



March 4, 2020

Mr. Dwayne Stephens
Chairman
Savannah Historic District Board of Review
112 East State Street
Savannah, GA 31401

Dear Chairman Stephens and Members of the Board of Review,

I write on behalf of The Cultural Landscape Foundation (TCLF) to express our profound disappointment upon recently learning that the parterre garden designed by Clermont Lee at the Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace in Savannah, Georgia, has been destroyed. That disappointment was compounded by the simultaneous revelation that the garden will be replaced by a design that can accurately be described as but a faint attempt to acknowledge the importance of the cultural landscape that has been erased and the pioneering woman who created it. It is worth noting that the *New Georgia Encyclopedia* refers to the latter as "one of the earliest women active in landscape architecture in Georgia" and "the foremost expert in recreating historic landscapes in mid-twentieth-century Savannah."

TCLF enrolled the Birthplace garden in its *Landslide* program, which monitors significant threatened landscapes, in January 2016. We did so after being alerted to the announcement by the Girl Scouts of the USA, which owns and operates the property, that it would demolish Lee's parterre design and replace it with a paved space in order to increase the capacity for outdoor events and achieve compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

As a national non-profit organization that provides technical assistance and consultation on the stewardship of designed landscapes, TCLF knows better than most that change is inevitable as the demands placed on historic resources increase and evolve. Indeed, we routinely help municipalities and private entities develop interpretive solutions that balance the stewardship of historic landscapes with contemporary needs and requirements. Thus we have never taken the position that the Birthplace garden must remain unchanged. In fact, in October 2018, TCLF released three conceptual plans for rehabilitating the garden, which offered ways to maintain the integrity of the historic design while addressing programmatic objectives, as well as safety and accessibility concerns. Commissioned by TCLF with support from descendants of Girl Scouts founder Juliette Gordon Low, the schematic rehabilitation plans were developed by the Atlanta-based landscape architecture firm Tunnell and Tunnell, which has considerable experience with historic designed landscapes.ⁱ

We understand, of course, that the Girl Scouts of the USA is under no obligation to adopt any of the professionally produced rehabilitation plans that we commissioned and offered for consideration free of charge, but we were very encouraged to find that a minimally altered version of those plans appeared in drawings by Greenline Architecture, which accompanied a press release from the Girl Scouts organization in November 2019.ⁱⁱ We were, therefore, all the more surprised to find that the most recently revealed plans have entirely abandoned the parterre design, replacing it with a hardscape that would both change the essential character of the space and alter the borrowed view and the integrity of setting for the streetscape along E. Oglethorpe Avenue, a prominent route within the National Historic Landmark District.ⁱⁱⁱ

Those recent plans also do little to respect the integrity of what is likely a National Register-eligible work of landscape architecture at the Birthplace, where, beginning in the 1950s, Lee designed an historically appropriate garden after thoroughly researching planting plans from the mid-nineteenth century. Lee's rigorous approach, well ahead of its time, was a hallmark of her unique commitment as a designer, and the professional relationship that she shared with the Girl Scouts was the longest of her career.

I know I needn't remind this board of review of the importance of Clermont Lee and her groundbreaking career—of her significance as the first woman to register as a landscape architect in the State of Georgia and the first professionally licensed practitioner in the City of Savannah; of her recent induction as a 'Woman of Vision' by the Savannah College of Art and Design, where she joins fewer than twenty women to receive that honor; of her prominent place in the scholarly literature on the history of landscape architecture in the American South; or of her prescient and courageous renovation of five of Savannah's historic squares, which, despite initial opposition from the city, prevented drive-through lanes from cutting across the beloved and historic communal spaces—a proposition that today seems unimaginable.

On a personal note, as the former coordinator of the National Park Service's Historic Landscape Initiative (1992-2007) and the author of the *Secretary of the Interior's Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes*, I know all too well that in the realm of historic preservation, our understanding of cultural landscapes has much catching up to do. Ever since the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards* was renamed in 1992 to reflect the treatment of "Historic Properties" rather than "Historic Buildings," my work has aimed to elevate the visibility and value of landscape architects like Clermont Lee and Atlanta's Edward Daugherty.

In many ways, the situation at the Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace is not too dissimilar from that at The Frick Collection in New York City. The Frick Collection was designated a New

York City Landmark in 1973 at a time when the celebrated British landscape architect Russell Page was engaged in designing a viewing garden there, from 1972 to 1977. In 2014 that garden was threatened with erasure because it was outside of the property's Period of Significance in the landmark listing. Happily, in 2015 that decision was reversed, and today a museum expansion project will instead result in the garden's renewal. The Juliette Gordon Low Historic District was listed in the National Register of Historic Places more than half a century ago, in 1966. Although Lee's work at the Birthplace began in the mid-1950s, her career canon could not be bracketed when the listing was established. But as with Page's work at The Frick, Lee's work at the Birthplace is now ripe for reappraisal and should certainly inform stewardship decisions going forward.

We therefore ask the board of review to exercise the vigilance anticipated in its charge and appropriate to the matter before it. The avowed mission of the Girl Scouts is to "build girls of courage, confidence, and character who make the world a better place," a motto that most certainly applies to the life and career of Clermont Lee. It would thus be truly regrettable if the erasure of Lee's work were to become an indelible emblem of poor stewardship and shortsightedness while there is yet an opportunity to maintain a lasting symbol of local and organizational pride.

Sincerely,



Charles A. Birnbaum, FASLA, FAAR
President + CEO
The Cultural Landscape Foundation

cc: Mark C. McDonald, President and CEO, The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation;
Elizabeth Merritt, Deputy General Counsel, National Trust for Historic Preservation; Susan
Adler, Interim CEO and President, Historic Savannah Foundation

ⁱ The plans commissioned by TCLF and produced by Tunnell and Tunnell are attached to this correspondence.

ⁱⁱ The drawing produced by Greenline Architecture, which was included in a press release issued by the Girl Scouts of the USA on November 15, 2019, and which closely follows 'Concept 3' in the plans made by Tunnell and Tunnell, is attached to this correspondence.

ⁱⁱⁱ The recent rendering of the proposed landscape by BARGE is attached to this correspondence.

Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace
Historic Landscape Rehabilitation
September 27, 2018

We began from a position that acknowledges that 60 years of continuous use by the Girl Scouts has invested the garden designed by Clermont Lee with enormous cultural importance and meaning for the city of Savannah, the state of Georgia and the broader community of Girl Scouts. This masterwork by Clermont Lee, the first licensed woman landscape architect in Georgia, should be treated with a deference and respect accorded the principle structure itself, for both house and garden have functioned together as a pilgrimage site for Girl Scouts.

Attached are three schemes for the preservation of the Clermont Lee designed garden at the Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace. Each one successively removes more of the Lee designed original fabric in order to accommodate more visitors. We asked ourselves the question: Shouldn't this be a garden that Lee would recognize? We believe she would.

Concept 1

The majority of the Lee planting beds remain intact and are replanted in a manner compatible with the original design. Subordinate beds nearest the main house are removed. The exterior pathway around the garden beds is paved with either exposed aggregate or tabby, while the internal beds remain crushed gravel. Estimated carrying capacity for this scheme would be between 60 to 134 persons at a range of 24 to 12 square feet per person.

Concept 2

The garden space itself is treated as in Concept 1. The planting bed along the south face of the original stable structure is removed and the first floor of the stable is converted to space for programs or events. Doors to this space can be opened to allow easy flow from inside to outside. A redesigned second and even third floor above could be utilized for a variety of activities. Under the bow porch of the main house, at ground level, later additions are removed expanding covered outdoor space adjacent to the garden. A new entrance from Oglethorpe Avenue gives pedestrians access to the garden without having to enter the main building. Estimated carrying capacity for this scheme would be between 100 to 200 persons at a range of 24 to 12 square feet per person.

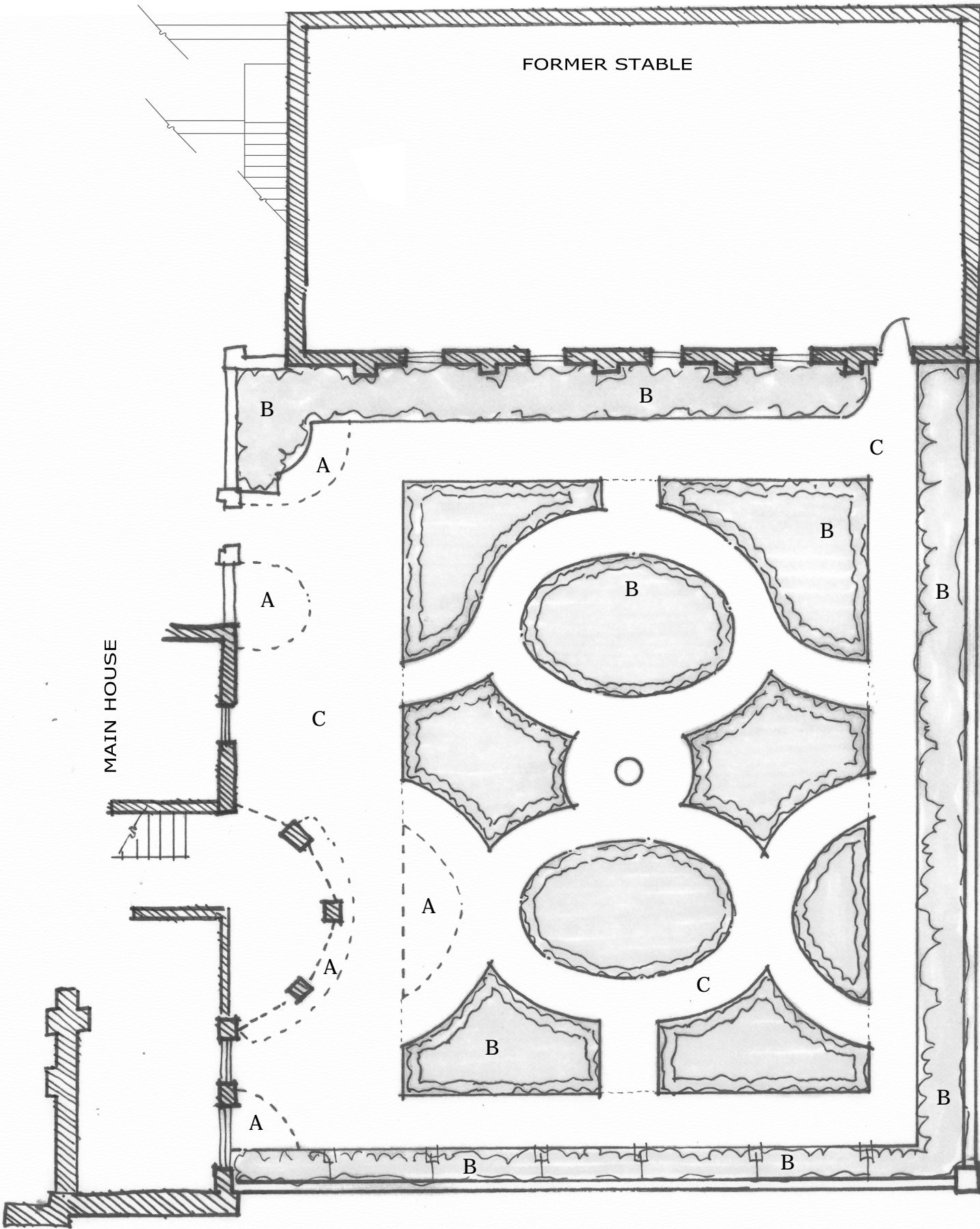
Concept 3

The architectural changes are the same as in Concept 2. The large oval planting beds that form the core of the garden are replaced with decorative pavement that depict the outlines of the original beds. A gate is opened through the fence to provide access to Oglethorpe Avenue. The statue of Juliette Gordon Low is relocated to a position of honor opposite the characteristic bow porch. The garden paths leading into the center of the garden are enlarged and the fountain removed. This scheme could accommodate between 115 and 230 people.

EAST YORK LANE

EAST YORK LANE

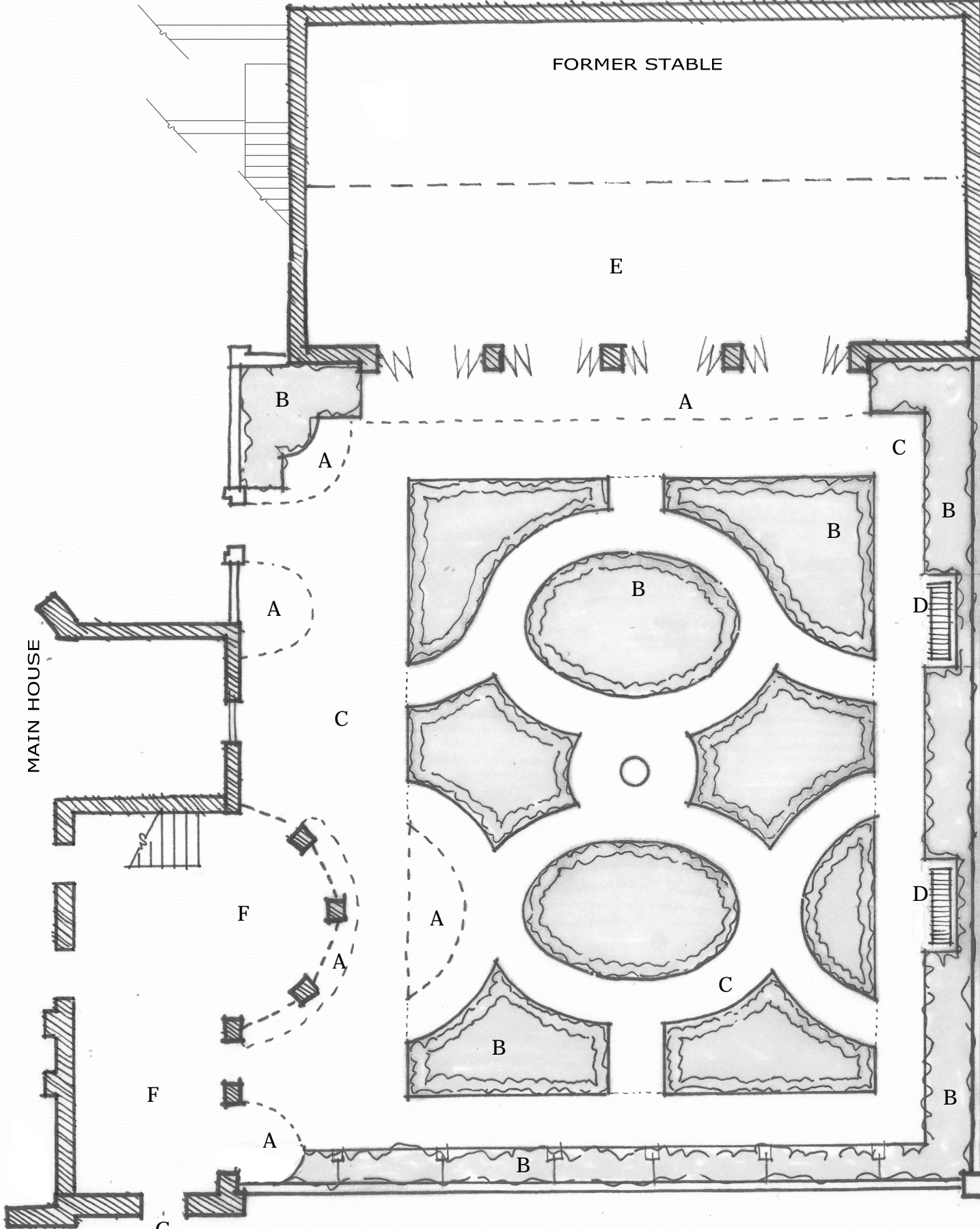
EAST YORK LANE



EXISTING SIDEWALK

OGLETHORPE AVENUE

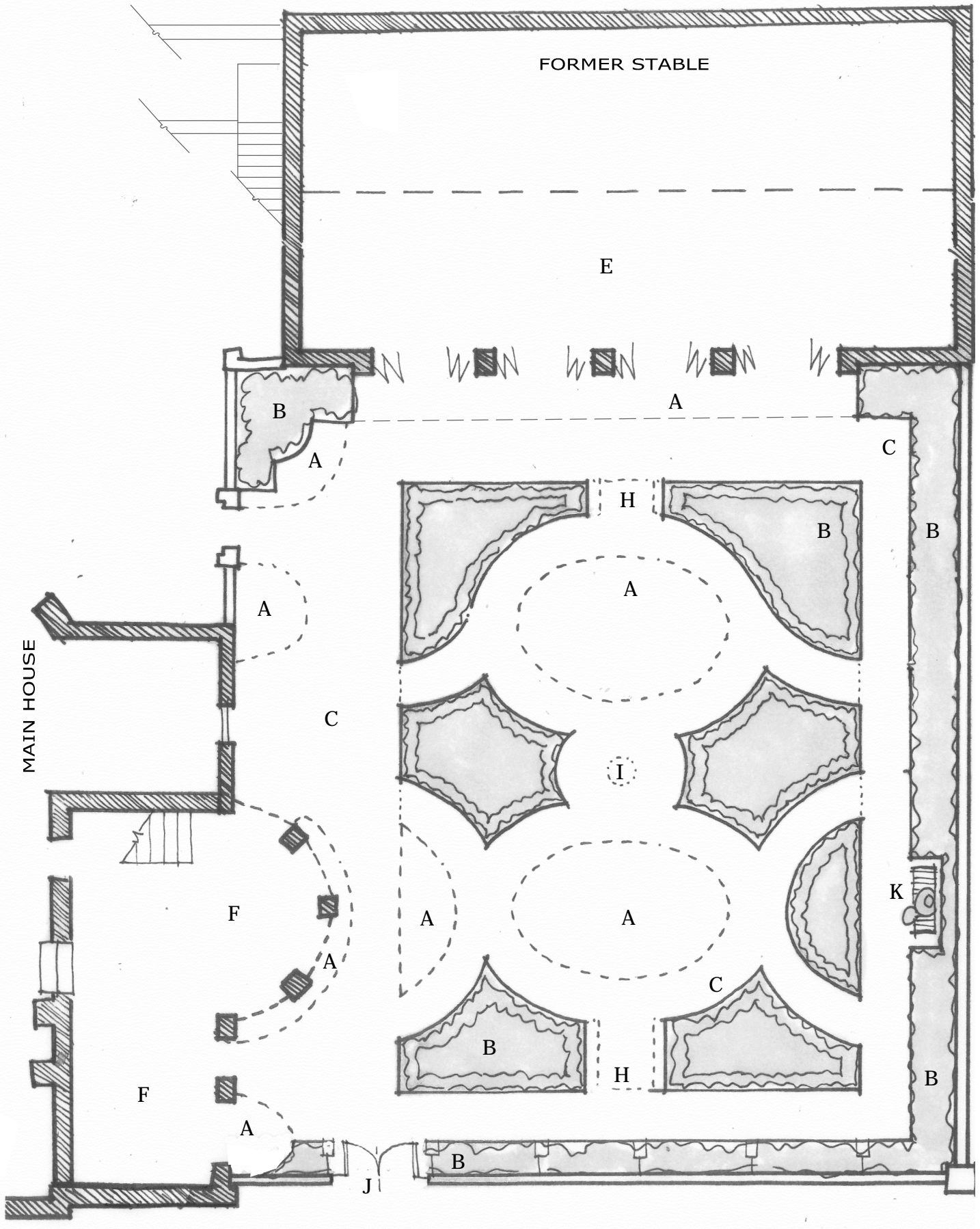
Concept 1



EXISTING SIDEWALK

OGLETHORPE AVENUE

Concept 2



EXISTING SIDEWALK

OGLETHORPE AVENUE

Concept 3

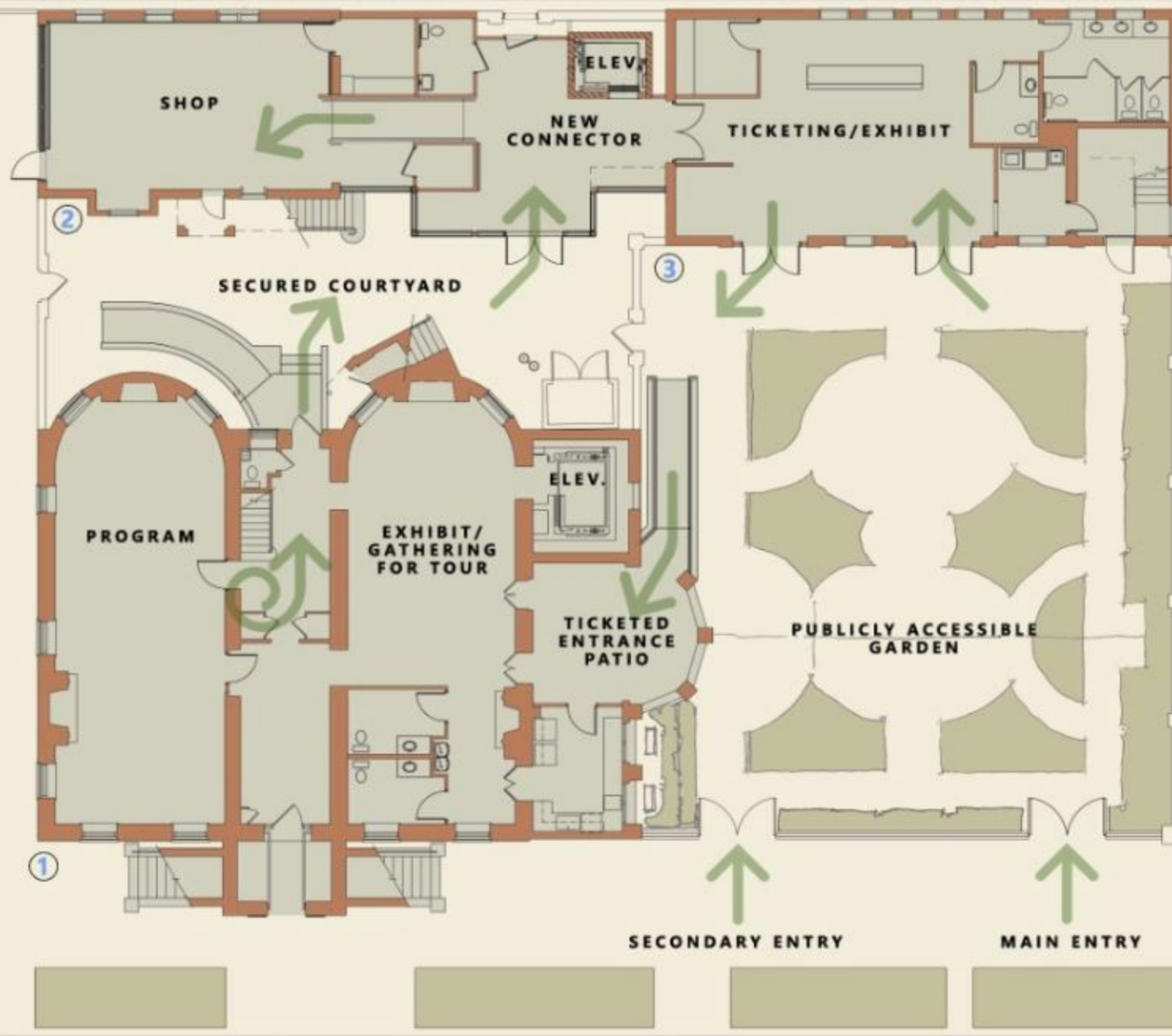
Garden Takeoff Chart

Concept	Planting (s.f.)	Path (s.f.)	Covered Open Space (s.f.)	Total (s.f.)	Loading Capacity (12 s.f. per person)
Existing	1737	1615	0	3352	134.6
1	1589	1763	0	3352	146.9
2	1426	1926	531	3883	204.8
3	1128	2224	531	3883	229.6

Key

- A. Remove existing planting bed and reflect vestige of original planting beds in paving
- B. Original planting beds, replanted in manor compatible with Clermont Lee's design
- C. Replace gravel walk with A.D.A. accessible paths; exposed aggregate or tabby concrete along perimeter; retain gravel in interior paths
- D. Bench
- E. Convert ground floor of former stable into event space, south wall and windows become operable doors
- F. Convert ground level area under porch into covered garden space by removing later partitions
- G. Garden entrance through building wall from Oglethorpe Avenue
- H. Widen path along garden's central axis from 4' to 6'
- I. Remove fountain and replace with flush decorative paving or millstone
- J. Garden entrance through existing fence from Oglethorpe Avenue
- K. Relocated Juliette Gordon Low statue and bench

BULL STREET



OGLETHORPE STREET

GROUND LEVEL
JULIETTE GORDON LOW BIRTHPLACE

Savannah, Georgia, U.S.A.



VIEW FROM OGLETHORPE



VIEW OF MAIN HOUSE
FROM GARDEN



VIEW OF OUTBUILDING EAST

- ① MAIN HOUSE
- ② OUTBUILDING WEST
- ③ OUTBUILDING EAST



SCHEMATIC PLAN

Site Plan - Garden

