INTRODUCTION

Small scale work has always been a core part of MVVA’s practice, providing the foundational thinking for many of the larger scale projects that the firm undertakes. Small projects do not necessarily mean private gardens (though MVVA continues to do those too). Of the five landscapes to be visited on this tour only one is private, the MVVA Cambridge Office Garden.

Of course, many of the qualities of a successful garden are transferable to larger landscapes. Regardless of size, the issues of comfort, scale, enriched experience, response to context and program, environmental impact, and durability are important in every landscape. However, smaller landscapes differ from large ones in the degree that they allow for intense focus on individual ideas, facilitate a greater degree of experimentation (though no less research), and usually have a more streamlined project team of client, subconsultant, and contractor groups to coordinate. Typically, they are built on a shorter time frame than large-scale work, which encourages a process whereby ideas materialize quickly, feedback is fast-paced, and fine-tuning can take place during construction. Smaller sites can also create the opportunity for a level of detail and intricacy that is often not possible, or perhaps even appropriate, in a large park or institutional landscape.

Introduced by designers who had a leading role in each of these small landscapes, this tour will explore landscape interventions ranging from 1,800 square feet to 4.5 acres in size, through the lens of different programmatic and experiential aspirations. The selected projects will highlight a diverse range of MVVA’s work at this scale in the Boston Area, including an interior courtyard at the Gardner Museum, the entry plaza at the Boston Children’s Museum, a city park in Allston, a courtyard at Harvard University, and our own Cambridge office garden.

OBJECTIVES

1) Understand design challenges and opportunities encountered in a range of small urban environments.
2) Learn the technical challenges and existing conditions, including working on a small waterfront plaza with unstable subsurface.
3) Appreciate the potential for integrating landscape program and experience with environmentally sustainable design.
4) Introduce one firm’s approach to planting design through the lens of projects at different stages of growth, with varied programs, in diverse contexts.

FIELD SESSION ITINERARY

1. THE BOSTON CHILDREN’S MUSEUM
2. MONKS GARDEN AT THE ISABELLA STEWART GARDENER MUSEUM
3. RAY MALLONE PARK
4. HARVARD YARD RESTORATION
5. MVVA CAMBRIDGE OFFICE GARDEN

MAP OF BOSTON AND CAMBRIDGE
PRESENTER BIOGRAPHIES

MICHAEL VAN VALKENBURGH
Michael is President and CEO of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, with offices in both Cambridge, MA and Brooklyn, NY. He is currently the Charles Eliot Professor in Practice of Landscape Architecture at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design, and in 2010, received the Arnold W. Brunner Memorial Prize in Architecture from the American Academy of Arts and Letters for contributions to the practice of architecture as an art. Michael is an ASLA Fellow and a registered landscape architect in more than 25 states and received the 2003 National Design Award in Environmental Design, and the 2012 ASLA Design Medal.

LAURA SOLANO
Laura Solano ASLA is a Principal at Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates in Cambridge, MA and an Adjunct Associate Professor at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Design. In practice for over 30 years, Laura has been an integral contributor to many of MVVA’s best-known landscapes, including: Teardrop Park, Restoration of the Whitehouse in front of Pennsylvania Avenue, the George W. Bush Presidential Center, Boston Children’s Museum Entry Plaza, and Brooklyn Bridge Park. She lectures across the US on technology, was on the Soils Committee for the Sustainable Sites Initiative and is a board member of the Landscape Architecture Foundation.

EMILY MUELLER DE CELIS
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. Her work includes York Quay’s Ontario and Canada Squares and Corktown Common (formerly Don River Park) in Toronto, Library Park in Allston, Teardrop Park in New York. She functions as the Lead Coordinator for more than 16 implementation projects resulting from MVVA’s 1998 Wellesley College Master Plan.

ANDREW GUTTERMAN
Andrew is an Associate Principal of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates’ Cambridge office, and an integral part of the firm’s senior management team. He has played a lead management role in many of MVVA’s projects including the Boston Children’s Museum Plaza, which received an ASLA Design Honor Award and he oversaw the Alumnae Valley Landscape Renewal at Wellesley College, which was awarded the ASLA Design Award of Excellence in 2006.

MATTHEW GIRARD
Matthew is an Associate with Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates. His work at MVVA has spanned all phases of the design process for a variety of projects including master plans for Kenyon College and Dartmouth College, a new quad for the University of Chicago, and the Monks Garden at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, MA.
THE BOSTON CHILDREN’S MUSEUM

Located on Fort Point Channel, the Boston Children’s Museum site has a spectacular view of the city. Regarded as an outdoor extension of its interior exhibit space, this 30,000 square foot plaza offers an urbane take on what it means to have play space in a city. In a world where almost everything within a city is designed for adults, this landscape is designed for children without stooping to blandness or banality. Instead, marble, slate and wire-cut bricks create scale and texture to engage the mind and senses in fun and unexpected ways. Five landscape rooms offer different but related experiences or opportunities including a maze, urban wetland, game space, performance area and café. Originally an asphalted wharf with significant settling problems and worn out dated timber terraces, the plaza was part of a major expansion of the Museum’s entrance and exhibit spaces, all completed in 2007.

SIZE: 30,000 square feet
HEIGHT OF HOOD MILK BOTTLE: 40 feet
SPECIAL MATERIAL: Marble tailings (quarry waste)
HIDDEN MATERIALS: Geofoam (to reduce weight), steel piles to bedrock (to support heavier elements), subsurface plant boxes made from landfill capping fabric to prevent salt infiltration
KEY COLLABORATOR: Dr.s Robin Moore and Nilda Cosco, of the Natural Learning Initiative
MONKS GARDEN
At the perimeter of the famed Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, the Monks Garden stands as the only space that the Gardner family changed to suit the current style. Its narrow and long proportions are said to have resembled a “monks garden” Mrs. Gardner had seen on her travels. During her time, the Monks Garden was planted in an Italianate style with tall, vertical evergreen trees in rows along part of the main walk and along the edge of the brick wall. MVVA’s redesign, newly finished in 2013, restores a rich horticultural palette that has always been a hallmark of the Gardner’s planted spaces. Stewartias, birch and tall arborvitae are underplanted with a changing display of pale perennials, all held together by evergreen fern and European ginger. A finely crafted narrow path made of dark brick and iridescent schist winds its way through the entire length of the garden, offering a strolling ground punctuated by loose chairs for relaxation and contemplation.

GARDEN AREA: 7,545 square feet
PATH: 2,100 square feet, 530 linear feet, 8,800 bricks and schist pavers
PLANTINGS: 66 trees and 7,300 perennials
COMPLETED: 2013
Once part of the Charles River marshland and later occupied by a concrete transfer yard, the existing site for Ray Mallone Park was denuded of vegetation with subsurface conditions that included layers of compressible Boston blue clay soils 20 feet below the surface. Tucked behind the widely successful Honana-Allston Library and at the future crossroads of the new Harvard Allston campus and the existing neighborhood, this new Boston city park introduces landscape complexity and experience as the core program of the site. A gift to the community from Harvard University, sculptural topography and distinctively composed plantings create memorable landscape episodes such as the Hill, Central Lawn, Rain Garden, Aspen Grove, Event Lawn, and Garden Edge. Identified early in the design as a pilot project in sustainability for both Harvard and Allston, the project employs LED lighting, organic maintenance, increased ecological diversity, improved wildlife habitat, the reuse of salvaged fill, and the collection of surface runoff for groundwater recharge through rain gardens. Due to the instability of the existing subgrade, the 14’ high sculptural hill is constructed of geo-foam with 18” of geo-fibered planting soils planted with little bluestem and switchgrass.

**SIZE:** 1.75 acres  
**UNIQUE SALVAGED MATERIALS:** Granite lion heads in fountain were salvaged from an adjacent Harvard building site
Harvard Yard is one of the oldest continually used built landscapes in the United States. By the late 1990s, however, the Yard’s original American Elm canopy had been largely eroded, despite multiple efforts to replant trees over the years. Addressing the need to reinvigorate the Yard, the MVVA master plan interpreted the existing landscape of Harvard Yard in relation to its cherished history, the evolution of the site to date, the University’s contemporary and anticipated programmatic needs, and the imperatives of landscape durability and longevity. The master plan recommended replanting the canopy of the Yard with more than twenty species with careful attention to site-wide microclimates, preserving the character of the space without perpetuating the inherent vulnerability of a monoculture. Other master plan initiatives included a revision of circulation systems based on current demands and anticipated building use, and a simplification of the volumetric space defined by the grass floor, tall trunk columns, and the tree canopy “roof”. The renovation scheme is sensitive to history while boldly achieving the environmental goals of the university. Working closely with the University and specialist consultants ranging from historians to arborists, the plan’s recommendations were organized as an accessible workbook of planning ideas, design projects, and maintenance recommendations. MVVA worked with Harvard over the course of a decade to implement the plan. Michael Van Valkenburgh continues to be involved with the future of this landscape through his participation in the Harvard Yard Soils Restoration Project.
Highly private and personal, the garden behind MVVA’s Cambridge office was completed in late 2012 following a year of discussion and sketches. The garden is an expression of MVVA’s passion for plants and love of craft. A rectangular wooden “raft” floats in the middle of the garden surrounded by plants and a fence that encloses the garden from nearby neighbors. It was important that the raft was visible from the office, an enticement, but there was also the need for an area that was not visible from windows, a place where staff could have a quiet moment. These two conflicting desires were resolved through planting that works in concert with the angle of the raft. The garden at 231 Concord Avenue operates as both a viewing garden and an outdoor destination in all seasons.

**SIZE:** 1,800 square feet  
**TIMBER FOR FENCE AND RAFT:** Black locust (Robinia pseudoacacia)  
**BRICKS:** Endicott Bricks  
**LOW-TECH SUSTAINABILITY:** Bed of gravel under raft acts as an infiltration basin  
**SALVAGED PLANTS:** Umbrella pine and the honey locust