

The Cultural Landscape Foundation
Pioneers of American Landscape Design

HARRIET PATTISON

ORAL HISTORY

REFLECTIONS AND INTERVIEW

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Reflections on Harriet Pattison by Robert Couch

April 9, 2016



I first met Harriet Pattison formally in about 1990, when I asked her to join a team of architects and engineers working on a master-plan proposal for the Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA). But this was not an arbitrary choice; as a graduate of Louis Kahn's class of 1972 at the University of Pennsylvania (I had worked for a short time in his office during spring holiday of 1973), I already knew of her many contributions to Kahn's work. Our proposal, a plan to revitalize the Abbottsford Homes housing complex, was reviewed and accepted by the PHA. I had previously worked with the Abbottsford Homes Tennant Management Corporation (AHTMC) under the direction of Ms. Bertha Gilkey of St. Louis. It was clear from the outset that Harriet and I would work well together, along with Ms. Gilkey and the AHTMC. With Harriet taking the lead in the site planning, this neglected housing complex was transformed into a "special place," as she

described it. Following the completion of the master plan, we were retained to complete the design and construction phases; thus we worked together for almost nine years on the project. There were many meetings with tenants and the PHA that seemed, at times, dead-ends of frustrations, but Harriet's patience and persistence guided us through.

In 1993, Harriet and I were invited to submit a design for a municipal building in Salalah, Oman, as consultants to a U.S. construction management firm in the United Arab Emirates. This was an opportunity for Harriet to fully employ her talents as a designer of the landscape. The new ministry building, programmed to function with an existing nondescript office complex, was enormously enhanced by the parking/garden landscape that seemed to be a programmatic burden at first. This is a climate where cars cannot be parked in the sun for a full day; circulation and security are major issues. Harriet's landscape design was "sheer beauty" (a phrase that Kahn frequently used) and was the salient feature of our submission. (Sadly the project was never advanced to the construction phase).

It was a pleasure working with Harriet for all those years.

Reflections on Harriet Pattison by Toby Korman Davidov

February 20, 2016



The drawings for our home were spread out across the table in Lou [Kahn]'s office when he brought in Harriet to meet with us and discuss our landscape design. She was such a pleasant person and so happy to be part of our amazing project for our young family. She wanted very much to hear our thoughts and satisfy our desires to make sure we had space for three young boys to run....play ball... swim...and in the future to play tennis. We had cost restrictions and therefore were not able to construct the tennis court right away. The boys were thrilled as it became their football field! I

very much wanted to look out the kitchen windows, which were floor-to-ceiling glass, and see flowers as soon as the snow melted. Harriet designed tulip and daffodil beds across the entire front area under the trees near the driveway. She also planted beautiful orchid rhododendrons around the pool area to enjoy during the summer months. Pines, the size of our youngest son (two to three feet tall), were scattered around the sides of the house. They are majestic today—40-plus years later!

Harriet was a delight to work with and was considerate of our budget and needs, while still maintaining her vision for our dream home. I am so pleased that [my son] Larry has expanded her creative design, and we are constantly enjoying the magnificent countryside that she and Lou had envisioned.

Reflections on Harriet Pattison by Marya Flanagan

February 12, 2016

As anyone who knows Harriet can attest, she has a great eye, a scholar's mind, and is a wonderful friend. When I think of Harriet, it is mostly of summer visits to Indian Island. There is the scent that tells you, only a few yards from the mainland, that you are on an island in Maine. But most of all there is Harriet's unfailing generosity and laughter, her protestations that we are somehow being too good to her by descending upon her (usually unannounced) and that we must stay and have "at least a little tea." Tea at the kitchen table, light off the ocean, and boats sailing past the front window will be accompanied by a feast of conversation. Freshly baked cookies will be brought out, and, as likely as not, all of this will spill over into a look at the garden she built in a sheltered spot near the path to the shore, a swim off the rocks, and then dinner. If we have a friend or two in town it will be no problem; all that will be required is that they enjoy themselves and sign the guest book before leaving. When my children were little I knew that when they came up to the house with a find, Harriet would examine it with the same interest and enthusiasm as the explorer; nowadays they take their own friends out to visit.

Of course, I also know, in spite of her modesty, that Harriet is a landscape architect who has worked on famous gardens, historic restorations, and such iconic projects as the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, and the original landscape design for the Roosevelt Memorial in New York. So when my husband, Judson, announced that he was going to ask Harriet to create a master plan for our small property in Baltimore, I told him that he was crazy and that our house wasn't exactly in her league. Luckily, he persevered. With her usual generosity, Harriet agreed to come down to see what she could do. She spent a few days with us, sketching, talking over ideas, and offering to help me with whatever I was doing when she came into the house. After dinner, she and Jud would start talking about trees and eventually they'd bring out Dirr's Hardy Trees [Dirr's Hardy Trees and Shrubs: An Illustrated Encyclopedia] and happily continue until well after midnight. It was like watching two high school classmates going through their old yearbook, with the phrase "Oh yes, that's a native" reserved for some local boy made good.

Our house in Baltimore sits between two small parks not far from Johns Hopkins [University]. It's a place that many people walk by daily and for which they feel a certain proprietary affection. I am sometimes startled when people insist that something relatively new about the landscape preceded our tenure in the house. But I think this speaks to Harriet's ability as a landscape architect with a deep understanding of structure, place, and the beauty of the interplay between the built environment and nature. The line of espalier pears along the sidewalk, the Davidia and the yellowwood, the brick-and-grass walkway that naturally unites all the elements in the back of the house are only a few ingredients in the alchemy that brings out the essence of the place. Like all the best landscape architecture, her work has an inevitability about it that makes it seem as if it has always been there.

Reflections on Harriet Pattison by Ed Jakmauh

February 5, 2016



I first met Harriet in 1973. Her son, Nathaniel Kahn, was a classmate of my stepson, Matthew Countryman, at Germantown Friends School (GFS), from kindergarten through grade twelve. The parents of the students in this class found each other so interesting that they met at least once a year for a potluck dinner; the dinners continued for many years, long after the students had moved on from GFS. Harriet was one of a few single parents in this group.

Harriet held her own in any conversation, often with very strong ideas and profound insights. In the 1980s and 1990s, I was in charge of several projects at Ballinger with large sites that needed thoughtful and creative landscape design. Harriet was retained and came up with excellent, often brilliant, workable and lasting solutions for three significant commissions.

At Geisinger Wyoming Valley Medical Center in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, the 30-acre site was very steep and run-through with abandoned coal tunnels. The major goal of the building design was to have the landscape be an integral part of the building. Harriet determined the species of trees, shrubs, and plants that could survive and thrive on the slopes and in the severe winters.

The success of Harriet's work at Geisinger allowed her to be awarded the lead landscape architect position for the new Hershey Foods World Headquarters in Hershey, Pennsylvania. From the first design charrette, Harriet led the team to see the very big picture, suggesting a reforestation plan for much of the hilly site, with a new pond for runoff. There were three buildings: the Corporate Headquarters, the Data Center, and the Gym. The buildings were separated from each other at some distance, with landscape design structuring their relationship and guiding anyone moving on foot among the three buildings along several paths, with bridges over deep ravines affording magnificent views.

Harriet brought a synthesis of the artistic and the practical to another medical project, the Clinton Wellness Center in Clinton New Jersey. As with her other work at Ballinger, the Wellness Center benefited from intimate proximity with formal and natural landscape and well-planted, terraced parking areas.

As successful as these larger projects were, it was Harriet's work on two of my own residential properties that taught me the most about good landscape design. Working with me on the restoration of Wilson Eyre's 1888 summer 'cottage' on a quarter acre in Germantown, Philadelphia, Harriet immediately picked up on the house as a backdrop for the garden.

Set back to within a few feet of the east property line, the long, thin house is a viewing platform for the entire property in changing light. House and garden are one entity. On a four-acre farm (circa 1840) in Little Compton, Rhode Island, Harriet used trees as strong elements to shape outdoor space. The soil here is predominately clay, so plantings must like water. Among the several elements in Harriet's design, my favorite is the row of five dawn redwoods that encloses one side of the eighty-foot-long parking court: a giant hedge. The trees have thrived in the frequently wet soil. No visitor fails to comment on the unique and majestic space.

Thank you, Harriet.

Reflections on Harriet Pattison by Larry Korman

April 7, 2016

To me, as a young boy, Harriet was as famous or as important to our house as Lou [Kahn], because my father often spoke about the importance and beauty of the outside integrating with the inside. When I moved back into the house with my family in 1999, my first call was to Harriet to see whether she could shed light on her original intention for the landscape surrounding the house. We knew there were certain things that both Lou and Harriet wanted, which for budgetary purposes were left undone or done differently. Harriet worked with our architectural team from PennDesign [the University of Pennsylvania School of Design], including Anuradha Mathur, a current professor of landscape architecture at Penn, to bring certain of those elements to fruition. In 2000, we embarked upon the first phase of Harriet's insight, which was to remove the asphalt driveway that came close to the house's entry, and rebuilt an undulating gravel driveway with dual courtyards for public and private purposes farther from the house—as planned by Harriet in 1973. We also created two bosques and planted twelve Virginia magnolias to block the view of the private courtyard—also a vision she and Lou shared.

In 2013, after a decade of focusing on the maintenance and interior design of the house itself, we asked Harriet whether we could meet again, not only to complete the elements we were unable to complete from her original phase, but also to ask her to develop a plan for a future phase that integrates the original four-acre land with the six acres adjoining, so that the total ten acres would be integrated fluidly with her vision. The sketches, drawings, and water colors she created are absolutely beautiful, and are works of art on their own. We have embarked on that journey by leveling the field, adding the berms and undulations, planting the perimeter pines, trees, and grass, and, most important to Harriet, adding the grove or mass of pine trees between the private courtyard and the beginning of the fields to preserve the ha-ha (in an “ah-ha” moment) for viewing in the house's main room, rather than when pulling up in the car. I think that is one of her many gifts she gave and continues to give to Lou.

Harriet is such a sweet and gentle lady that you sometimes forget what a tremendous force she is—how her incredible knowledge balances the art and science of her craft just as well as Lou balanced form and function (and they both relied on light to bring their visions to full fruition). We thank Harriet greatly for sharing her insight and passion for the house with us over all of these years, and we congratulate her on this incredibly deserving honor and retrospective. We treasure our relationship with her and [her son] Nathaniel, and wish this beautiful family all of health and happiness!

xo, Larry and Korin

Reflections on Harriet Pattison by Elizabeth J. Scott

February 14, 2016



I inherited a beautiful and awkward piece of property on the Harbor's edge in Tenants Harbor, Maine. It did not have any outdoor private space, as the house was separated from the lawn that went down to the ocean by a public right of way; but I so longed for a private place to sit outside and enjoy the harbor. At the same time, I did not want to plant any tall trees, as they would eventually block my view from my house. I had tried various plantings on my own, but nothing I did achieved the results I wanted. My good friend Peggy Watson's aunt

was Harriet Pattison. Peggy suggested I hire Harriet for some help.

Harriet came down to see the site and talked to me about what I wanted to achieve. She was a quiet, deep and very thoughtful person, who said she would think about it and make me a drawing. Soon arrived a brilliantly simple and elegant design. She drew a plan for a large circular garden, taking advantage of the available land. It held out the promise that, once realized, one could feel embraced. It could become a very special spot. It would frame the view of the harbor from a variety of sitting places and yet would not interfere with the views from the house. It would be an attractive addition to the yard and provide a pretty view for those walking by on the roadway. When the planting matured, it would be completely private, providing for me a lovely hideaway outdoors.

I heartily agreed with the lovely plan, but Harriet had a number of challenges in executing it in compliance with the shoreline zoning laws, which forbade the moving of earth within 75 feet of the harbor. She had wanted to uncover the large outcroppings of bedrock, but instead had to import large boulders. She went to a local quarry and found boulders that had the shapes she needed, which ended up both defining the circle and providing seating. Next, she worked with a local nursery to make the soil ready for planting and to choose plants that would thrive by the water in Maine with minimal care (I was a seasonal resident), and that were restful and pleasing to all the senses. She planted a garden with a foundational lilac tree, heathers, lavenders and many varieties of evergreens. The colors went from warm to cool, with accents of rose. She was right there supervising all the plantings, leaving nothing to chance.



It is now close to a decade since the garden was installed and it is more than I could ever have dreamed possible. It took a Harriet Pattison to transform that awkward piece of land into a place of quiet, peaceful, and elegant beauty. When I arrive towards the third week of July at my Maine home, I find the lavenders in full bloom and smelling heavenly, the heathers in lovely colors of white to rose, and enticing places to sit, completely shielded from the public. Through the design and execution of her plan, Harriet provided me with my heart's desire: a lovely place to sit, and a space so appealing that it has become a favorite place for meditation, for reading, for the grandchildren to play, and for lunch and luncheons. My book club came down for a number of years and several members exclaimed: "This is among my favorite places in Maine."



Reflections on Harriet Pattison by James Timberlake

January 11, 2016

I have known Harriet Pattison for over 35 years, since I was an intern architect at Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown (VRSB). Since that time, I have come to know her as a friend through her son Nathaniel Kahn. When we met, she was working with the late George Patton, FASLA, a mentor to many young architects on landscape design. He was a consultant for VRSB on National Plaza, a Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation project. Harriet's efforts on that project, along with Patton's, are well chronicled. I have come to know Harriet's work well over the years. The beauty, elegance, and simplicity of her landscapes and design propositions were instrumental in advancing many gardens and landscapes, and to advising, influencing, and directing Lou Kahn and other architects and landscape architects. Her quiet manner belies her strength of thought, being, and perseverance during a time when designers of her talent struggled to find, and be recognized for, their voices. She works carefully and consistently to develop designs that influence many. Her poise and modesty are a bellwether of her work—landscapes of grace, modernity, and simplicity.

Harriet is a woman of humility but great strength; one of immense talent and great skill. She toiled for many years in the shadows of many great architects, some of whom may have been blinded by her brilliance.

Reflections on Harriet Pattison by Rafael Villamil

February 10, 2016

My wife and I met Harriet some 28 years ago. An Indian architect, who had worked at [Lou] Kahn's office and, like me, had worked on the Bangladesh project, was in Philadelphia and wanted to show us photos of that project still under construction. I was very much intrigued by Harriet and invited her and her son Nathaniel for dinner. We've been the best of friends ever since.

She is a courageous and passionate lady—courageous in overcoming the obstacles that circumstances have placed in her way, and passionate and totally committed to excellence in her work. I was privileged to have rendered her some assistance in providing construction documents for a few of her projects. Her designs come to fruition after long and exhausting work expressed (and explained) in beautiful and delicate drawings that are works of art in and of themselves. She is tenacious and relentless in the pursuit of the beauty she sees in natural landscapes, while never losing the graciousness that defines her. It is gratifying to see her finally receive the recognition that is clearly her due.