MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY EXTENSION

A Guide to Historic and Cultural Landscape Preservation Approaches

Historic and cultural landscapes are an invaluable part of our state's heritage and important to preserve and protect for future generations. While owners of historic properties may, understandably, place initial emphasis on the stabilization and preservation of the main buildings, the landscape must also be addressed at each site. As the landscape tends to change and evolve more dramatically than the architecture, it requires a unique approach and considerable thought and strategy. But with the proper research and responsible implementation, historic and cultural landscapes can provide the public with an improved understanding of our state's history.

One of the most useful guides for historic or cultural landscapes is The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes published by the National Park Service. Below is a review of the four basic approaches outlined in the guide. A review of the four approaches will provide a framework that private homeowners also will find useful. In cases that involve complex projects or sites of significant cultural or historic value, it is essential to work with a licensed landscape architect who has extensive experience in historic preservation.

The National Park Service guidelines are organized into "Organizational Elements" and "Character-Defining Features" that need to be reviewed during a cultural landscape analysis. Organizational Elements define the landscape's organization and pattern and create spatial definition. These elements may include both natural features, such as topography, and cultural features, such as walls or hedges. Character-Defining Features provide a landscape with its unique personality and include topography, vegetation, circulation, water features, structures, site furnishings, and objects.

For an individual homeowner, it is useful to inventory existing features and to explore the history of the property through historic maps, photographs, and other available documents. Local libraries, special collections at state universities, and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History are excellent sources of information. However, each case is different, and, while some properties may have considerable documentation available, others may have little to none. In some cases, documents such as historic photographs may be in private collections, so it may be advisable to consult former property owners and other community members who have knowledge of the property.

Once inventory and research are complete, selection of a treatment is appropriate. Four basic approaches are outlined in the cultural landscape guidelines: preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction. A brief explanation of each of the approaches follows.

This arbor at the Eudora Welty House in Jackson, Mississippi, was originally made of wood, but the current structure was made primarily of metal to increase longevity and reduce maintenance costs. Material choices and budgetary challenges are just a few of the many complex issues that arise in efforts to preserve historic landscapes.

Approaches

Preservation

Although preservation is the most straightforward approach, it requires the site to be predominantly intact with its historical integrity still in place. In addition, it is necessary that the property use remains the same and that extensive repairs, additions, or alterations are not needed. Preservation emphasizes minor sympathetic repairs, stabilizing the property, and preventative maintenance of existing features, as opposed to major alterations or additions. While this approach may sound simple, the complexity and dynamic character of landscapes still make for difficult decisions—when to remove aged canopy trees, how to deal with new plant pests, or how to repair site furniture when some materials are no longer available. Again, it is often advisable to seek professional expertise, especially when dealing with landscapes of considerable significance.

Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation is appropriate when a site has been altered so much that its history is difficult to understand, when replacements or repairs are required, or when a new use is planned. Rehabilitation can include the addition of new features, but those historical features that still exist should be retained and protected. Rehabilitation is often chosen after a building or landscape has been altered dramatically. One issue with rehabilitation is that new work can give a false historical impression; in some cases, this problem is overcome by making new elements blatantly new in order to contrast with historic features. This approach is sometimes used when sites of dramatic significance have been left with little historical integrity. In such cases, new features can be used to assist the public in understanding the site's history. One such case is the home of Benjamin Franklin (Franklin Court) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where "ghost structures" of long-demolished buildings help visitors understand the site's original organization. These structures, designed by architecture firm Venturi and Rauch, use contemporary materials to frame the outline of the buildings as determined by archaeological work and some limited documentation. The practice has been emulated at other historical sites.

Restoration

Restoration is appropriate when a particular period of the landscape's history outweighs the value of later additions and alterations. In this case, the landscape may be "restored" to a "period of significance." For example, if a property was significant for being the home of a famous Civil War general and later owners had added a swimming pool, it might be appropriate to remove the pool, even though it is also considered part of the site's history. Restoration was chosen as the approach for the Shadows on the Teche landscape in New Iberia, Louisiana, where the landscape was restored to the most recent period of significance—the Weeks Hall garden.

Reconstruction

Reconstruction is seldom used as a landscape approach because it requires such an extensive amount of documentation. Even if there are construction drawings of a particular landscape structure, we can't be certain what changes may have been made during or after construction. Even historic photographs of particular elements aren't enough to build authentic replicas in most cases. Therefore, it is somewhat unusual for reconstruction to be chosen as a treatment. It is used only when a landscape cannot be properly understood without the particular element in question and there is sufficient evidence to faithfully execute a reconstruction. One example is the pavilion at Monticello; Thomas Jefferson's notes and additional archaeological fieldwork allowed for an accurate reconstruction in 1984. In this case, reconstruction of the pavilion was critical. The main architectural feature of the south vegetable garden, it demonstrated Jefferson's interest in and commitment to the garden. It also demonstrated Jefferson's incorporation of aesthetic features into predominantly utilitarian gardens.

Choosing an Approach

For owners of historic properties, the process of choosing an approach can be useful in itself, as it requires investigation and reflection on the property's significance and current conditions. This investigation can lead to important insights useful in deciding how best to deal with the complex issues that arise with many historic landscapes. No matter which approach you choose, preserving intact landscape elements of significance is essential, as is the need to make decisions based on reliable historical sources and information. The local library is an appropriate place to start any historical investigation. Libraries often have documents not available elsewhere and can provide suggestions on where to look for additional information. An abbreviated list of possible sources of information is posted on the following page.

Reference

Birnbaum, C., & Capella Peters, C. (Eds.). (1996). *The Secretary of the Interior's standards for the treatment of historic properties with guidelines for the treatment of cultural landscapes.* U.S. Department of the Interior.

Selected Mississippi Archival Sources

Alcorn State University Archives/Special Collections
https://www.alcorn.edu/academics/library/library-departments/archivesspecial-collections/

Delta State University Archives
https://www.deltastate.edu/library/departments/archives-museum/

The Margaret Walker Center at Jackson State University
http://www.jsums.edu/margaretwalkercenter/

The Mississippi Department of Archives and History
https://www.mdah.ms.gov/

Mississippi State University Special Collections
http://lib.msstate.edu/specialcollections/

Mississippi University for Women Archives
https://www.muw.edu/library/archives/

University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/archives/

The University of Southern Mississippi Special Collections
http://www.lib.usm.edu/spcol

Selected Resources for Historic Landscape Preservation

Historic American Landscapes Survey
https://www.asla.org/hals.aspx

National Center for Preservation Technology and Training (National Park Service)
https://www.nps.gov/subjects/ncptt/index.htm

Olmsted Center for Landscape Preservation (National Park Service)
https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1594/index.htm

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for the Treatment of Cultural Landscapes (National Park Service)
https://www.nps.gov/crps/tps/landscape-guidelines/index.htm

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