TWO EVOLVING PARADIGMS, THE PASTORAL AND THE CIVIC: NEW CAMPUS INTERVENTIONS AT WELLESLEY AND MIT

Overview

Session Description
This field session examines ways of transforming campus infrastructure and designing spaces for 21st century social engagement. Whether idyllic or urbanized, the underlying aims of these projects—sustaining and extending institutional legacy—remain completely aligned.

Under Frederick Law Olmsted Jr.’s guidance, Wellesley College built a campus that exploits the rolling backbone of a rural glacial landscape—with expansive wetland meadows, the pastoral Lake Waban, and familiar native plant communities already thriving on site. MIT, on the other hand, organized its colossal Main Group—with its famous Infinite Corridor—on an absolutely flat landfill overlooking Boston in the Charles River estuary. Both have thrived, with strong identities: Wellesley through connected and highly varied landscape spaces; MIT with endlessly connected buildings, courts, and passages. This field session contrasts two essentially different ways of evolving campus legacy through the work of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates in more than a dozen projects at Wellesley, and the work of Reed Hilderbrand LLC at the intersection of MIT and its neighboring biotech city. The projects share technical subconsultant teams and sustainability aims; but they reflect opposing contexts, contrasting planning approaches, and widely different spatial paradigms. This field session brings the two into shared focus for an energizing day of campus immersion.

Wellesley

MVVA Principal Matthew Urbanski and Associate Principal Emily Mueller De Celis will lead a tour at Wellesley to discuss master plan principles and the implementation of projects. Wellesley faculty member Peter Ferguson will discuss campus history. The tour will feature the widely acclaimed 13-acre Alumnae Valley Landscape Restoration, in which a brownfield site has been reclaimed as a campus landscape space. The visible and hidden functions of the landscape will be discussed. Wellesley grounds staff will join the tour to discuss the performance of the landscape six years after completion.

MIT

Reed Hilderbrand Principals Gary Hilderbrand and John Grove will host an afternoon campus tour of MIT, which combines an imposing classical scale and axial order with adaptive and flexible arrangements for classrooms and laboratories and a complement of massive outdoor courts. Senior Campus Planner James May from MIT’s Department of Facilities’ Campus Planning and Design will discuss the process of building at MIT and his role as Project Manager of the Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research. The tour will feature mid-century works by Eero Saarinen, I.M. Pei, Sasaki, Dawson & Demay, and more recent work by Frank O. Gehry. Discussion will center on Reed Hilderbrand’s new North Court and Main Street projects, which capitalize on MIT’s overlaps with a dramatically expanding urban biotechnology community.

At both campuses, unique storm water and soils systems will be examined for their common performance goals and their remarkably different expressive intentions. Pine and Swallow Environmental Principal John Swallow will discuss his work as horticultural soil consultant for projects at both Wellesley and MIT. Discussion and debate on the two campus paradigms and planning approaches will be encouraged.

Learning Objectives
Learn how designers concisely frame institutional legacies as a way to inform authenticity and sustainability in design outcomes.

Get the inside story on the collaborative infrastructure planning that shapes sustainable solutions.

Compare the benefits of working from a guiding master plan with the fancy footwork of a more incremental and adaptive approach to projects.

See how the changing economics of project delivery require adaptations all the way through completion—and beyond.

Field Session Itinerary
8:00  Leave for Wellesley [mu, ag, emdc]
9:00  Wellesley introduction and walk with MVVA staff and campus historian Peter Ferguson
10:15 Campus Center Mini-tour
10:45 Tour Alumnae Valley, meet with College Facilities staff
12:15 Lunch on Wellesley campus
1:00  Leave for Cambridge
2:00  MIT introduction and walk with RH staff and MIT Senior Campus Planner
3:00  Review North Court/Koch + Main St Project
4:15 Depart
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Bios

Matthew Urbanski, ASLA Leader
Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Brooklyn, NY

Matthew is a Principal of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates where he has worked for over two decades. Collaborating with Michael Van Valkenburgh, he was a lead designer of Brooklyn Bridge Park in Brooklyn, New York, Segment 5 of Hudson River Park, Alumnae Valley at Wellesley College, and Teardrop Park, among others. In addition to his work as a designer, Matthew is an Associate Adjunct Professor at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design.

Emily Mueller De Celis, ASLA Leader
Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates Cambridge, MA

Emily is an Associate Principal at Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates and has led the day-to-day project coordination and design development for a wide range of project types, including public parks, institutional landscapes, and urban plazas. She functions as the Lead Coordinator for more than 16 implementation projects resulting from MVVA’s 1998 Wellesley College Master Plan.

John Grove, ASLA Leader
Reed Hilderbrand LLC Watertown, MA

John Grove ASLA is a Principal at Reed Hilderbrand, and has executed numerous award-winning projects over the last twenty-five years. He has shaped many of the firm’s most technically sophisticated works, including Harvard’s Naito/Bauer life sciences precinct, MIT’s Koch Institute and North Court, the Corning Museum of Glass, the Charles River Pier at Boston’s Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital, and a long list of private commissions that have garnered national attention for their exemplary craft and character.

Peter Fergusson Presenter
Wellesley College Wellesley, MA

Peter J. Fergusson is Feldberg Professor of Art History Emeritus at Wellesley College, where he has taught since 1966. He is the joint-author of The Landscape and Architecture of Wellesley College (2000), contributed a chapter in A. Berrizbeita (ed.), Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Reconstructing Urban Landscapes (2009), reviewed for Sitelines. He was closely involved with the development of the 1998 Wellesley College Master Plan, participating as an advisor on behalf of the College.

Gary Hilderbrand Presenter
Reed Hilderbrand LLC Watertown, MA

Gary is a partner of Reed Hilderbrand LLC, where he has shared design direction of the firm with Doug Reed for nearly twenty years. He is Professor in Practice of Landscape Architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. At Harvard since 1990, he has taught design studios, landscape technology, and the use of plants as a sustainable medium in design. Long devoted to the exploration of language’s role in shaping design intention, he is a recognized author and critic of twentieth-century landscape architecture practice.

James May Presenter
MIT Cambridge, MA

Jim joined MIT in 2000 as a senior campus planner with MIT’s Department of Facilities’ Campus Planning and Design group. In 2003 he initiated a planning study that explored options for renewing MIT’s cancer research facilities, and then took on the role of project manager for the building project that resulted: the Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research and the adjacent North Court. Prior to joining MIT staff, Jim worked at several Boston architectural firms, focusing on planning and design of educational facilities.

John Swallow, Affil. ASLA Presenter
Pine & Swallow Environment Groton, MA

John Swallow is a Principal and founder of Pine & Swallow Environmental. Dr. Swallow holds a Ph.D in Organic Chemistry from MIT. His professional soils and horticulture practice spans three decades and has emphasized soil chemistry, analysis of environmental conditions for plant growth, site rehabilitation, and urban tree planting techniques. He has served on the Sustainable Sites Initiative Technical Core and Soils Committees for many years. Recent projects include: Transbay Transit Center, San Francisco; Jefferson National Memorial Expansion, St. Louis; New York and Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, Governors Island, Four Freedoms Park, Brooklyn Bridge Park, and The High Line in NYC.

Stephanie Pierce ASLA Leader
Reed Hilderbrand LLC Watertown, MA

Stephanie is a Senior Associate at Reed Hilderbrand where she has worked on many institutional and large scale residential projects. Recent New England projects include MIT’s North Court, the Ridgewood Residence Halls at Brandeis University, and the Hamilton College Studio Arts complex. Stephanie received a MLA from the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and has a BA in Biological Studies and Art History from Wellesley College.
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MIT Tour Route

1 Kresge Quadrangle
2 Killian Court
3 Eastman & McDermott Courts
4 Media Lab Court
5 North Court
6 Main Street
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Campus History

1916

1970s campus expansion

2012

Killian Court

Kresge Auditorium and Kresge Chapel

William Welles Bosworth Drawing of Main Main Group
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North Court

The David H. Koch Institute for Integrative Cancer Research opened in March 2011 with the mission of combating cancer by fostering collaboration across disciplines. The new building and its neighbors—including Frank O. Gehry’s Stata Center and I.M. Pei’s 1976 Landau Building—frame a new 4-acre quadrangle on the site of a former parking lot. North Court connects the city directly with MIT’s iconic “Infinite Corridor” and amplifies the Institute’s design heritage of mid-century courts and plazas through a contemporary, highly performative language of urban squares, quadrangles, and promenades. The new sidewalk and plazas establish a definitive campus threshold on Main Street, where MIT research scientists and students intersect with the world’s leading biotech and life sciences companies amid a thriving, innovative urban culture.

North Court joins the public realm of Cambridge Main Street and the Eastern extension of MIT’s primary circulation spine, the Infinite Corridor. (above)

The site was an afterthought, a parking lot that had gradually become enclosed due to successive building construction. (left)
The broad Main Street sidewalk accommodates the public sidewalk, sitting, and meandering zones. A street section shows the supportive growth medium for street trees.
Lulu Wang Chow Campus Center
Academic Quad
Harris Courtyard
Tupelo Lane
Houghton Memorial Chapel Lawn
Science Center Meadow
Alumnae Valley
Paint Shop Pond
Departure Point
Campus History

Throughout its 135-year history, Wellesley College has shown a keen understanding of the benefits resulting when the pedagogic goals of an academic community are enhanced by its campus as a place. The college’s founders, presidents, and pioneering faculty – with input from Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. at a formative moment – carefully selected Wellesley’s particular campus structure for specific social and philosophical reasons. This aesthetic – rooted in the values of the 18th c. Romantic poets – draws from the spiritual power of the natural world as a foundation for an idealized environment for learning. The College remains remarkable for its integration of this ideal within a specific, regional topography of undulating glacial hills and valleys.

Figure 1: Landform structure and landscape place names. A graphic interpretation and summary of the named pieces on campus, found in various readings and manuscripts over the course of researching and writing this report. (Drawing by Elizabeth Meyer and Katie Towne)
Wellesley faced a unique set of challenges with its subtle campus form, the solutions of which were not obvious. The nearly built-out condition of the campus made expansion and growth difficult. The maturity of the vegetation, the decline of the infrastructure, the inappropriate dominance of the car, the aging of historic architecture and site structures and the tired quality of many landscapes spaces, defined the essence of the challenge. Significant portions of the master plan advocated restoration and renewal based on a careful interpretation of the still valid ideologies of the past. Our 20-year plan identified $120 million worth of landscape, roadway, infrastructure and building projects, including the transformation of an 8-acre parking lot into the Alumnae Valley landscape, completed in 2005. Since the completion of the 1998 Master Plan, Wellesley College has commissioned MVVA to implement the series of projects outlined in the plan, including the Alumnae Valley Landscape Renewal, the Davis Parking Facility and Wang Campus Center Landscape, the College Road Planting Strategy, the Harris Courtyard Landscape Restoration, the Hazard Quadrangle Landscape Restoration, the Paintshop Pond Landscape Reclamation and Athletic Fields, the Pendleton Hall and Hillside Renewal, the Science Center Landscape Renewal, the Tower Court Restoration and Tower Hill Landscape Renewal, the Trade Shops Landscape, and the Tupelo Lane Reconfiguration and Landscape Renewal.
Alumnae Valley

Completed in 2005, AVLR replaces a 175-car parking lot that was contaminated at brownfield levels with a naturalized outdoor social space set within a lush wetland landscape that actively extracts pollutants and filters surface drainage as it approaches Lake Waban. A conduit for cross-campus surface runoff into Lake Waban, 13-acre AVLR collects and cleans water from an 82-acre area before it is released into the larger watershed. The water cleansing system includes sediment forebays, overflow swales, a cattail marsh for water purity, and a stone spillway for aeration. The rolling topography of Alumnae Valley encourages a sensory immersion in the biodiverse meadow and wetland landscape and provides an opportunity for ecological education and psychological restoration. Throughout the AVLR project, members of the Wellesley maintenance and horticultural staff reviewed the MVVA team drawings and offered valuable feedback with respect to the success of various species on the campus and their experience with relative maintenance needs.
Soils

During the course of the AVLR design, geotechnical and environmental testing revealed severe soil toxicity stemming from earlier uses of the site. Wellesley was committed to dealing with the pollution responsibly, and the design of Alumnae Valley evolved to support this goal. As plans to reestablish this area as an important new connective campus landscape were developed, multiple types of contamination required a range of remediation strategies, including isolating toxic soils and safely reusing them on site as well as establishing an unobtrusive pumping system to draw out dense, non-aqueous phase liquid that had settled in the site’s original peat layer.

Existing surplus fill from the excavation of the garage and campus center was amended to create a variety of soil profiles designed to support the diverse plant communities proposed by MWVA. Using existing compost and stockpiled soils that Wellesley College’s facilities department had been blending in their yard, the majority of Alumnae Valley’s soils were created on-site with native native material.

A Working Landscape