

The Cultural Landscape Foundation  
Pioneers of American Landscape Design

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M. PAUL FRIEDBERG

ORAL HISTORY

REFLECTIONS

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## Reflections on M. Paul Friedberg from Howard Abel

April 2009

I worked with Paul from 1961-1964 with a 6 month Army Reserve tour in the middle. When I began there were four of us in the office. The office was in an apartment on 86th Street and Madison Avenue with Paul working out of the kitchen and Walter Diakow, his partner, and Phil Loman and myself in the converted living room. Paul used the back bedroom as his living quarters. I had been out of school for about six months and had worked for a traditional landscape architectural firm before joining Paul's office. The pace and excitement were electrifying. We worked on lots of small projects, mainly housing with Paul wanting to try ten new ideas for each project. He usually got at least one but at the end of the tenth project he'd have his ten and just kept on going.

His vision on how urban space should be used and defined was quite different from the then thinking current attitude. His work seemed to be intuitive and emotional usually thinking how people would fit into the landscape. Proportion, scale and use of material took on a completely different meaning. I always marveled that he was willing to try to do anything. I used to laugh thinking if he had been asked to move the Empire State building, I was sure he would say "how far".

For me what he passed on was the idea that you could do anything and the only thing that would hold you back was yourself. I'm not sure that today's young landscape architects know how much he has done for the profession and how much ground breaking he accomplished.

## Reflections on M. Paul Friedberg by Jim Balsley

April 2009

I first met Paul Friedberg in December of 1965. I had graduated from SUNY at Syracuse in 1963 where I excelled in design and drawing and was warned that I would be hired for my hand only, unless I began my career in landscape architecture at an office where I could learn all the basics, from surveying through design to construction supervision. I had completed two years doing just that on sublime suburban office and residential projects at the office of Ed Bye, Jr. in Connecticut when I was called by a classmate from Manhattan who urged me to contact Paul Friedberg in New York. Paul was searching for a designer for a special project he had recently been awarded. My first meeting with Paul was memorable not solely because of his charming and dynamic personality, nor because of his office setting, a townhouse on tree-lined west 88th street with a rear garden and the sounds of clip-clopping horses hooves passing down 89th street from Claremont stables. The project was Jacob Riis Houses Plaza and Amphitheatre. This was no "sublime" project, but a pilot project intended to transform a depressed neighborhood on Manhattan's lower east side by creating a multifunctional public recreation area, community center, and events place. It was an opportunity to address social ills by using the design of public space as a catalyst for social change. I thereupon became a New Yorker and began my collaboration with Paul as his Director of Design on this project and many other memorable projects from 1965 through 1972 and again from 1977 through 1981. During this period, Paul had also begun the Urban Landscape Program at the City University of New York where he asked me to serve as an Adjunct Professor for design studies and where we could further the cause for socially responsible design. These were times of great social upheaval across America and beyond and the office benefitted greatly from a multi-cultural gathering of transplanted architects and engineers, first from the Hungarian revolution and subsequently from the Cuban revolution. We joined in extensive debates about politics, society's ills, war, and the projects themselves. Our collaboration produced an impressive body of award winning projects including Jacob Riis Houses, the NYC Police Headquarters Plaza, Bedford-Stuyvesant Superblock, Roberto Clemente State Park, Battery Park City Financial Center Plaza, and Buchanan School Plaza and Pershing Park and Plaza in Washington, D.C. Throughout, Paul's creative, dynamic, and often iconoclastic visions prevailed resulting in many of the most socially notable projects of that time. His influence and example to "make a difference" were instrumental in my own efforts to become involved in teaching and many social causes, and to carry on that spirit through my own consultant practice over the past 25 years.

## Reflections on M. Paul Friedberg by Charlotte Frieze

April 2009

As a student at Smith College, it had always been my intention to attend graduate school in Landscape Architecture. It wasn't until 10 years after graduation that this goal became a reality. As founder of the Urban Landscape Architecture program at City College, Paul Friedberg made it possible.

Paul created a program in which New York City was his classroom. He taught using real projects including the Brooklyn waterfront; Jamaica, Queens; and a 50-lot development in Bridgehampton. Our classroom extended to Central Park, The New York Botanical Garden and Woodlawn Cemetery.

Paul was probably the most demanding professor I experienced at City College. But at the end of the two years, he had taught me to see, to understand the nuances of landscape design, the politics of urban development and the fundamental concepts behind real estate development.

## Reflections on M. Paul Friedberg by Bernard Jacobs

April 2009

I first met Paul in the fall of 1968. I had graduated from State University of Farmingdale that spring and had been working at a design and build firm on Long Island through the summer.

I found an ad for a job at Paul's office in the New York Times and applied. I was asked to come down for an interview. I packed my portfolio and headed to the city. At the time Paul's offices were in a townhouse on 96th Street west of Broadway.

I took the Broadway Seventh Avenue express from Penn Station to 96th Street and walked west towards Paul's office. At the time the neighbourhood was very different from what it is today, cutting edge and blue collar.

I walked up the stairs; M. Paul Friedberg was on the second floor and announced myself to a stunning, British accented receptionist. I was told to have a seat and Paul would be out to see me in a few minutes. The walls were white the partners offices in the front and I could see more workspaces towards the rear. I was ushered into a conference room and after sitting for a while Paul came entered wearing what we all came to know as the M. Paul "look". Black pants and a black turtleneck sweater.

We leafed through my portfolio, which at the time consisted of mostly high-end residences. I loved drawing and graphics and was proud of my work. I also told Paul that I had been working at nurseries since I was a "kid" and knew a lot about horticulture and plant material.

He asked me if I could start the following week and I eagerly accepted.

My first day of work I was showed a desk in the back room and told to work with Phil, an engineer who worked at Friedberg. At the time Paul's firm was one of the only landscape architects that had engineers working there. The first job I had was to correct New York Public School record drawings. Blue linen with ink and the only way you could change the drawings was to wet a ink eraser and using an erasing shield remove the offending words or drawings. I then made corrections using a Radiograph pen. In a world of computers this seems so antiquated. I corrected drawings, ran prints, ran errands and generally did all those entry-level projects.

One day Paul came by my desk and said, "You told me you knew plants and worked in a nursery. Do you want to go tag trees for a project?" Obviously I said yes. The next day I found myself in a rented car driving down to south Jersey to meet the infamous Chet Halka. I met Chet around noon in a bar at the Princeton Inn. I didn't know it then but Chet was a serious drinker at the time. After lunch we drove over to his nursery to tag trees for one of Paul's projects in New York. I became the official tree tagger back then and would travel to New Jersey and eastern Long Island to tag trees for Paul's projects. Some of the trees I selected back

then are still alive and well on Paul's older projects, Police Headquarters, Jannette Park, Waterside Apartments, to name a few.

At the time Paul was working with Timberform to develop his line of adventure playgrounds equipment. We were witness to a number of mockups in his office. I remember seeing the first tire swing connection fashioned out of a car ball joint. Paul was passionate about his work on playgrounds and his new style of urban spaces. All the people working for him loved the work we were doing.

At the time I met, Jim Balsley who taught me how to really draw. Others in Paul's office at the time were Bill Kuhl, Jay Gould, Alan Pearson, Jim Gates, and Sonja Locke.

I played softball on the M. Paul Friedberg team in Central Park and one year we even made the finals in the Architects and Engineers division thanks to the pitching of a kid from Jamaica with a devastating fastball.

Paul's firm was growing and we quickly outgrew 96th street. Paul found space in an old warehouse on 62nd Street that housed the costumes from the Metropolitan Opera. When Paul first took us all over to see the space there were still costumes hanging on racks. Some of us put them on and I remember us all laughing and carrying on.

The space was raw with a huge ramp from the street to the second floor with huge windows overlooking 62nd Street. We all pitched in to convert the space and moved in to our new space within a couple of months.

At that point we were seventy-five people. Walter, Paul's partner, ran the day-to-day office situations and Paul designed and was the face of the new landscape architecture he was creating. I helped him put together slide shows, at the time Paul was one of the first using two Kodak Carousels with a fade, to do presentations. We were so cutting edge.

Paul asked me to be a construction representative for the Publishers Clearing House Headquarters in Port Washington on Long Island. As usual I tagged all the plant materials and worked with Lewis and Valentine the landscape contractor. The project had a huge concrete edged pond with three islands and numerous people places. It was really cutting edge at the time.

In 1969 the first Earth day march happened and Paul closed the office so we could be a part of the parade. It was a great time to be in New York.

After PCH the economy soured and hit the skids for design and construction. Paul laid off a number of people and unfortunately I was one of them. It was a tough time back then and I was fortunate to find a job at Coffey Levine and Blumberg, a small landscape architecture firm on Park Avenue South. I continued to play softball for the Friedberg team and stayed in touch. I found out that Paul was going to set up the first Urban Landscape Design track at CCNY

and asked if I could attend his classes. He said yes so as an evening school student I was able to be part of the first year. We were a class of seven, Lee Weintraub was one of the first students and Bill Kuhl, and Paul taught the first classes.

The Landscape students were housed in a huge ex bus garage on Broadway north of 125th Street. We all built out spaces and hung around drawing, hanging out, and socializing. Classes were small and we learned about history and construction. It was great.

In 1973 the economy soured even more and I was let go from Coffey Levine and Blumberg and found myself looking again. Unfortunately it wasn't good, my first experience with a deep recession. Luckily I had a friend who was moving to Chicago and she suggested I look there. I found a job with CF Muphy and relocated and made a life for me here. I remember my time at Paul's fondly and would bump into him often. Not too long ago at an ASLA conference where I thanked him for my start, and he told me he was proud of me. That felt good.

## Reflections on M. Paul Friedberg from Sonja Johansson, FASLA April 2009



Sonja Johansson and Paul Friedberg 1968, working on a model for a timber playground. Photo was probably taken by Ron Green. Printed in *Weyerhaeuser News*, November 1968.

I worked with M. Paul Friedberg for 6 years in the 1960's, becoming an Associate of the firm. Paul had recently begun to pioneer a new movement in playground design in the northeast. His Riis Plaza, in a NYC Housing Authority project that opened in May 1966 to much publicity including front-page coverage by *The New York Times*, exemplified his concept of continuous play on linked equipment vs. the isolated equipment that had been the norm.

My fascination with the complexities of public playgrounds had led me to do independent research in 1963 at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Shortly thereafter I began working with Paul. The mid 60's in NYC were exciting times where people felt they could transform NYC through hard work, enthusiasm and creativity. Young, handsome Mayor John Lindsey came into office. Within just a few years Central Park went from a place people were afraid to go into, to the heavily used, world-renowned park that it is now. Charitable foundations gave money for capital construction of children's playgrounds.

Paul's emphasis was not in middle and upper income neighbourhoods of NYC, but mostly in distressed inner city areas. He wanted all children to be able to play outside in playgrounds where they could be creative and rambunctious. Paul's high-energy character was in keeping with the times. No one wanted to wait through years of bureaucracy to get things done. He applied for and received a federal beautification grant enabling us to design 4 types of portable, modular equipment for 10 temporary playgrounds. These were located in vacant lots where



condemned buildings had long ago been torn down. The idea was that if eventually another use was wanted for the space, the equipment could be easily relocated. In the meantime, a trash strewn lot was cleaned up and kids had a great place to play in these "vest pocket parks".

Paul was a master at community meetings where he was able to gain acceptance to proceed with designs that residents had not seen before. He knew he could not simply ask residents what things they wanted, since he was not going to give them the things that were in ordinary playgrounds. So he got them talking about the activities they wanted for their kids. And then he showed them slideshows of sketches and models of his new equipment that would let kids do those activities.

Paul introduced linked timber play equipment to replace the old single pieces of drab metal equipment that was endemic in playgrounds of the time. He wanted to be sure that kids spent their time playing rather than lining up to play. He visited his playgrounds often to learn even more about how kids played, thought and moved. We learned that kids love to climb up, but hate to climb down the same way, so we always placed a slide, fire pole or other item as the way to get down. And we could easily see that the kids were often creating make-believe games, not only moving their bodies.

After establishing my own firm in Brooklyn, NY and later in MA, I designed many types of projects. A highlight has always been working with communities in inner city areas to make cities more liveable places for children and their families. I created public playgrounds that had play areas scaled for infant play, defined spaces for different age groups so that kids could play in ways appropriate to their age without impinging on younger or older ones, and paid attention to making the playgrounds enjoyable places for the caregivers as well. Paul's enthusiastic, lively and creative personality was always an inspiration.

## Reflections on M. Paul Friedberg by Signe Nielsen

April 2009



Signe Nielsen at the office, 1978.

Paul Friedberg held me in the palm of his hand when I first entered City College School of Landscape Architecture. I was a student in his second class since he became director of the program. Our first assignment was to conceive of an ideal play environment, a subject Paul knew a great deal about given his leadership in the field. I went home and made a fantastical model of whatever I had lying around-cotton balls, dried pasta, buttons and gumballs. When it was my turn to present he said: "Get that disgusting thing out of here". I cried that night and was sure I would never become a landscape architect. He pushed, nudged, prodded, inspired and led me through.

Several years later, he hired me as an employee. His firm had been chosen to enter a select competition to design a new capital in Alaska. Paul put together a very creative team which he directed with enthusiasm and tireless energy. The final plans and model were spectacular, complete with night lighting and snow drifts (of salt). We sent Paul off to Alaska to present the vision to both the jury and the citizens of Alaska. I recall that the jury awarded the design a third place but the voters selected it as the winner-a tribute to Paul's incredible ability to translate complex planning and design into compelling and inspiring words that could move the minds of everyday folk.

The next project I worked on was L'Enfant Plaza in Washington DC, a prestigious site on Pennsylvania Avenue. Many mornings Paul would roar into the office on his motorcycle (which he could park inside the office vestibule) and deposit four or five (literal) napkin sketches on my desk. "Build it" he would say. I was the model builder for the project. In the end, we had 14 different strategies for the site which displayed his process of thinking about public space. They told a story, each model building on the next and concluding in his preferred solution. The client presentation went very badly. Instead of appreciating the development of a singular idea through the process of exploring many approaches, the client responded by saying that there was no clear vision. I could tell Paul was devastated. The project continued to unravel. In the end, the client made an arrangement with Paul and Robert Venturi to switch sites; Paul went on to design Pershing Square and Mr. Venturi designed L'Enfant Plaza. Washington DC lost. I was laid off.

I remember the morning Paul called me into his office to deliver the news that this would be my last day. I had that same feeling as I did during my first play environment crit: a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that my budding career was over. He was such a powerful figure, so highly regarded in the field, so persuasive, so important to my development that I was sure I would stop learning without his tutelage. This day I saw another side of Paul – his compassion and loyalty to people. With me in the room, he made a phone call to a community organization in East Harlem and got me a short term job to help them develop a neighborhood park.

We have remained friends ever since then. So, like many other landscape architects who have been shaped in various ways by Paul, I can attribute my commitment to public work and improving the urban arena to his leadership, energy and insights.

## Reflections on M. Paul Friedberg by Nicholas Quennell

April 2009

I have known Paul for many years as a colleague and friend. I taught at City College for several years from 1972 on when he headed the program.

When I first arrived in New York from a four year stint with Lawrence Halprin I was very impressed by Paul's early playground designs – their architectural strength and the way they offered new play experiences, especially in comparison to the dreary metal swings and asphalt which had been the norm until then. As head of the City College landscape program he certainly brought the same creative energy and enthusiasm, and though I never really taught with him -- just saw the results and met him at faculty meetings -- he was always supportive of the faculty (I taught in the design studio and lectured on history of landscape) but, from my perspective, never interfered with what we did as individuals.

We have remained friends and meet up once or twice a year – he is always good company and fun to be with.

## Reflections on M. Paul Friedberg by Lee Weintraub: from a conversation with Nancy Slade of The Cultural Landscape Foundation

April 2009

In a recent interview Lee Weintraub spoke about knowing Paul Friedberg for more than 35 years. He remarked on Paul's forceful and vibrant personality and referred to him as a man who is on "24/7".

Lee came to City College of New York (CCNY) in the 1970s intrigued by the program and Paul's published work. It was a critical connection for him. He remembers it as a time of change and a lot of "noise", and that he said, was what Paul's work was all about. Lee remarked that Paul's practice was deeply set in under-served urban communities, and that it strove to explore and redesign city streets, as well as, to change the way people looked at the possibilities for cities. Paul was his studio professor for four years, and later Lee worked in his firm. After some years, like many, he left and started his own practice, spreading the core values of urban landscape architecture. Today, Lee runs an active practice, and like Paul, he has committed himself to the education of the next generation. A former director of the landscape program at City College, he continues as a full time professor. He is part of a generation of firms that were spawned by Paul's, which carry forth the mission of environmental urbanism. He is proudest that his firm continues to do the same.

## Reflections on M. Paul Friedberg by Mingkuo Yu, ASLA

April 2009



Mingkuo Yu in his office, 2009.

In 1970, I finished my graduate studies in Landscape Architecture at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. My first job was working at the Public Works Department in Chicago, mainly designing urban space such as riverfronts and street improvement projects. Wisconsin and Chicago were both in the Midwest, but I had always dreamt of working in New York City. M. Paul Friedberg's office was based in New York, and his work had drawn my attention as I admired his innovative, simple and elegant solutions.

After one year of working in Chicago, I sent my resume to Friedberg's office, hoping to find a job opportunity there. Friedberg sent one of his partners, Dean McClure, to Chicago to interview me, and invited me to join his office immediately. I then started my career with Paul in 1971.

Paul was an energetic and dynamic person. He used motorcycle as his major tool for transportation in New York City. He often took me along to client meetings on his big bike, weaving through dense traffic jams. At the time, I did not tell Paul how fearful was of those motorcycle rides!

Paul was constantly busy with projects during my tenure at his office in the 1970s. Once a project came in, he briefed the team on the site background and client demands. He developed ideas quickly with instant rough concept sketches, and usually informed me that we had another client meeting scheduled in a day or two. It was high-pressure working under Paul, but my experience with him well-equipped me with different design approaches and solutions.

At Paul's office, it was my responsibility to prepare design drawings for presentations. It was through Paul that I learned never to use a pencil. We used pastel pens to draw plans, sections, or perspective sketches directly, then copied and colored on top of the drawings with markers

or color pencils. We did not have AutoCAD at that time – hand drawings were most useful at that time. After being with Paul for some time, I could pick up what his ideas were and completed alternate schemes for the project during the preliminary design stage. I found out it could shorten the overall time schedule for a project by presenting different concept designs instead of just one scheme.

During my years with Paul, I became involved in various projects including housings, plazas, parks, street landscape, waterfront developments, and other urban design studies. I was the project designer directly under Paul for projects such as the Fort Lincoln Park in Washington, D.C.; Madison State Street Mall, Madison, Wisconsin; Monroe Street Mall in Grand Rapids, Michigan; the Loring Greenway urban renewal project and Peavey Plaza in Minneapolis; Honeywell Headquarters Park Plaza in St. Paul, Minnesota; and Pershing Park Plaza in Washington D. C., etc... The majority of them were award-winning projects, and I am glad that I had the opportunity to work with Paul on those projects. The knowledge and skills I gained through working with him has since enhanced my teaching and professional career.

In 1980, while I was a senior associate at Paul's office, I was called back to Taiwan to head the School of Architecture and Urban Design at Tunghai University, my Alma Mater in undergraduate Architecture. Initially, I had planned to only leave Paul's office for a year or two, but I never had the chance to leave my teaching and practice jobs in Taiwan. However, since I came back to Taiwan, Paul and I have been in frequent contact. We became good friends. We cooperated on a couple of projects, including the Taipei Art Park and the Taipei Freedom Plaza Regeneration Master Plan.

As a landscape architect, Paul is an excellent physical environment designer. His design approaches and philosophy are to integrate not only elements from nature, but also the people, the users, and the environment. He particularly emphasizes on "design for social interaction," where every urban space could be a social space for the city people. Also worth mentioning is his collective, multidisciplinary approaches to project design. Paul has great artistic sense, and often invites artists to participate in his designs. In many of his projects, you can see his intention was to enhance the landscape with artwork to transform the space into an outdoor gallery. The social values of urban design and the collective efforts with artists have made landscape architecture a more profound profession, reinforcing depth in design philosophy.