

The Cultural Landscape Foundation
Pioneers of American Landscape Design

LAURIE OLIN

ORAL HISTORY

REFLECTIONS

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Reflections on Laurie Olin by Tony Atkin

November 2013



As anyone who knows Laurie and his work can attest, he draws and paints constantly. Whenever he has a spare minute (or sometimes an hour) at a site, out comes his pen, watercolors, and sketchbook. He will lean on a rock or make an impromptu chair out of whatever is around, and concentrate on the view. He uses sketching to understand and describe the fundamental character of a site: its structure, texture, and colors, in ways that verbal and written description cannot. It is a specialized and highly skilled form of investigation, mapping, and reporting about a place.

That it includes sensuality and pleasure is obvious to anyone looking at his work. The materiality, tactility, and organization of paints and paper correspond to the materiality and organization of the site. The light reflected back from the paper through the applied paint gives watercolor and ink luminosity unavailable in other media. The quick, nearly out of control brush strokes combined with a rigorous understanding of light and form gives his best work immediacy and strength - and an evanescent quality that was well known to the Chinese poets Laurie studied in the collections of the Seattle Art Museum as a young man. At the same time, his sketchbooks are informal and workmanlike, often containing lists and descriptions of what he was thinking about as he made the drawing. They are full of his joy at being an acute observer

of the world.

Along side our professional work together, Laurie and I have taught joint landscape/architecture studios at Penn for many years, where we have tried to remove the boundaries between landscape and architecture for ourselves and our students. Recently we have taken our students to the southwestern US where we have studied the settlements, cultural landscapes, and architecture of its ancient inhabitants and ongoing cultural forms in a unique climate and terrain. We have worked with the Pueblos of New Mexico, other native groups and local people to advocate for development options and ecological models that are appropriate to this place and time.

Laurie's involvement and ongoing interests in the Southwest have been recorded in several sketchbooks. One evening after dropping him off at his motel, I received an anxious call on my cell phone that he had left a sketchbook, full of his drawings and notes, on the top of my car as he unloaded. I pulled over and looked to see if it could possibly still be there, but by then I had been around several sharp turns and of course it was gone. Dispairing of finding it (very unlikely under the circumstances) and with Laurie getting philosophical about the tremendous loss of a full book, I convinced him that we should at least retrace my route since leaving him, even though it was now getting dark, and we both thought it would probably be futile. Almost at the end of our search, and in the middle of Santa Fe's busiest intersection, we saw a faint glimmer of a small rectangle on the tarmac. I put on the brakes and Laurie ran to retrieve his sketchbook. It had be run over several times and its cover had the tire tracks to prove it, but the drawings inside were protected and safe. We decided that for two confirmed secularists, this was a small but wonderful miracle.



Reflections on Laurie Olin by Anita Berrizbeitia

November 2013



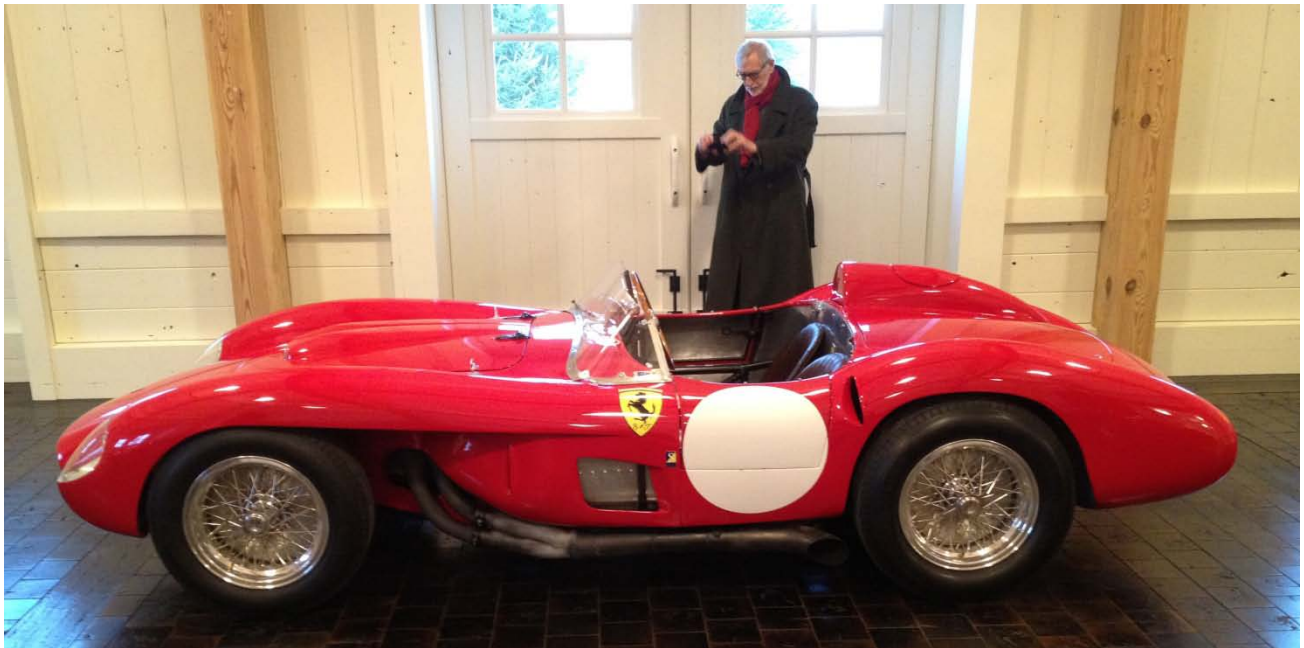
Courtesy of the Francis Loeb Library,
Harvard University Graduate School of Design

It is almost impossible to write about Laurie Olin without using superlatives such as fantastic teacher and extraordinary colleague. In addition to these, however, I want to point out Laurie's unusual commitment to the pursuit of knowledge, which he sees as an essential requirement for full engagement with the field of landscape architecture. His command of history, theory, art, science, world history, and all of the associated design fields unfolds in all facets of his work. He has taught, practiced, and written for at least three decades with remarkable consistency, passion and profound substance. But also Laurie has been unflagging in his generosity with time, insights, and advice that he has shared with countless students and colleagues.

Thank you Laurie for being a model, an inspiration, and a friend for all these years.

Reflections on Laurie Olin by William H. Fain, Jr., FAIA FAAR

November 2013



Laurie taking an iPhone shot of one of Les Wexner's spectacular Ferraris in New Albany, Ohio, the morning of a work session with senior Ohio State officials on the planning of the University. Laurie brought a small team of professionals together including David Chipperfield, Edgar Lampert, Ron Ratner and myself.

Early on, Laurie Olin became one of my mentors. He is not only a professional colleague, having collaborated on urban projects of scale, but also a personal friend, sharing many stories and comparing sketchbooks over dinner.

I am an architect who has spent much of my career in urban design and planning. I made the decision to focus on issues related to urbanism at the outset of my career having been educated at UC Berkeley in the turbulent 60's and shortly thereafter working for Mayor John Lindsay's Urban Design Group in New York City. For the past 33 years I have been in private practice in Los Angeles.

I met Laurie Olin in the late 1980's at a National AIA Regional and Urban Design Committee meeting in Philadelphia. Laurie was at the time the Department Chair of Landscape Architecture at the GSD, while having is practice in Philadelphia. He made a presentation to our relatively small group of 35 architects about the planning of Philadelphia. He talked about how the city was established, it's growth, the problems it faced and initiatives looking forward. What was impressive about his presentation was that

he came from a perspective which included architecture, planning and landscape. From a design point of view, it was a complete picture with a great deal of respect for history, context and the evolution of the city.

In the early 1990's we collaborated on a project in San Francisco. Although it could be said that Laurie has worked on many such projects of scale, Mission Bay was a sufficiently complex and an important project of scale for me at the time. The client was Catellus, which was the largest property owner in California, and its Chairman was Nelson Rising who we had both worked for when he was with Maguire Thomas. After working closely with Nelson on the concept for the project, we brought Laurie in to evaluate the overall plan and design the open space network. You must realize, Laurie has an incredible ability to conceptualize an idea on the spot and to draw it. How many meetings have we all been in and there comes a time when words no longer are adequate to describe what is being said. Laurie will pull out a roll of paper and will begin drawing, testing ideas, introducing new ones, confirming them as well. Clients expect this of him and this is what happened at Mission Bay and the plan became better because of it. The biggest issue in his mind had to do with the long and narrow east-west open space, called the "Common". He took a week to work on this and came back with a brilliant solution including continuous landscape elements with episodes of active and passive areas, which were more local to the adjoining properties. Laurie became further involved later by developing the winning scheme with Machado Silvetti for the UCSF's biotechnology campus at the heart of the Mission Bay. I had the opportunity to jury the entry and am convinced Laurie's brilliant open space concept and landscape design favored the team's award.

Laurie believes that design professionals need to weigh in and support the value of civility in our cities and respect for our natural environment. In the early 90's Laurie and I were asked to work together on a major suburban Los Angeles master plan by a leading land development and farming company. The site was located in a naturally pristine area with beautiful riparian and mountainous conditions. Although the developer was quite well regarded in the business community it produced standard merchant built housing and suburban shopping mall developments. Laurie refused to work for the developer. Furthermore, he wrote a rather pointed letter to the CEO about the ills of suburbia and how his company had contributed to the destruction of the environment. I decided to continue with the master plan figuring the developer would be willing to explore new ideas about cluster development and the preservation of significant natural features. We worked for a month on several innovative ideas

and presented them to the project director. Unknown to us he had designed a mass grading scheme independent of us for the site. We were taken aback. Laurie understood the issue of land ethics from the outset and was willing to speak out about it. It was an important lesson for me.

One of the best memories with Laurie was over dinner at a little corner cafe in South Park near the Rincon District of San Francisco. We had just finished a community workshop on open space for Mission Bay. Laurie showed me the beautiful sketchbook that he carries wherever he goes. He introduced me to miniature watercolors, the type you can use on an airplane, and showed me a fish painting he was working on. I asked him where he got his sketchbook since the paper was unusually thick and suitable for watercolor painting. He said it was a secret, and he would tell me someday. Years later he told me he got the books in Paris, but I still haven't found them.

Reflections on Laurie Olin by Carol and Colin Franklin

November 2013

First arriving in Philadelphia in 1976 to teach at the University of Pennsylvania, School of Design, Laurie slept on our couch, happily joining in our house restoration to tear up our living room floor. He was tall and thin and told hilarious stories of playing basketball with Eskimos, when he lived in Alaska. Even then he balanced the charm and the modesty of a country boy with the glamour and excitement of a sophisticated urbanite. He gave us the first of his many wonderful books *Breathe on a Mirror* which is a study of homeless men on Seattle's Skid Row. We saw that he could draw like an angel and had a remarkable knowledge of unexpected areas.

Carol taught with Laurie in a fledgling course, the new design of the Environment Program, and we both worked together (a proto Andropogon and a proto Hanna Olin) on LAMP, the Landscape Architectural Master Plan for the Penn Campus—both enterprises lead by the then Dean of the School of Design, Peter Shepherd.

As we first knew him professionally, Laurie was a extraordinarily kind and patient teacher, bringing his broad base of interests and extensive design knowledge to wonderfully fluid talks and to his trenchant design critiques. He always understood and valued the importance of intermingling his professional office with the University and through this commitment has greatly enriched both. As both an Architect and a Landscape Architect he easily crossed the arbitrary boundaries imposed on the design professions at that time.

As a friend and professional colleague, we were the beneficiaries of his many acts of generosity, such as recommending Colin to teach at Tsinghua University in Beijing where Laurie had been asked to steer their fledgling Landscape Architecture Department.

Laurie is a man of phenomenal energy, which allows him to work a superhuman schedule. He has miraculously balanced a galaxy of enterprises—creating and running one of the most important design practices today, teaching, writing, lecturing, mentoring office staff, students and whole departments, as well as having a wonderful wife and children. His numerous awards, culminating in the 2012 National Medal of Arts and in 2013 the Thomas Jefferson Foundation Medal in architecture are recognition of his talent.

Reflections on Laurie Olin by Bob Frasca

November 2013



Laurie and I met as colleagues on the Architectural Commission at The University of Washington. As a side note, Laurie graduated from there in architecture and had special insights into the unique qualities of that very beautiful campus. For the next five years at our meetings and dinner afterward, we found that we had a shared vision of the built and the natural environment.

When we were awarded the new 22,000 seat conference center for The Latter Day Saints, adjacent to the Temple Square in Salt Lake City, I asked Laurie to meet me there to design a roof garden and surrounding plazas on our ten acre site. We worked together on a six acre roof garden and surrounding landscape at ground level that had its roots in the rich and varied landscape of the state of Utah. The landscape is intermixed with water fountains, runnels and hardscape that overlook Temple Square. A few years later the church's in house landscape architect invited Laurie back to discuss problems they were having with the roof garden. Expecting dead plants or faulty irrigation they told him when he arrived that there were field mice and rabbits that had inhabited the place and what should they do about it. I think Laurie told them it was like any natural habitat and to let them be.

From there we worked together on The Mondavi Institute for Wine and Food Science at the University of California Davis where Laurie designed an edible landscape for the courtyard and a test vineyard as the entrance of the new complex. Later with our firm he designed a beautiful midtown park in downtown Portland that accommodates a variety of activities throughout the year.

In summary I can say that Laurie and his colleagues at Olin make us and every architect they have worked with look better than we really are.

Reflections on Laurie Olin

November 2013

Kenneth Helphand FASLA

Philip H. Knight Professor of Landscape Architecture Emeritus University of Oregon

I have always said that Laurie hit a trifecta. He is the rare landscape architect who is equally distinguished as a designer, is a magnificent teacher and also an outstanding author and scholar. His reputation would be secure in any of these fields, but all three! I have students read articles by Laurie and look at his work. I ask where do think he grew up, this master of site and urban design? The answers are always New York, Philly or Chicago. When they learn that he grew up outside of Fairbanks of Alaska it inevitably leads to a fascinating conversation about formative influences on designers.

Laurie and I serve on the board of the Foundation for Landscape Studies. Headquartered in New York, but we had a rare meeting and field trip in Portland, Oregon (I live in Oregon). The day the group spent with Laurie in downtown Portland was a revelation. As we toured Halprin's fountains, Pettygrove Park and Pioneer Square Laurie knew everything about each project, down to the inspiration for the drainage details. The day's conversation about design was one of the most interesting I have ever had and I only wish I had recorded it for my students. We visited Director's Park that Laurie designed, but had not been to since its completion. It was a beautiful sunny day and the park was vibrant, as was Laurie. It was wonderful to watch his enthusiasm at seeing his vision turned into practice. The place performed not only as he imagined but also in surprising ways. Two women who help program park events were excited to have their photos taken with the designer. And once again we were treated to a discourse on the design and its details- the whys and wherefore of the place. My wife had joined us for the day. She has heard me talk landscape architecture for over forty years, but she was in awe. Now when we visit a site she asks, "What would Laurie do?" It is a great question.

Reflections on Laurie Olin by Ron Henderson, FASLA
November 2013



Laurie Olin is my teacher, employer, advisor, colleague - and throughout the past two decades, my friend. At Penn in the early 1990s, I was a teaching and research assistant for Laurie's landscape architecture theory course at a time when he was crafting arguments for the influence of the Roman campagna on English landscapes. He invited me to lingering discussions over drinks at the White Dog Cafe although I knew that after these talks, in which it seemed he had infinite attention to our topic, he would then return to his office and give similarly capacious attention to a client, a project, or his partners.

A few years after Penn and my internship at Olin, Laurie invited me along on his academic adventure to found a new landscape architecture department at Tsinghua University in Beijing. Laurie is deeply committed to the history of the profession of landscape architecture and to the role of landscape architects in the design of cities and in the stewardship of environments such as those in Alaska, his

native home. He understood the significance of this opportunity to contribute to the burgeoning profession in China as there are few who know the history of landscape architecture more thoroughly or who recognize seminal opportunities to shape an expansive future for the profession as he does. It was with this prescient knowledge that Laurie accepted the Chair Professor appointment at Tsinghua and asked me to come along with him to craft and refine the curriculum and mission of the department.

We shared a 1950's-era apartment in a Soviet-inspired planning unit on the Tsinghua campus as we both periodically shuttled back and forth between our responsibilities on two continents. In periods that converged with both of us in Beijing, we explored the city. What joy it is to learn a new city alongside Laurie - whose insights into urban form and sympathies for "places for people" has shaped so many outstanding urban spaces.

Laurie is one of my biggest advocates - cajoling, provoking, supporting my efforts and shouting out on my behalf. I would like to think that this has only been for me, but I know that he builds success in many others through his generous nature. You can see this same spirit in the places he designs - an abundant optimism toward open society and civic life that fulfills the highest aspirations of landscape architecture in the city.

Reflection on Laurie Olin by Gary R. Hilderbrand FASLA FAAR

November 2013

Laurie chaired Harvard's Department of Landscape Architecture in the mid-1980s, during my own MLA studies there. His young firm, Hanna/Olin, had become something of a phenomenon, and this was palpable for students whose fascination with history and theory only reinforced our commitment to making landscapes. Laurie captured incredible commissions in those years, and he shared them with us through his lectures and studios: the renewal of Bryant Park with Hugh Hardy, development of the Johnson & Johnson World Headquarters and the 16th Street Transit Way Mall in Denver with Harry Cobb, expansion plans for the Harvard Business School, and design of the newly formed edge of Battery Park City. He brought an equal force of critical and reflective inquiry to scholarship on Olmsted, the cultural geography of towns and fields in the British countryside, and historiography and reception theory on the gardens and Rome and Florence and the Campagna.

For many of us, he embodied much of what there was to know about the field, and we could see through him the immense potential of deep and critical inquiry as a basis for design. For me, he became a model: a designer with a fanatical appetite for consuming knowledge and turning it back into the work. In this, he appeared to be catalyzing a field that seemed poised for renewed relevance. He helped convince the world that a broadly cultural outlook for landscape architecture mattered more, or perhaps more correctly, that it mattered again. And I think we knew that Harvard would not keep him long. He was irrepressible. And off he went!

Some reflections on Laurie Olin by David Hollenberg

November 2013

To be exposed to Laurie as both a friend and colleague is to find oneself in a recurring state of delighted astonishment.

In the mid-1990s I found myself interviewing Laurie and his team of superb partners and sub-consultants at their presentation for the Independence Mall Master Plan. I was one of the members of the Selection Committee for this high stakes project, serving in my capacity as Associate Regional Director of the NE Region of the National Park Service. Such Committees can often be asymmetrical, with members of varying backgrounds and experience and they often find themselves evaluating and selecting from among the best of the best. In this case, Laurie's interview was the last of five, and the only team led by a landscape architect. And it was the only team that in its presentation chose to ignore the topics that we had suggested each team address in its presentation.

As a Committee we were initially stunned, then mesmerized, and astonished by the intelligence with which Laurie reframed what we had said we were interested in, by the extraordinary team he had assembled, and by the immediate sense that there really could be no other choice. All of which turned out to be true. In winning this important commission, Laurie conveyed, as I have so often seen him do, the very different perspective that a landscape architect can bring to planning and urban design. As I have often joked to Laurie, landscape architects have to have a very different kind of ego from architects, because when all is said and done their primary collaborators are nature and time. Laurie correctly added history as a third collaborator for this project.

During the production of the Master Plan, Laurie worked especially closely with his primary consultant, Bernie Cywinski of Bohlin Cywinski. All of us who had the pleasure of serving as client for that Master Plan were repeatedly struck at the fluidity those two incredibly talented design professionals brought to this assignment. At any given moment, Bernie could have seemed to be the landscape architect, and Laurie the architect. Moments later, they were back in their roles and then presto another reversal. It was a delicious collaboration to watch, and a perfect example of Laurie's professional grace.

This Master Plan was characterized by a complex administrative structure in which multiple projects would be funded, designed, and constructed by independent and interdependent clients. The Plan set the framework for all of the projects to work together as an ensemble while expressing the diversity

that one would hope for in a public space designed to convey both urbanity and democracy. Besides Bernie, two other architects were involved -- Harry Cobb and Michael McKinnell, for the National Constitution Center and the Independence Visitor Center respectively. As a collective client group, we took what in retrospect was the somewhat risky step of letting these four eminent designers work by themselves in a studio in Laurie's office, while we clients sat nervously outside, worrying about our budgets, our schedules, and any compromises that were being made to our respective projects. I came to refer to these meetings as "the Clash of the Titans." Laurie was clearly the glue and was able to speak for the whole. Laurie's leadership was a thrilling and repeated example of landscape architecture revealing its intellectual and aesthetic power. He was the exemplary advocate for the viewpoint that if any one of the projects tried to inappropriately outshine the others, the whole enterprise would fail. It is not a stretch to have seen these sessions as an analogue of what had happened in Independence Hall two centuries before.

Years later, Laurie and I were sharing a drink -- a not unusual circumstance -- looking down at the Mall from his office. With no little satisfaction, he said -- "you know it looks like what we drew. I watch it every day, and it works." It somehow felt appropriate that we then toasted not only his success but the Mall at Independence Park. Indeed, toasting a place with the same warmth that one toasts a friend is quintessential Laurie.

I now have the pleasure of serving as the University Architect at the University of Pennsylvania, and have done so since leaving the Park Service in 2006. Penn has an effective mechanism to evaluate designs for our major buildings and landscapes, called the Design Review Committee. It meets monthly to evaluate projects and answer two basic questions. Is this project right for Penn? And is this design team giving us their best? Laurie has served on this Committee for a decade. His insightful comments and support at the meetings has without doubt upped the ante for the quality of what the university has designed and built over our last astonishing decade of growth. Knowing him as well as I do, it is always a source of quiet pleasure to watch him get frustrated with something an architect might be proposing, to then come to quiet grips with that frustration, and then to articulate in the clearest and most helpful way what adjustments might be desirable. He is an invaluable presence.

I would conclude by simply saying that getting to know Laurie and having the privilege of working with him in so many different ways has been a consistent high point of my career as an architect.

Reflections on Laurie Olin by Elizabeth K. Meyer

November 2013

I met Laurie in the early 1980s, and count myself as one of many landscape architects who has been shaped by his generosity as a mentor, as well as his example as both an intellect and inventive designer.

I last saw Laurie in April 2013 when he received the Thomas Jefferson Medal in Architecture, an award bestowed annually since 1966. Most recipients are architects. Laurie was the fifth landscape architect to be honored with his Medal that is co-sponsored by Monticello and the University of Virginia. At the dinner celebration held in Monticello's parlor, dining room and great hall, I was reminded of the many ways that Laurie has distinguished himself as a designer, educator and public intellectual. Adele Chatfield-Taylor, a member of the Monticello Board, Director of the American Academy in Rome, and former Director of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Design Arts Program, spoke movingly of her forty year friendship with Laurie, her admiration for his substantial body of public and private landscape designs, and in particular, his contributions to the NEA's Mayor's Institute over several decades. That moment on Monticello Mountain lingers as a promise of what landscape architects should be, and can be—distinguished designers who change the way that clients, patrons and collaborators understand the city, constructed nature, and public space.

Adele's toast reminded me of similar moments when I experienced Laurie's words and images—bursting out of his ever present sketch book—taking hold of a conversation, a meeting, or a studio review and changing the direction of a project as well as the sensibilities of the others in the room. These occurred during so many varied venues: late nights at Hanna/Olin on Chestnut Street when Laurie joined a group of us around a twelve foot long drawing to help render, to entertain us with memorable stories, and to educate us with his commentary on Stanley Cavell, Nelson Goodman, and Aldo van Eyck; tense exchanges at meetings and over faxes with an unwieldy team including SOM Chicago, Frank Gehry, Stanley Tigerman, David Chipperfield and Norman Foster when Laurie's trace drawings challenged and cajoled the other team members—to reconsider an urban design scheme for King's Cross, London; lively, heady theory workshops at Peter Eisenman's office in NYC assessing the last two collaborations between Peter and Laurie, and the speculating about next one, CMRI in Pittsburgh; weekly on-site coordination meetings at Bryant Park where Laurie's attention to detail, ability to anticipate snafus, and knowledge of architecture and civil engineering ensured that this forlorn historic park would emerge from the construction of a library stack under its central lawn without the dozens of vent shafts, ventilation grates, and mechanical system boxes that threatened the project week after week; and the morning workshop at UVA's School of Architecture last April when he demonstrated the craft and discipline of design thinking through drawing, inspiring another generation to commit themselves to recording the world, and speculating about its transformation through their marks on paper.

Laurie's legacy as a landscape architect includes many amazing projects. But, it also includes his former students, employees, colleagues and friends who have been cajoled, often unknowingly, to do more, to be more, and to expect more out of the designed landscape. We are indebted to his loquaciousness, curiosity, relentlessness, and boundless energy.

Thinking about Laurie Olin from Jaquelin T. Robertson

November 2013

I have long considered Architecture, Urban Design, Landscape Architecture, Interior Design, Preservation and History interconnected aspects of a single activity – the design, management, protection and ongoing maintenance of the natural and created environment; and that the best design professionals who help shape our world and are responsible for protecting it have to understand and deal with all of these disciplines.

Among the “landscape architects” I have collaborated with over the years, Laurie Olin stands out. Laurie, with whom I worked at Ed Barnes’ office, from the start, was a delightful person who like the rest of us there (Pasanella, Gwathemy, Weinstein) was learning what to do in different situations and settings i.e. architectural etiquette (of which Ed was a master). Later we came upon Vitruvius’ famous dictum, with respect to the’ ineluctable “Rules of Place;” rules which have to be discovered by the designer. Olin who brought good manners with him, began to master “what is needed where and when” ... in NY terms which are different. I saw then, that Laurie would do the “right thing” anywhere and that he would have his own practice.

Over the years, his drawings of landscapes, countrysides, trees and buildings got better and better. Every August, Laurie would go to different places to “think things out and draw.” He drew both to understand things better and, I suspect, to enjoy his talent.

He became one of the most important participants in the Mayor’s Institute on City Design, critiquing the different projects while sketching the various players, all of which helped show how to best deal with cities, designers and the public. This ability to explain things clearly to others served him well, when he ran the Landscape Program at the Graduate School of Design, an experience important for him and for Harvard alike. At the time, I was Dean at UVA and on the Harvard Visiting Committee. This enabled us to compare our two Landscape programs which was a great help for both of us.

In looking back, I believe I gave Laurie one of his first formal commissions – an illustrated site plan for a house in Richmond. The drawing was so beautiful and right that client and I gasped when we saw it. I knew then, how strong Laurie’s talent was and how it would change some of the most important places in New York and elsewhere – places that needed help: Columbus Circle and the Fifth Avenue frontage of

the Metropolitan Museum. We also worked together for Les Wexner on New Albany, a new community in Ohio and Wexner's many residences from Georgia to Colorado. All projects that involved everything and in retrospect were some of the happiest times together.

Of the many awards Olin has received the most meaningful is the 2013 Thomas Jefferson Foundation Medal in Architecture. The great critic, Garry Wills pointed out, that Jefferson, considered architecture a public art performed, in his case, by a practioner, not a theorist. As the Father of American architecture, Mr. Jefferson has had to wait too long for this most deserving son to be recognized.

Hats off Laurie, I've been thinking about you.

Jaque

Reflections on Laurie Olin by Peter L. Schaudt , FASLA FAAR

November 2013

It was 1981. I was with my parents in Philadelphia. They were kind enough to take me to Philadelphia and Cambridge to visit Penn and Harvard before I applied to graduate schools. I originally stopped in the office at Penn to meet Ian McHarg but he was not there. It was summer. Someone in the office suggested I go visit Hanna/Olin and talk to Bob Hanna or Laurie Olin. This was my start on a Laurie Olin journey that would influence my career into this glorious profession called landscape architecture.

I went to 19th and Market Street and walked to the second floor, above a bar, to Hanna/Olin's office. Next door was a nude wrestling place. It was a real, gritty urban place. I arrived and talked to Bob Hanna about Penn's landscape department. He was extremely gracious, (you never forget as a young student the time professionals give you when they really don't need to!) and he gave a complete endorsement of the Penn program. He motioned over to Laurie who was drawing (the site plan of Johnson and Johnson headquarters in Skillman, NJ) with a brown Prismacolor pencil on yellow trace. He said, "Hello" and then, "Go to Penn. Don't go to Harvard."

We went home to Chicago. I still needed to finish my last year as an architecture undergraduate at University of Illinois at Chicago. Later that year, in the spring of 1982, I was accepted to both Penn and Harvard. I made my decision and I chose Harvard Graduate School of Design. In the meantime, I found out the landscape department at the GSD had a new chair. His name was Laurie Olin.

True story: My first day at the GSD I went up in the elevator and Laurie walked in the elevator with just me. We said hello, and I mentioned that I had met him in his Philadelphia office the previous summer. "Oh yes, I remember," he said. "I'm glad I didn't take your advice and go to Penn!" I replied.

Laurie was a major influence on my education as a landscape architect. If our profession had a clone of Laurie Olin for each ASLA state chapter, our numbers of practicing landscape architects would be double the size they are today. Laurie is a friend, mentor and leader who shared his passion and moved the profession into the 21st century.



American Academy in Rome - Villa Aurelia; “Year of the Landscape” October 1990
Laurie-far left, Peter far right planting an umbrella pine in the Villa Aurelia garden.



Laurie Olin giving a tour at the Villa Lante in Bagnaia discussing Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* at the top of the terrace adjoining the Bosco. Laurie explained how the garden is a representation of the “beginnings of a world transforming into an increasingly refined garden in the Renaissance humanistic spirit.”

Reflections on my friend Laurie Olin by Cathy Simon

November 2013

I grew up in New York and was educated on the East Coast. The Wellesley College Campus, extraordinarily beautiful, an intricate glacial topographical landscape with hills and bowers, a lake and old trees, sloping lawns and picturesque pathways, opened my eyes to the art of place-making in the natural world. The Harvard Campus--the Yard, the river and the city, Mount Auburn Cemetery with its fall carpet of yellow and red—expanded my consciousness that another voice than the architect's—the landscape architect's--could have an even more powerful impact on settings for human experience. After Graduate School I moved to San Francisco, attracted by the astonishing California landscape, and by the excitement of working in a great city on the West Coast with its Mediterranean climate and curious seasonality. Here the practice of Landscape Architecture flourished. I had the good fortune to work with Lawrence Halprin, Garrett Eckbo, and Robert Royston, all inspiring and charismatic pioneers in the field.

My first experience of Laurie Olin's work was a visit to the 1983 Codex Campus in Quincy Massachusetts. Here, working collaboratively with Koetter Kim and Flack and Kurtz, Laurie had devised a site design that was both beautiful and instrumental (the Blue Hill aquifer was used as a heat sink with Laurie's lake an elegant kind of cooling tower). When in the early 1990s I was commissioned by the University of Washington to design one of two new Branch Campuses, I called Laurie to see if he wanted to partner with me and virtually the next day, he arrived at my office. I found him an elegant presence full of insights about the northwest landscape and soon discovered that he had graduated from the University of Washington, starting his career there! Not only was Laurie enthusiastic, but also erudite, specifically knowledgeable, collaborative and highly respected by the university. One morning my team, Laurie and I, craving shad roe and bacon, had breakfast in the Pike Place Market at the Athenian Restaurant, overlooking the Seattle waterfront. I asked Laurie about the Puget Sound, its extent and character, and at the table, on the back of a placemat, he proceeded to draw it from memory, its islands and inlets, cities and towns, explaining its intricacies all the while.

From virtually the moment I met Laurie until now, we have remained friends, respected collaborators, and colleagues in this small world. Laurie celebrated his 60th birthday at our table

surrounded by old friends, Alan Jacobs for one. During the 1990s we worked together on UW projects and later at Bard College. When Laurie and his partners had somewhat reluctantly agreed to do a monograph, they imaginatively broke the mold of the typical firm profile and each partner engaged in a dialog with his choice of a person of interest. Laurie's choice was my husband, Michael Palmer, a poet, an equally erudite, well-read thinker, a lover of literature and books, a sort of soul mate.

When I was working with Richard Rogers on the design for the Transbay Terminal, a new train and bus station to be located in downtown San Francisco, I was about to go to London for the first time since 1965. Knowing that he had spent considerable time there, I asked Laurie for advice about London. The next morning, he appeared with a five-page, hand written and lavishly illustrated letter explicating the city, walks to take, pubs to visit, bridges to cross, art to see and much more.

Laurie has shared with me incredible insights about the wonder of gardens, lemon trees in grids, paving as an urban carpet, orchards, outdoor rooms carved into the forest, trees, stone, grading, water. He draws as he talks—and he is a great talker, having spent his childhood in Alaska with its long winter nights—always inspiring, funny, brilliant. I feel blessed to know him.

Reflections on Laurie Olin, by Adele Chatfield-Taylor, FAAR '84

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One of the most interesting things I have ever worked on was a design project we sponsored at the National Endowment for the Arts while I was Director of Design there, called the Mayors Institute for City Design. We started it in 1985.

The idea was a simple one – to start a design seminar for American city mayors because Jaquelin T. Robertson, Dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Virginia, Joan Abrahamson, President of the Jefferson Institute and I – inspired by Mayor Joe Riley of Charleston, South Carolina – all were disturbed by the fact that when mayors got elected, they were immediately swept up to the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard to take classes on such problems as homelessness, AIDS, terrorism, police management, garbage collection and snow emergencies, but they had nowhere to go to learn about city design, and nothing that would prepare them for the fact that every single day as mayors, they would have to make decisions that would shape their cities, whether they were the size of Houston, Texas or Waterford, Virginia. Every decision about a city tends to have a design consequence, whether the decision was big – like deciding whether or not to build a football stadium – or whether it seemed small – like deciding where and how to install a park bench.

Because mayors are very busy people, and quick studies, we had to find a handful of very special design professionals to help us teach in this Institute. We wanted 5 or 6 top professionals to join the same number of mayors (so that everyone was equal and there was no “us” or “them”). It was a big order: each design professional had to be a great designer, a good communicator, a philosopher, and a poet – who could get to the essence of what his discipline was all about – and – in a total of 20 minutes – explain -- in a way that would be transformingly educational like a light bulb going on – how each design action went together to determine the quality of a city. The assumption was that these mayors *had* never and *would never again* encounter a designer or be part of such a design clinic – and thus that they had to leave the room enlightened.

And we had to cover the waterfront – find one architect, one city planner, one preservationist, one traffic engineer, etc. It was hard enough to find the perfect person in most of these areas. But the most challenging, *by far*, was finding the right landscape person, because if a landscape professional does a good job, the results look so inevitable, so obvious, and the hand so invisible, that it looks like God did it. The person who designs *subtly* approaches each problem differently has no trademark *look*, and, in our day and age of signature everything, such a person does not grow on trees.

As it turned out, we had several design professionals to choose from in most areas, but after calling my design pals all over the United States and then around the world, I found out, rather alarmingly, that there was only one landscape person who was considered brilliant enough to absolutely make the light bulb go on, and that was Laurie Olin.

I knew Laurie, of course, because we both had the good luck to be in and out of the same world over the years, but I must confess, until we were launching the Mayors Institute, I did not realize he was so preposterously unique.

I knew he was an exceptional artist, because he had won the Rome Prize in Landscape Architecture from the American Academy in Rome, selected by a coruscatingly discerning jury; and he had won a Fulbright and a Guggenheim. I knew that he drew like an angel, every day filling more pages of his famous horizontal sketchbooks, in a graphic version of thinking out loud.

I knew he could tackle any design problem – city parks ranging from Pershing Square in Los Angeles to Bryant Park in New York – commercial projects ranging from Canary Wharf to Johnson & Johnson – campus planning from the University of Pennsylvania to Case Western Reserve University – public housing in Germany, private commissions here and abroad, even our scattered gardens at the American Academy in Rome.

I knew that he was a clamored-after conference speaker and teacher – at Penn, Harvard, the University of Virginia; that he was tremendously admired by his peers, having been honored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, having been elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, having had honorary membership conferred on him by the American Institute of Architects. I even knew that unlike most in our design profession, he could *write*, hence [Across the Open Field](#), and that he was

destined to win the Bradford Williams Medal for the *best* writing on landscape architecture, not to mention the Wyck-Strickland Award for all around achievement.

So we invited him to the Mayors Institute, and in the first 15 seconds of his presentation, I realized that all the hyperbole was true. Laurie began by showing a slide of a small log cabin in a vast Alaskan landscape. He said these words:

Landscape architecture is about not bushes and trees but the shaping of space...

At that moment, and in the remaining 19 minutes, he did his job, and one by one, I watched the light bulbs go on – over the heads – and radiant faces – of these mayors – who were getting the message for the first time. Indeed there is only one Laurie Olin.

After more than 25 years, the Mayors Institute is still going strong, and Laurie is still the man who is invited there the most – to break the ice, to explain that landscape architecture is not really about bushes and trees, that he loves cities as well as the countryside and nature, and that when one works in the public realm, it is not easy to remember that every place is different and needs to its own identity. He loves the materials he works with – plants, stone, light, dirt, decomposed granite, water, the changes in the seasons, the passage of time, historical precedents, and, most of all, artistic rightness.

We congratulate Laurie on having gotten it *so* right, and thank him for giving *so* much to so many. Long may he wave.

Adele Chatfield-Taylor, FAAR'84

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