many factors, including history, budgetary and space constraints, preexisting buildings and axial plans, and, as Shurcliff observed, the sheer number of people involved. At Mount Holyoke, Shurcliff’s work augmented space created by his predecessors there but primarily employed plants for decoration and screening of modern architecture. At Chatham, he created pockets of space, but not a spatially designed campus connecting indoors with outdoors. In contrast, Shurcliff succeeded in bringing landscape modernism to Wheaton. Created with buildings, ground plane, trees, shrubs, and water, the new campus was composed of human-scaled spaces and was itself a space within and connected to the overall Wheaton campus. Students’ experience there came closer to the utopian ideal as well as a result of the cohesive campus.

Figure 25: Wheaton College, Clark Hall (c. 1962)
Notes


3 Turner, 249-50.

4 Turner, 249.

5 Muthesius, 1.

6 Muthesius, 12.

7 "Master Planning of Universities," transcript of speech given by Sidney N. Shurcliff to the Joint Meeting of the International Federation of Landscape Architects in Washington, D.C., July 1958, page 1. (From Marion B. Gebbie Archives and Special Collections, Wallace Library, Wheaton College, Norton, MA.)

8 "Master Planning of Universities," 11.

9 Richard P. Dober, Campus Planning (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp., 1964): 34. Dober was a leader in the development of the discipline of campus planning in the postwar period. When Shurcliff wrote to him on June 1, 1961 suggesting publication of the Mount Holyoke amphitheater project in Landscape Architecture, he was an editor of the magazine and worked at Sasaki, Walker and Associates. (From Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, folder 13.)

10 Dober, 32.

11 Dober, 34.


13 Muthesius, 24-25.

14 Turner, 251.

15 Quote is from Goucher College competition program as quoted by Turner, p. 252 with ellipsis added.

17 "Master Planning the Campus," transcript of speech given by Sidney N. Shurcliff to the Fourteenth Annual Meeting, Eastern Regional Group, National Association of Physical Plant Administrators of Universities and Colleges on January 22, 1965. (From Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design.) While this address is substantially similar to the one given in 1958, Shurcliff added comments about the potential inspirational qualities of good campus design and observations about the academic department head as "a small czar in his own field" who thereby complicates the campus planner's work.

18 Alumnae publication, Mount Holyoke College, no date. (From Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, folder 17.)

19 A letter from Sidney N. Shurcliff to Otto C. Kohler, Business Manager of Mount Holyoke College, dated December 12, 1956 indicates Shurcliff's central role in his firm's work at the college at that point. (From Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College.)

20 A letter from Sidney N. Shurcliff to Otto C. Kohler, dated October 4, 1960 outlines the goals for planting at the amphitheater. (From Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, folder 12.)


22 Sidney N. Shurcliff's March 15, 1961 letter to Harvey M. Epstein of the Feeley Advertising Agency, Inc. of New York expresses concern that the manufacturer of Troyturf had pushed for publication of the project before the designers could do likewise. This and related letters from both Shurcliff's and Carl Koch's office underscore the urgency with which they hoped for publication in professional journals. (From Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, folders 12 and 13.)

23 A letter from Otto C. Kohler, then Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds at Mount Holyoke, to Sidney N. Shurcliff, dated April 9, 1953 is the first mention of alumnae interest in restoration of the 1904 Garden. (From Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College.)

24 The 1904 Garden was finally approved in 1970 and completed the following year upon completion of Hugh Stubbins' Arts building. (Letters and planting plans from Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College, folder 16.)
25 Shurcliff, Shurcliff and Merrill, *Master Plan for the University of Massachusetts, Amherst* (October, 1957).

26 Sidney N. Shurcliff’s letter to Otto C. Kohler, dated October 31, 1957 illustrates his plan to distribute the University of Massachusetts Master Plan for marketing purposes. (From Archives and Special Collections, Mount Holyoke College.)


29 Wheaton College Board of Trustees meeting minutes of October 22, 1955 and January 21, 1956. (From Marion B. Gebbie Archives and Special Collections, Wallace Library, Wheaton College, Norton, MA.)

30 *Making it Modern: Wheaton College*, 42. The failed 1938 art center project was slated for a portion of this site.


33 Folder B134 at Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Graduate School of Design is comprised of 25 folders filled with correspondence, invoices and other documents relating to work at Chatham from 1964-1975. Disputes with neighboring landowners, labor issues, and supply problems among other issues appear to have been numerous.

34 *The Chatham College Forum*, undated pamphlet. (From Archives and Special Collections, Jennie King Mellon Library, Chatham University.)


Southeastern Massachusetts Technological Institute Board of Trustees meeting minutes of September 30, 1971. (From Archives and Special Collections, Claire T. Carney Library, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth.)
CHAPTER 7
THE LEGACY OF SIDNEY NICHOLS SHURCLIFF

Sidney N. Shurcliff’s life and work offer a vantage point for viewing twentieth-century landscape architecture in particular and American culture in general. Spanning a period of tremendous change, Shurcliff mirrors contemporary influences on the role and practice of the landscape architect. Most notably, his work reflects the dialogues between theory and practice that were integral to a period of transition in the profession. The essence of these dialogues expands historical knowledge of mid-twentieth-century landscapes and the canon by which they are judged, and therefore potentially preserved, today. In turn, such enlightenment broadens the circle of designers worthy of remembrance and the impact both their successful and unsuccessful work has on current practice.

Shurcliff’s life and career traversed much of the twentieth century. With one foot planted solidly in his father’s early twentieth-century world and the other in the quickly changing late-postwar world, he attempted balance. He likely both relished and wished to move past the spoils of family name and connections. His practice carried the threads of landscape architecture’s Olmstedian beginnings to practitioners still working today whom he mentored in his office and through the
many organizations in which he was involved. Shurcliff’s firm responded to the
evolution of landscape architecture practice and foreshadowed many of its
developments. His work with commercial developers, coequal partnerships with
architects like at Wheaton College, and planning work demonstrate the changing
roles of the landscape architect in the postwar period. His consultation in Taiwan is
an early example of American landscape architecture’s global outreach, particularly
toward Asia. Shurcliff’s career substantiates the importance of contributions to a
design discipline like landscape architecture that are other than design itself. His
business and interpersonal acumen helped the Shurcliff firm, started by his father at
the turn of the twentieth century, thrive into the late 1970s. The firm provided a
venue for talented landscape architects like Vincent Merrill and others. Shurcliff’s
writing and commentary fostered contemporary opinion and left a record for later
study. His speeches and professional organization work advanced public knowledge
of landscape architecture and the evolution of the discipline. Shurcliff’s work gives
form for the study of many of the social, economic, and cultural forces at play in mid-
twentieth-century American life. His residential work illustrates developments in
architecture and the American home and the influence of postwar popular media.
Shoppers’ World and the bank projects demonstrate both the causes and effects of
economic expansion and mid-twentieth-century consumer culture. The Storrow
Embarkment project grew out of postwar highway expansion necessitated by
heightened dependence on automobiles. This project and the streetscape
improvements on Tremont Street were urban renewal, a central feature of postwar
city planning. Shurcliff's campus planning work reflects contemporary ideas of higher education and its expansion after World War II.

Through his projects, Shurcliff's wavering embrace of landscape modernism becomes evident. Rarely was he wholly guided to create human-centric, ahistoric, nonaxial space with plants and other materials. Occasionally, he incorporated a few of these elements. Most often, he used just one or two of them. Outwardly, he declared an allegiance to modernism: "I felt keenly interested in the Modern Movement and practiced it myself. . ." Inwardly, he was cautious: "but not in cooperation with my father who was adamant about doing anything of that style." Interestingly, his varying responses to modernism, from ambivalence to imposition to negotiation, appear in all phases of his career. That is, his dialogue with modernism was more circuitous than directed. As a result, Shurcliff becomes a transitional figure in landscape design, both holding onto the past and giving substance to the future.

A tense ambivalence with modern landscape precepts is evident in several projects. While the streetscape project on Tremont Street (1958) strove for human scale, the form and materials of its execution were far from modern. As noted, much of Shurcliff's work at Mount Holyoke College was constrained to relatively minor adjustments to work done there by his father and the Olmsted office. While significant, the amphitheater (1961) was more of an accoutrement to the existing campus; Shurcliff's role in the project was to provide appropriate landscaping, much of which was intended to blend the new construction with historic campus buildings. The landscape designs for Shoppers' World (1951) and its precedent, the
unbuilt North Shore Center (1947) were largely dictated by commercial and financial requirements and showcased a sort of substanceless "modern style" with axial planning and a resemblance to historic public space. Plantings and other materials were used for their decorative appearance rather than the creation of modern space. The landscape was designed merely to complement, not connect with, indoor sales space.

At times, Shurcliff appears bent on imposition of modern landscape elements. Clearly, his residential garden in Brookline (1948) and his published description of it portray an overtly earnest attempt to "get it right" instead of truly applying theory to practice. A similar response is seen in his "indoor-outdoor connection" comment regarding the Solaray house (1947). When given the opportunity to advance Paul Rudolph's thoroughly modern master plan at Southeastern Massachusetts Technological Institute in 1971, Shurcliff basically responded by piling on more buildings and parking where they already existed.

In two notable projects, Shurcliff successfully negotiates and embraces landscape modernism: his garden in Ipswich (1951) and the Wheaton College campus (1955-1962). In both, he used structure, ground plane, and plants to create human centric outdoor spaces that are intimately related to indoor spaces. At Ipswich, he connected the garden to the surrounding land- and seascape. At Wheaton, he gave new and old campuses a solid physical, functional, and visual linkage. In both of these projects, Shurcliff was unhindered by paternal or historic precedents, developers, architects, or other constraints. Perhaps these two projects
portray for Shurcliff—even if fleetingly—a resolution of conflicts between theory and practice as well as son and father.

Shurcliff is a transitional figure in landscape architecture history. He was not an iconclast or an idealogue or a perfectionist. He responded to the pressures and influences exerted on his life and his work and moved along. His work bears the history of mid-twentieth-century America, a time of great change, vaunted success, and many mistakes. As such, his work offers lessons for contemporary landscape architecture practice unlike those readily found in the work of his better-known contemporaries. For example, comprehension of the struggles inherent in the Chatham College project might guide current attempts to improve accessibility on campus and develop a cohesive master plan for future growth. Shurcliff’s Brookline garden and his description of it demonstrate the risks taken by designers reliant upon substanceless style instead of design grounded in theory and true site assessment. Shoppers’ World, demolished in 1994 and subsequently replaced with “big box” retail development, offers one final example. Although clearly not a paragon of landscape modernism, the shopping center and its central landscape were significant cultural landmarks for many living in the Boston area between the 1950s and 1980s. Its destruction, just six years prior to its fiftieth anniversary, is still felt as a needless loss of memory and history.

Sidney Nichols Shurcliff represents the many landscape architects and professionals of all types who have fallen between the cracks in history but whom nonetheless deserve remembrance. As teachers, writers, organizational leaders, and producers of the everyday environment, they have earned our esteem.
Notes

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