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# THE ACTIVE EDGE

The schematic design model for Brooklyn Bridge Park (top) shows possible pedestrian access points to the parks and waterways in yellow. Above, left to right: photographs of the existing site, spanning from the Con Edison building just north of the Manhattan Bridge to the piers and surrounding streets.



Designed by Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates, Brooklyn Bridge Park seems destined to become New York's third great urban landscape.

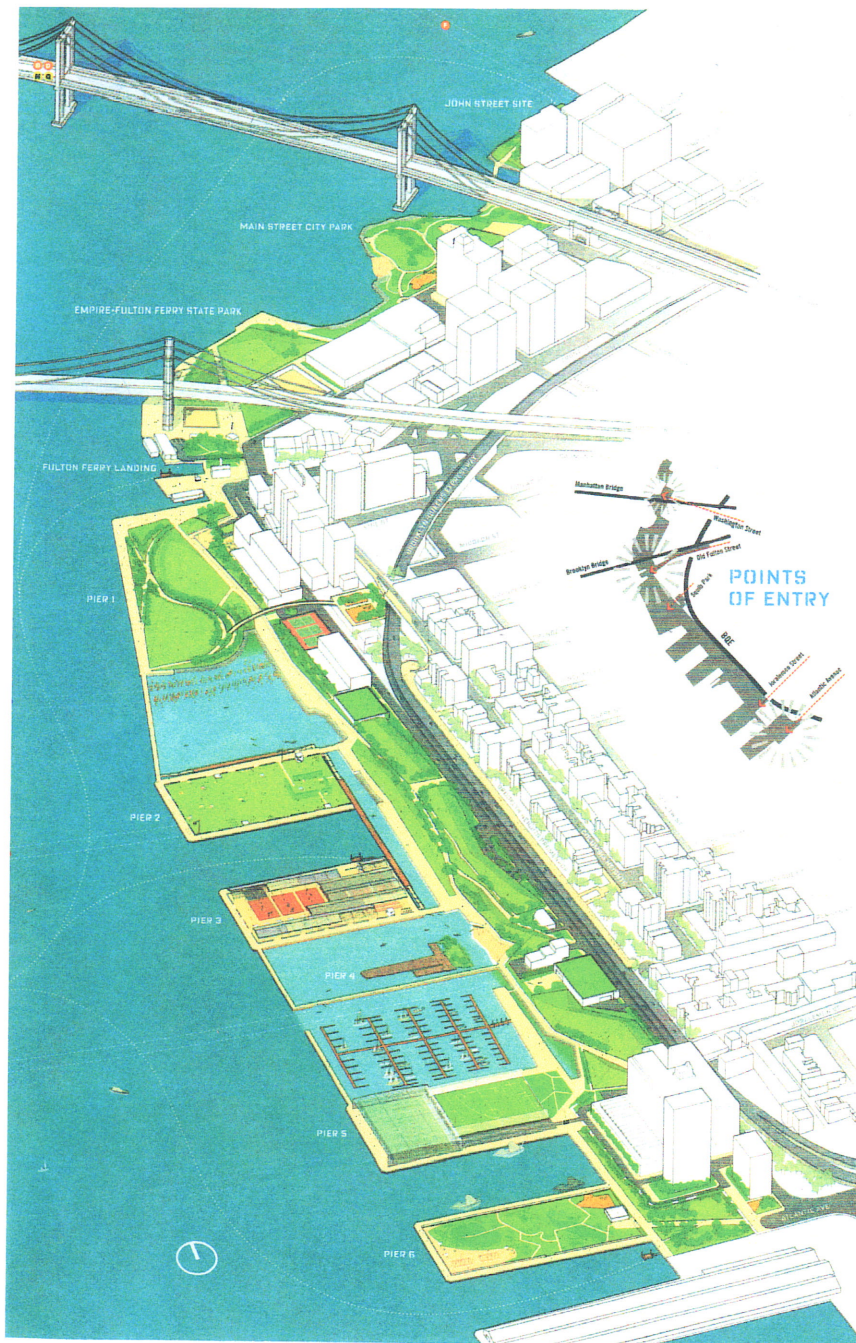


By Andrew Blum

If you are looking for a sense of what's to come with Brooklyn Bridge Park—the great 85-acre park soon to take shape along 1.3 miles of the Brooklyn waterfront—then Teardrop Park is a good place to start. Nestled into only two acres between apartment buildings in Battery Park City, it has a small sloping lawn, a tiny marsh, and a pathway that winds up to the top of a stone wall, which in wintertime glistens with dripping ice. Completed in 2004, it's a romantic, adventurous place that abandons Modernist landscape architecture's single crisp layer of meaning in favor of something moodier. The landscape architect of

both parks, Michael Van Valkenburgh, likes to think Teardrop has what the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard calls "psychological immensity." But Teardrop had a princely \$17 million budget and a generally agreeable site. Brooklyn Bridge Park is landscape architecture under live fire, with a complicated site (already occupied by the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the Brooklyn Bridge, and a quartet of five-acre piers supported on 12,000 wood piles), a strict budget (\$150 million for 85 acres), and a democratic imperative heightened by its size and inherent status as a symbol of the "New Brooklyn." Still, it is easy to

The "Dress Warehouse" shows, courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum, Manhattan, N.Y.



### POST-INDUSTRIAL PARK

An axonometric plan of the site (above) puts the proposed park in context of the adjacent neighborhoods. Proposal sketches (right) imagine the court-sports area on Pier 3, kayaking in the safe-water zone near nature island, preserved dock piles near Pier 1, a walkway along Pier 5, and the Fulton Ferry Landing park entrance.



*Van Valkenburgh knows that landscape architecture needs a new model attuned—like everything else—to a world in which the real and the simulated, the past and the present, the natural and the man-made are fluid.*

imagine that when it's completed in 2012 it will be New York City's third great park, after Central Park and Prospect Park.

Frederick Law Olmsted would be pleased. Van Valkenburgh and his firm, Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates (MVVA), share the old master's emphasis on the park's role as a democratic equalizer for the city; they share his technical sophistication and imperative for a sensitive layering of the constructed landscape upon the natural one; and they recognize the need for range, for varied and multitudinous landscapes rather than singular compositions. But what Olmsted's Arcadian vision symbolized in the urbanizing America of the nineteenth century—the agrarian ideal at the core of the nation's democracy—would be hopelessly historicist amid the expressways, warehouses, and industrial piers of the Brooklyn waterfront. Van Valkenburgh knows that landscape architecture needs a new model attuned—like everything else—to a world in which the real and the simulated, the past and the present, the natural and the man-made are fluid.

This is landscape architecture's new paradigm. "Nearly every significant new landscape designed in recent years occupies a site that has been reinvented and reclaimed from obsolescence or degradation as cities in the postindustrial era remake and redefine their outdoor spaces," noted then Museum of Modern Art Architecture and Design curator Peter Reed in a brochure accompanying last year's exhibition *Groundswell: Constructing the Contemporary Landscape*.

"So many of the sites we're handed today are leftover, never-would-have-been-looked-at-twice-thirty-years-ago kinds of places," Van Valkenburgh says to me one morning last December in a conference room at his office, located in a loft building half a block from Union Square. At 54 years



Portrait: Dean Kaufman; others courtesy Michael Van Valkenburgh Architects



### THE MVVA TEAM

The design team (from left) Nate Trevethan, Dorothy Tang, Matthew Urbanski, Michael Van Valkenburgh, Gullivar Shepard, and A. Paul Seck.

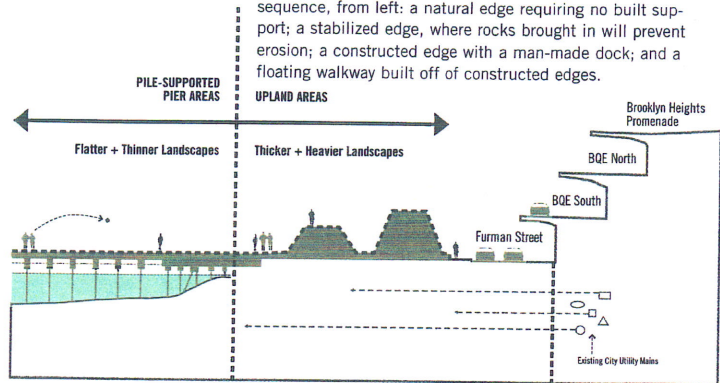
old, he is intense, passionate—momentarily hot-tempered even—and informal, dressed in a sweater, flannel pants, and Merrell slip-ons. The window boxes outside are filled with Japanese skimmia, an evergreen shrub. Principal Matthew Urbanski, a former student of Van Valkenburgh's at Harvard's Graduate School of Design and his closest collaborator for the past 15 years, sits across from him. Both speak in the language of ideas, thinking things through together as they go and often finishing each other's sentences. "Landscape is so much about the circumstance of the found condition," Van Valkenburgh says. "It's a lot more 'I asked the landscape what it could be' rather than the other way around," Urbanski adds.

So much of their work—like Brooklyn Bridge Park—has been defined by water. In 1989 Van Valkenburgh won the commission for Mill Race Park, in Columbus, Indiana—the Midwestern town that industrialist J. Irwin Miller turned into an architectural mecca with buildings by everyone from Eliel and Eero Saarinen to Cesar Pelli and Carlos Jimenez. It was a turning point for Van Valkenburgh. Six months earlier, after seven years of teaching, he was granted tenure at Harvard. As he recalls, "A friend of mine said to me, 'You just got handed an eighty-three-acre park, you're not even forty years old, and you never did anything in your life. They had no business picking you. Do you want a little boutique practice or do you want to be a real landscape architect?' So I just basically realized, shit, I gotta give up this Harvard tenure thing."

He didn't quite do that—he was chairman of

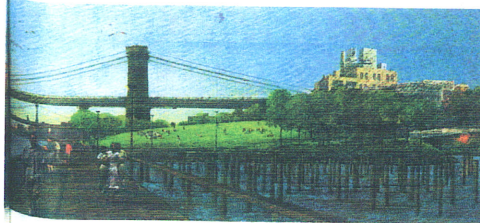
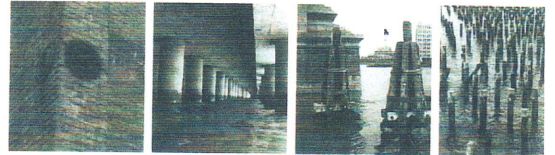
### WATER'S EDGE

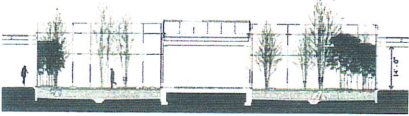
Drawings below represent weight-bearing considerations and various "edge conditions" where water and land meet. Lower sequence, from left: a natural edge requiring no built support; a stabilized edge, where rocks brought in will prevent erosion; a constructed edge with a man-made dock; and a floating walkway built off of constructed edges.



### PRESERVATION

The current site (below) is home to historical maritime structures and significant construction details. Right: an ornamental detail on a neighboring building; the underside of Pier 3; dolphin piles; the remnants of old dock piles.



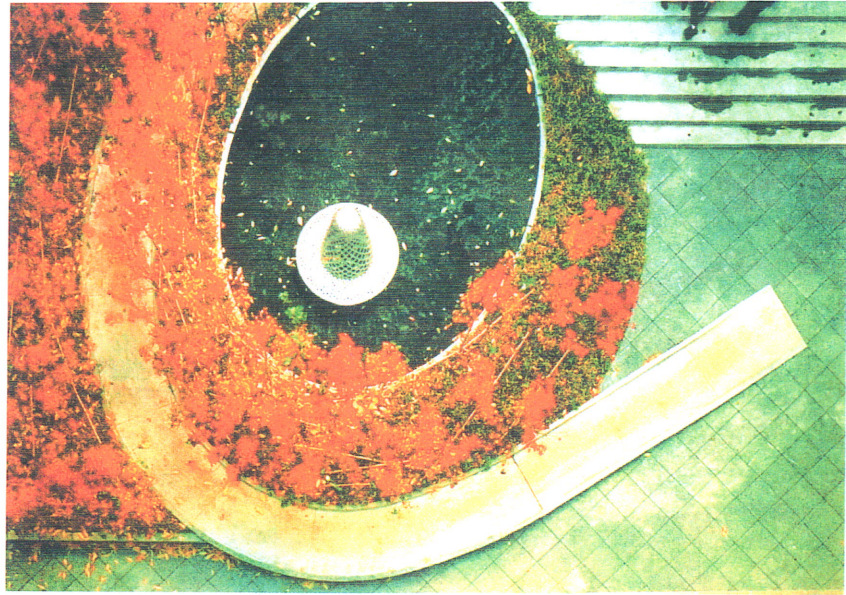


### TAHARI

To build the Tahari Courtyards in New Jersey, the office facility's previously continuous roof was cut open by architect Bart Voorsanger, allowing sunlight into a miniature birch forest planted in the center of the building. This is a reinterpretation of a Roman architectural form called a compluvium, an opening in a rooftop that lets natural elements into the building.

### HERMAN MILLER

While integrating more parking into a Herman Miller factory in Georgia, water runoff had to be controlled to prevent erosion. The final solution—planting absorbent vegetation between existing trees and telephone poles—was informed by the natural characteristics of the wetlands.



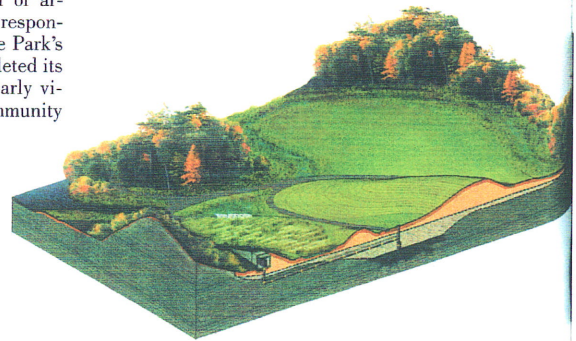
### THE NEW SCHOOL

The New School's Vera List Courtyard (above) sought to make ADA-compliant accessibility inherent to the design. A ramp snakes around a raised platform, which can be used as a stage or sitting area. The stairs provide extra seating.

Harvard's department of landscape architecture from 1991 to 1996 and retains tenure as the Charles Eliot professor in practice—but Van Valkenburgh did grow the firm, becoming a “real landscape architect.” Today there are nearly 40 designers (about ten of whom work full-time on Brooklyn Bridge Park) split relatively evenly between offices in Cambridge and New York. For everyone in the firm the cool self-assurance typical of architects seems weighted with the public responsibility of park building. Brooklyn Bridge Park's public planning process (it has just completed its environmental review) has been particularly vituperative, with a steady stream of community

### WELLESLEY

The design for Wellesley College's Alumnae Valley sought to redistribute water runoff and convert it to water storage. From left: the axonometric plan, showing the redistribution of collected water; a photograph taken during construction; a design proposal transposed on an early photo; the completed site.



activists, developers, and politicians all staking their claims on the design, represented in a 31-foot-long model that was on display in an office workshop until it was moved to an exhibition at the Architectural League of New York. As a result the architects exude a palpable sense of public imperative, making the place feel more like a non-profit than a fancy design studio. None seems eager to wave a hand and have it their way.

Van Valkenburgh likes to compare the firm's approach to that of Alice Waters, the godmother of organic food, who trumpets the connection between how food tastes and the honesty and social responsibility with which it's produced. “Landscape operates on that level for us,” Van Valkenburgh says. “Great scenery, but, oh my god, you're looking at a purification system for eighty-two acres of runoff.” Mill Race Park is designed to be submerged by annual flooding. So is Allegheny Riverfront Park, which stitched downtown Pittsburgh back to the Allegheny River essentially by reclaiming a highway median. An as yet unbuilt segment of Hudson River Park in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood is layered on top of existing marine piers. And MVVA's master plan for the Wellesley College campus, as well as their subsequent reimagining of a utility parking lot there as Alumnae Valley, demonstrate the firm's insistence on combining environmentally

This page: top left, courtesy Elizabeth Feigen/Elizabeth Van Valkenburgh Architects; top right, Jerry Spier; center, courtesy Paul Warchol/Michael Van Valkenburgh Architects; bottom left, courtesy Ron Reed/Michael Van Valkenburgh Architects; bottom right, courtesy Alex Macdonald/Michael Van Valkenburgh Architects; opposite page: top, courtesy Paul Warchol/Michael Van Valkenburgh Architects; bottom right, courtesy Michael Van Valkenburgh Architects



**TEARDROP PARK**

The jagged bluestone walls enclosing a path through Battery Park City's Teardrop Park were informed by upstate New York's natural rock formations. The stark contrast between the rocks and surrounding concrete buildings reflects the experience of discovering natural structures in urban settings.

technical solutions with aesthetically driven ones.

These projects were all perfect preparation for Brooklyn Bridge Park. In 2000 MVVA worked as a subconsultant on the initial master plan, led by Toronto planning firm Urban Strategies. Yet as the architects tell it, winning the commission for the park—awarded through a public proposal process in July 2003—was a fluke. They had shown the Brooklyn Bridge Park Development Corporation the nascent possibilities of the site, but they didn't expect to be asked to explore those possibilities themselves. Their experience with the technicalities of waterfront construction and marine engineering enabled them to recognize the richness of what existed there already—such

as the well-maintained massive pier structures. Their plan would stretch the budget further than the others—but more crucially their proposal for the park wouldn't depend strictly on the formal.

Van Valkenburgh bristles at even the implication of the question “What are your forms?” He insistently defines himself in opposition to Modernist landscape architecture—the style of work made famous by designers like Peter Walker, George Hargreaves, and Kathryn Gustafson, with its preference for the neat and photographable. Along with his Watersian focus on honest ingredients, he prefers Tom Stoppard's aphorism in the play *Arcadia*: “The unpredictable and the predetermined unfold together to *continued on page 130*

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## The Active Edge

continued from page 87

make everything the way it is.” Van Valkenburgh glosses, “It’s an essential underlay of what landscape is as a medium: the combination of understanding the things that are givens and then setting it up in a way so that the occurrence of the undeterminable is a welcome consequence.” Olmsted once described his plans for Mont-Royal in Montreal by saying, “It would be wasteful to try to make anything else than a mountain of it.”

But nobody ever mistook the Brooklyn waterfront for a mountain. Saying the site is defined by its givens is like saying Shaquille O’Neal has a height advantage. The park’s \$150 million budget leaves little room for major structural changes, so from its first proposal MVVA adopted a strategy of matching the park’s program with existing conditions: lightweight playing fields go out on the massive piers while heavy noise-abatement mounds (the sound from the BQE, Urbanski says, “will make your ears bleed”) and treed areas stay on real ground. The site’s isolated location, cut off from surrounding neighborhoods by the BQE, is countered by playgrounds placed near three key entrance points, with draws such as an indoor sports complex and a boat marina set deeper inside the park. Additionally—in a move met with public outcry—a few condominium buildings and a boutique hotel are planned at the edges of the park, both to fulfill its mandate of being economically self-sufficient and to build in a 24-hour-a-day constituency.

Last summer Nicolai Ouroussoff, architecture critic for the *New York Times*, called Van Valkenburgh to ask him about his design ideas for the site. He responded with a five-page letter that reads like a manifesto for a new landscape architecture. “Tapping into the intellectual power of Olmsted parks does not come from a desire to imitate the past in the stylistic sense,” Van Valkenburgh wrote. “Rather, it comes from recognizing common interest in transforming sites into purer versions of themselves, thus sublimating an extensive public program.” For Van Valkenburgh, landscape architecture is at least partially reductive: it’s about “subtracting to reveal.” It doesn’t impose ideas; it inseminates them, often literally, by spreading seeds. It is an “in vitro” act—the artificial occurrence of a natural process. Accordingly, the design of Brooklyn Bridge Park does not scrape away “the unpredictable and the predetermined.” It celebrates them.

“Basically, the BBP project is about restoring complexity to the urban river edge that was lost when the piers were built,” Van Valkenburgh wrote in the letter. The architects call this the *rich edge*, an ecological term that describes the heightened biodiversity at the interfaces between ecosystems. This is meant metaphorically, in that the experience of the park is to be defined by shifting encounters with that edge. Visitors will always be negotiating it: the pathways will frame their views of the skyline and the bridges, and they’ll be constantly faced with a choice of paths to walk—close to the water, up on higher ground, or on bridges and piers somehow in between. “We respect the democracy entailed in park users’ being able to make their own experiential choices,” he adds.

But it is also metaphorical since the architects intend to create wildlife habitats and build in (or reclaim) a variety of edge conditions such as rocky beaches and floating walkways. In this way the park will choose its own path as well: “The occurrence of the undeterminable is a welcome consequence,” regardless of whether it’s something preserved from the site’s natural or industrial past or something made in vitro. “If we’re talking about something that reached a static state, then maybe we could dwell a little more on the significance of what’s preserved and what’s made. But in fact they’re both dynamic, they’re both allied; they’re both different each day forward in time,” Van Valkenburgh says. “Brooklyn is a lot about this,” he adds. “There’s hardly a speck of nature left. But to sprinkle a bunch of seeds around and fix the soil in a way so that it can—through its own resources—generate a new landscape is pretty exciting.” [www.metropolismag.com](http://www.metropolismag.com)

# BROWNFIELD TO GREENFIELD: A GUIDE TO ALUMNAE VALLEY

BY PETER FERGUSSON

DON'T LOOK for Alumnae Valley on your old Wellesley maps. You won't find it. It is newly named—as it is newly made. Look instead for Service Lot. Then bring to mind the hard-surfaced, 300-vehicle car park, a rutted brownfield that stretched westward from the power plant (figs. 1 and 5; pages 38 and 39). Today, the cars, roads, painted parking bays, College service trucks, and tennis courts are gone. Gloriously reclaimed, Alumnae Valley's 10-acre site has become

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL LUTCH





Fig. 1

Wellesley's latest completed landscape. Defying our prevailing car-culture, a new nature replaces old tarmac.

Alumnae Valley's transformation closes a 130-year search by the College for the valley's purpose and identity (see "Wellesley's Quest to Be Centered," spring '03). Ice-age glaciers scored out the topography 20,000 years ago, leaving a trail of eskers (gravel ridges), drumlins (hills), and kettles (dell-like depressions). They also destined the valley as a natural watershed for the nearly 100 acres to the northeast—an area that includes the Alexandra Botanical Garden and College land across the railroad tracks—which drains into Lake Waban.

In 1902, Wellesley's fifth president, Caroline Hazard (below), asked Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., to prepare a master plan to steer the College's future growth. Instead, he wrote her a 22-



page letter urging her to preserve its existing topography and original ecology. The future lay in the past. Since Wellesley's founding in 1875, development had edged eastward, away from College Hill (where Severance and Tower Court now stand), leaving in its wake the ancient valley to the west. The power plant was settled there in 1903 and then, some years later, the industrial shops: carpentry, electrical, plumbing. Service Lot had been born, and the valley became the College's back door.

Attempts at remediation came and went. With optimism, the 1921 Master Plan shows the valley with a canoe turnaround and a running track. It also shows the valley's northeastern side bordered by the College's new main road, which its designers raised on a causeway (where it remains), thereby separating the valley from its watershed. Some things worked. Alumnae Hall, originally the Student-Alumnae Building materialized in 1922–23, and the Hay Amphitheatre in 1936. But these gains were soon surrendered. Following World War II, parking spread inexorably across the valley floor like a malign creeper, then advanced uphill toward the former Well (what is today the Ruth Nagel Jones Theatre), and finally smothered the sward in

Plantings boldly dress the bones of the newly devised topography. The drumlin mounds are meadow-planted using native fescues and perennial wildflowers: black-eyed Susans, asters, goldenrod, woodland phlox. For those entering from the Davis Museum side, leggy sumacs introduce the valley.



Fig. 2

front of Alumnae Hall. While Wellesley garnered national praise for its peerless landscape, Alumnae Valley spiraled downward.

The College did its best to ignore the valley, embarrassed by it as one might be by an awkward relative. Eyes averted, it turned its attention elsewhere. Not surprisingly, it took an outsider to see things differently. The call in 1996 by the Wellesley Board of Trustees for a landscape master plan led to the hiring of Michael Van Valkenburgh Associates of Cambridge, Mass., and New York City, one of North America's most distinguished design firms. Their report two years later identified many of Wellesley's campuswide landscape woes and proposed a program to correct them. But the firm's boldest proposal involved Alumnae Valley. Eyesore it was, but had the College overlooked an asset? If freed from passive parking uses and reconnected to the landscape, the valley would offer a bounty of possibilities. But where to put the cars? And how to counter Wellesley's east-titling development?

On its own, the valley's chances of reclamation looked bleak. Its fortunes changed with a sequence of decisions: the positioning of the playing fields over the reclaimed area known as Paintshop Pond, the location of the Wang Campus Center close to Alumnae Hall, and

finally, the construction of the Davis Parking Facility adjacent to both. All inclined the campus back toward the west.

The 1998 Campus Master Plan (fig. 11) prepared by Van Valkenburgh was asked to address a complex program for Alumnae Valley. It needed to unburden Severance Green (overused for the College's ceremonial and recreational events); to link the Hazard Quad, Tower Court, Alumnae Hall, and the sports center with a landscape of connection; to resume its function as a natural watershed; to complement the new campus center that would spread out on its northern boundary; and, not least, to find a form congruent with Wellesley's landscape character.

Van Valkenburgh considered several options to fill these needs. Strictly historic restoration was ruled out; the College's horse-and-buggy, long-skirted early years held no relevance for the present day. A different guide was needed. Van Valkenburgh began with history, as he does with all his projects. For him, form follows history. Not a history restored, but a history reconceptualized from an understanding of its original intents. To steer the valley's reclamation, Van Valkenburgh took cues from Olmsted's 1902 letter and drew heavily from Wellesley landscape history, plus his many hours of walking the College's grounds.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

The valley survived as a battered skeleton. It needed not simply rebuilding, but reimagining. Construction of the Davis Parking Facility (half underground) and the Wang Campus Center involved extensive excavation, but rather than truck the excavated dirt away, the daring decision was made to use it to rebuild the valley's topography. Four 70-foot-high mounds were bulldozed onto the old tennis courts near the amphitheatre, there to await the opening of the parking facility (in 2004) and the liberation of the valley from its role as parking lot. Using the dirt, the valley floor was raised by 6 feet in order to seal potential contaminants from the former cars, power plant, or fill moved from the former Paintshop Pond area. On top of this, Van Valkenburgh shaped three huge, dramatic drumlin-like forms (approximately 150 feet long and

The power plant was settled in the valley in 1903 and then, some years later, the industrial shops: carpentry, electrical, plumbing. Service Lot had been born, and the valley became the College's back door.



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Fig. 7



Van Valkenburgh shaped three huge, dramatic drumlin-like forms (approximately 150 feet long and 20 feet high) to serve as the valley's armature.

20 feet high) to serve as the valley's armature (figs. 3 and 8). The most striking drumlin dominates the entry from Shakespeare House, where the walker is raised level to the roofs of the power plant (fig. 2) and then dropped down a steeply sheared slope to Generations Pond (fig. 6). The two other drumlin-shaped mounds lie perpendicular, moving outward and away from the campus center, one framing the pond, the other angled to shelter the events and recreation lawn (figs. 7 and 8). None replicates any known historical feature of the valley. Yet, each makes reference to the College's glaciated history, forming a topography composed around the principles on which Wellesley's landscape rests: variety, irregularity, indirection, vista-driven

panoramas, and subtle linkages. As manifest "art-ing," the bold and brilliantly conceived topography is a sculpted creation, not *ex nihilo*, but ingeniously developed from an imagined past.

To serve programming needs, a grassy outdoor space for concerts, student fairs, Frisbee-playing, and the like, is nestled into the valley's broad, arced western side with spectator space possible on the raked side of the framing drumlin. To handle drainage, Van Valkenburgh devised two forebays, roughly circular, rock-strewn "bubblers," to serve as pipe-fed termini for rainwater and sediment runoff. Alive in storms, quiescent otherwise, one disperses runoff (figs. 9 and 10) into Lake Waban, the other into a clay-lined half-acre wetland—the Generations Pond—more or less in the

Fig. 8



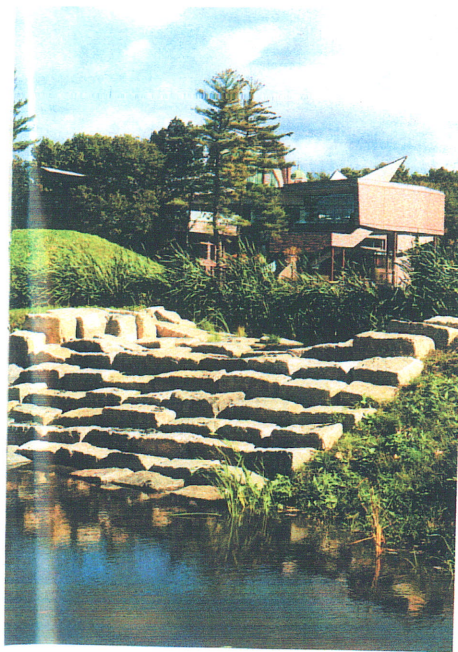


Fig. 9

center of the valley composition, flanked by curved paths leading outwards from the campus center.

Plantings boldly dress the bones of the newly devised topography. The drumlin mounds are meadow-planted using native fescues and perennial wildflowers: black-eyed Susans, asters, goldenrod, woodland phlox. These merge with marsh marigolds and iris. For those entering from the Davis Museum side, leggy sumacs introduce the valley. At the center, thousands of chest-high cattails fill the pond, and a tupelo grove stands at its campus-center end. Toward Lake House, chokeberry climbs the hillside. On the Tower Court slope, pines and American beech grace the lower reaches, some of nearly 350 newly planted trees.

How will the new landscape look? Today we see it in its infancy; we are left to guess the adult from the baby. To reach adolescence, 10 to 20 years of growth are needed. The intention is for something unmanicured, a little rough, but something which in its freedom of growth speaks of liberation, a value corresponding to the words of Katharine Lee Bates 1880 celebrating Wellesley's "wild beauty." Plants are heavily native, ecologically friendly, diverse in species, and modest in their needs for maintenance. At the same time as they delight, they carry an edge, posing questions, stretching the mind, critiquing the horticultural clichés of suburbia. After all, this is Wellesley College, not Wellesley Country Club.

Pedestrian circulation was designed by Van Valkenburgh around the concept of "meander." Paths curve and crest, thereby concealing destinations (the opposite of the

unidirectional, "fast," or cut-through). The landscape is designed to slow down, to unfold to nature, to reveal relationships between different parts of the landscape, to open up experiences. True to its program, the valley serves as a crossroads, a role it best conveys from the campus center. From there, delightfully, the center offers spectacular views north over Munger Meadow to the Alexandra Botanic Garden, and west toward Lake Waban's tree-rimmed shore, dramatically opened by Van Valkenburgh. Among other things, the views constitute a panoramic linkage, allowing a connection to the larger network of valleys separated by the 1921 main College Road causeway.

How, then, can Alumnae Valley's landscape be understood and contextualized? Rejecting an open-field, lawned composition, Van Valkenburgh mixes wetlands and meadows, rises and falls,

the wild and groomed, the canopied and sun-filled, intimate spaces and expanding panoramas. Recalling its geological origins, the valley boldly articulates a present without precedent in a past. At the same time, it heals a self-inflicted wound, reconnects with its College's founders' ideals, and prompts reflection on our place in the natural world.

Neither modernist, nor minimalist, Alumnae Valley is both wholly up to date and firmly rooted in history. Seen broadly, it is unabashedly picturesque, extending old England's definitions of that idea in terms consistent with New England's. The landscape it presents deliberately complements Wellesley's educational ideals. Its ordering system, like its institutional pedagogy, emphasizes student individuality rather than conformity, gives form to women's visions of nature. As such, the valley stands in studied contrast to the determinism and directionality of men's colleges, encoded in their orthogonally controlled campuses, the long prevailing "rational" model of elite collegiate institutions. Intensely place-specific in its references and intents, Alumnae Valley is not simply a landscape for Wellesley College but also a landscape about Wellesley College.

*Peter Fergusson is the Theodora and Stanley Feldberg Professor of Art. He is also author, together with James O'Gorman and John Rhodes, of The Landscape and Architecture of Wellesley College.*



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

- 1 WEST FOREBAY
- 2 HAY AMPHITHEATRE
- 3 TUPELO GROVE
- 4 GENERATIONS POND
- 5 DRUMLINS
- 6 RECREATION LAWN
- 7 EAST FOREBAY
- 8 CATTAIL MARSH