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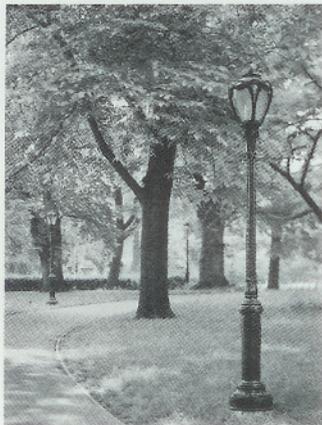
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Gerald Allen Landscape Revealed in Time

It seems to me that good mentors do not operate by wreaking a dramatic conversion on you. Instead, they encourage you to make the best of what you are already doing.

Early in my career, I was fortunate to be involved in a major campaign to renovate Central Park. My encounter with the park, and its invitation to think about the implications of a great landscape composition, led me further in directions I had already begun exploring. For instance, I was very interested in the idea of architecture as a place rather than as a thing, and as something that you experience by moving through it. Being brought face to face with the great examples of Olmsted and Vaux made those ideas more vivid and more thrilling.



Central Park lamp, New York
Photo: Tim Buchman



Above: Timothy Hursley
Below: Tim Buchman



Central Park Lamp, New York

I was asked to design new lamps for the cast-iron lampposts in Central Park that Henry Bacon, architect of the Lincoln Memorial, had designed in the early twentieth century. There were some 1,600 posts remaining, but Bacon's original tops had long ago disappeared. I invited Kent Bloomer to work with me on the design of new ones.

It was obvious to us that we should somehow use natural shapes like leaves and branches and twigs, but I also wanted to incorporate the idea of the post and the new lamp revealing themselves in time. For one thing, the post itself is like a giant stem, growing up and up and finally culminating in, of course, a flower, which is the lamp. But as you also walk around the lamppost a quarter turn, the flower actually appears to change its shape. And, as you draw closer, you see a second layer of ornament in form of little leaves, and then tiny seed pods on the swags that drape between its vertical elements.

**Cherry Hill Concourse
Central Park, New York**

Cherry Hill Concourse, part of Olmsted and Vaux's original design for Central Park, was a pleasant venue in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It originally consisted of a circular, gravel terrace, about 180 feet across, with a fountain in the middle. People went there in carriages to take in the view across the lake and to water their horses.

As I worked on its renovation, I realized that the concourse, like so many other places designed as picturesque landscapes, is meant to be experienced in time as you move through it. For instance, as you come up the driveway, your eye is caught by the prospect of the fountain. As you circle around it, something totally else—the lake—is revealed. The effect mesmerized me.

My favorite view of the renovated concourse suggests how the composition still works. First, you can still ride around it in a carriage, but now also on roller skates. Note, though, how the circle is sliding out of sight on the left. You can't quite see it completed, so you have to imagine it. It also slips out of view in the lower foreground because the brow of the hill intervenes. On the right there is a sliver of lake; if you were to go over there, you would find a wonderful view of the buildings on Central Park West—twice, once for real, and once, upside-down, reflected in the lake.

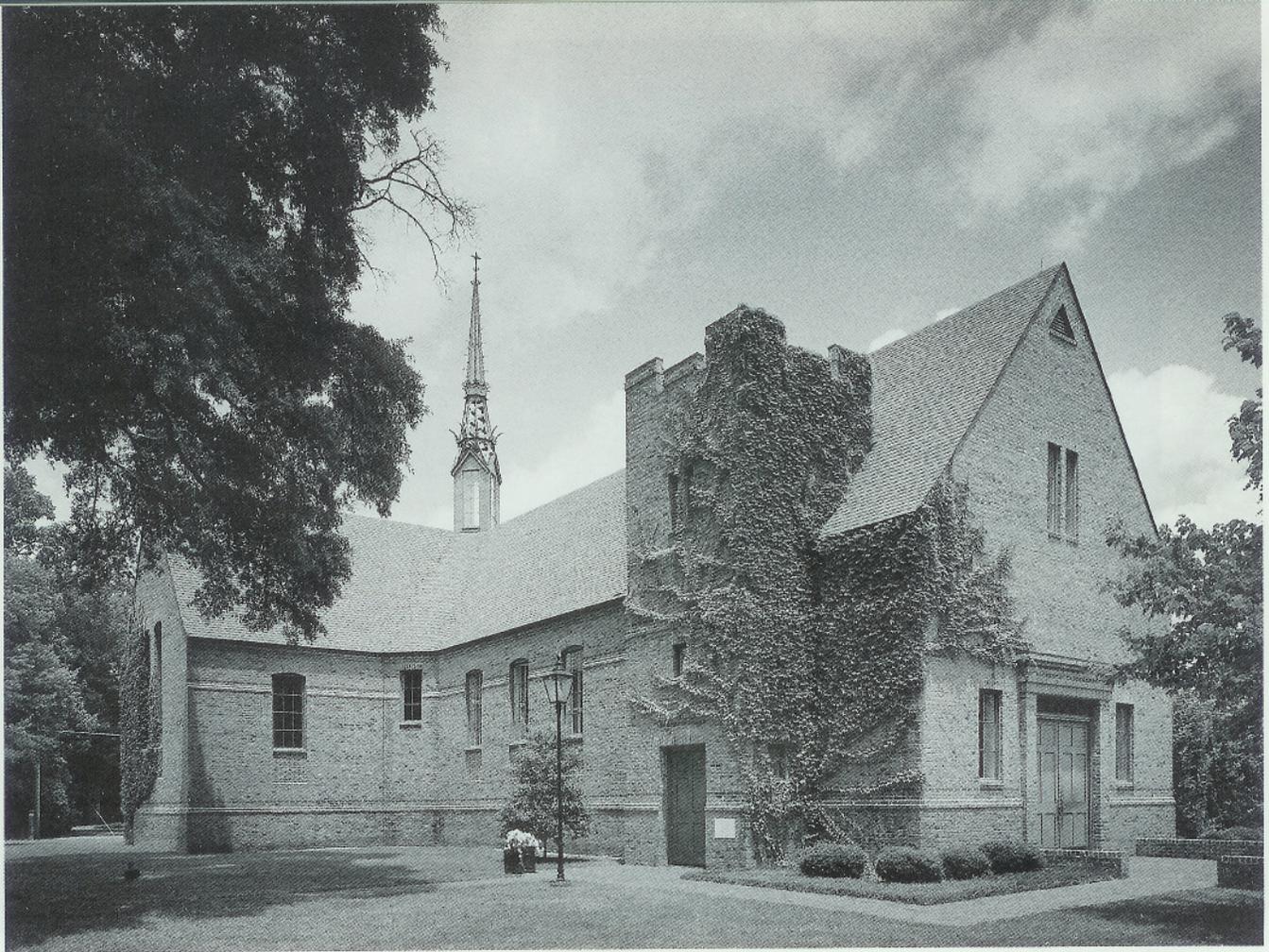


Photo: Tim Buchman

**The Church of St. Therese
Wilson, North Carolina**

I used to chuckle at the local builder of the Church of St. Therese, which I designed about ten years ago, when he referred to the metal spire on the roof above its crossing as "the spiral." But he was absolutely right. It is a double helix, designed by Kent Bloomer, that twists upward with leaves and plants and other natural shapes, some of them slightly menacing.

This is an excellently simple example of recalling the forms and shapes of nature in the materials of a building. But notice, here, how important the shapes of nature themselves are to the impression the building makes, starting with the Virginia Creeper that (a little menacingly, perhaps) is starting to smother the tower. This and other landscape elements were designed and lovingly planted by Josephine Brown and other parishioners. An architect should always be this lucky.

Thorbiskope

Fifteen years ago I bought a house that had been built by my ancestors in North Carolina about two hundred years ago, but which had been sold out of our family in 1943. It had not been lived in for some time and was in very bad shape, so my first step was just to stabilize it; I couldn't even think about restoring it.

But I also decided to start thinking at the same time about what the yard should be, and to go ahead and start planning it, so that by the time I finished working on the house, the garden might be coming along as well.

I was not knowledgeable about horticultural practice, so I began reading books and looking at what other people had planted in their yards as I drove around in my car—a first-rate way of learning what, and what not, to do. I started by planting some tiny little crepe myrtles, red cedars, and magnolias, plus some hollies to make a hedge, and I watched over time as they began to grow. I put some attractive plants I found on the site in a holding bed to watch them too. So I started to learn things that other gardeners know by heart—like how monkey grass, a perfectly ordinary plant in the South, grows so densely that if you plant it as a border between a lawn and a flowerbed, not even Bermuda grass will grow through it.

I learned about what plants were comfortable in my garden, and also about plants I could introduce and make comfortable. For instance, I began to notice that it seemed a great deal cooler on my land than in the surrounding area, particularly in the winter. With the help of a home weather station, I confirmed that it is indeed cooler. And that is because the house is on a river, which, of course, is at the bottom of a shallow valley whose slopes extend a half mile on both sides. So, when the wind is calm, the cold air comes slipping and sliding down, right into my back yard.

The horticultural downside is that some beloved local plants like azaleas do not do well



A part of the yard at Thorbiskope, the author's house in North Carolina
Photo: Gerald Allen

here. The upside is that Anglo-Jap yew, which should not grow here, does if you are careful about where you plant it. So does European beech, my favorite tree in the world.

Gardening takes time. In truth, it could take someone almost a lifetime just to figure out the basic vocabulary of plant materials in any one place. So it could take more than a lifetime of springs, summers and falls to learn to master the language. And—even after you almost have figured it all out—it still takes a long time for your plants and trees to grow. I've been at it for almost fifteen years at Thorbiskope, and it is only now beginning to come together.

But it worries me that this, so obviously an effective way of designing something, is very unlike the way that we ordinarily design in professional offices. When I started working on my garden, I had no very clear idea exactly what the whole plan was going to be. Then, as I kept at it, learning and planting, watching and adjusting, I came to recognize that there is merit in not having to decide everything at once, but deferring decisions until you have a clearer understanding about what to do. There is a positive pleasure in being able to say, "I'll just think about that for a little bit." I get really good results that way.