modernist landscape

by Julia Koster and Sarah Ridgely, National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC)

While walking around Washington, DC, it is easy to discover the city's trove of Modernist landscapes. Designed and developed in the second half of the 20th century, these sites are characterized by unique hardscape and sculptural elements in urban settings. Like their Modernist building counterparts, many Modernist landscapes are at a critical decision point in their lifespan, with many communities considering whether to restore, rehabilitate, or replace them. Many face challenges due to aging, evolving public expectations and preferences regarding design and program, and changes in surrounding context, use, and circulation.

Adapting Modernist Landscapes in the Public Realm, a panel hosted by AIA|DC on August 28, 2018, considered these challenges and some of the key questions and case studies for Modernist landscapes in the Washington, DC area. Panelists raised several important considerations:

- Are Modernist landscapes different than other designed landscapes?
- What are the similarities and differences in preservation and rehabilitation issues for designed landscapes in comparison to Modernist buildings?
- What steps can design professionals take to make informed choices when contemplating changes to Modernist landscapes?
- Are maintenance and proper funding key problems?
- Looking more broadly, is it important to preserve 'best of' examples and works from specific designers?

While exploring these considerations, understanding the characteristics of Modernist landscapes, particularly those in the Washington, DC region, provides helpful context. Modernist landscapes were generally designed and developed between the mid-twentieth century and the 1980's, often by prominent professionals known for Modernist design. These landscapes reflected the social and planning ideas of their day, and often included significant experimentation in design, materials and construction technology–not all of which proved successful. Landscapes were often characterized by the use of smooth and aggregate concretes along the ground and walls, many of which exhibited sculptural characteristics. These were carefully designed features celebrating urban life and were often developed in concert with



Pennsylvania Avenue in 1980s. Image courtesy of NCPC.



Pennsylvania Avenue at present. Image courtesy of NCPC.



Pershing Park in 1980s. Image courtesy of NCPC.



Pershing Park at present. Image courtesy of NCPC.

Modernist buildings, either as part of a single site or a larger campus design.

Washington, DC and the surrounding National Capital Region are home to a number of Modernist landscapes, many of which are found on federal property. Many downtown federal precincts were developed when Modernist architecture and landscapes dominated as a design preference. Familiar sites include L'Enfant Plaza and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development plaza, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau courtyard, and the Hirshhorn Museum Sculpture Garden. The buildings and adjoining landscape of the National Institute of Standards and Technology campus in Gaithersburg, MD is recognized for its mid-century Modernist design.

Washington, DC has a great legacy of planning and attention to public space and a rich array of designed landscapes from multiple eras. With this in mind, panelists noted the importance of considering whether modernist landscapes are different than other designed landscapes. National Capital Planning Commission (NCPC) Senior Urban Planner Sarah Ridgely shared the perspective of her agency around this topic. Ridgely argued that while physical forms may differ, all designed landscapes face similar challenges in responding to 21st century demands. Ridgely added further that the process of understanding whether and how to alter these landscapes can be assisted by gathering information to better inform decisions. To that end, NCPC has developed a series of questions to use internally to think holistically about changes to these landscapes (see callout box for summary). NCPC's questions cover topics including landscapes' surrounding context, space use and programming, condition, and assessment of original design intent and key elements.

Landscape Architecture Bureau Founder Jon Fitch, ASLA argued a similar point. Fitch noted the design similarities between Boston, MA's hardscaped urban City Hall Plaza and the Piazza del Campo in Siena, Italy, while contrasting the public reaction to these spaces. Although the spaces share similar design features, City Hall Plaza is widely criticized by residents, while Siena's Piazza remains a public favorite. Rather than lumping all Modernist landscapes together, he identified several well-used, admired, and well-maintained sites. "We save what we love," he noted. Therefore, an important aspect is to understand what makes certain landscapes cherished, while others are neglected or disliked.

Panelists identified changes in the surrounding urban context as a major factor impacting Modernist landscapes. ZGF Architects' Urban Principal, Otto Condon discussed the recent transformation of Washington, DC's Banneker Park, designed by Dan Kiley. While the park previously functioned as a public overlook at the terminus of 10th Street, SW, it is now a critically important connector between the National Mall and The Wharf, a recent development on the Southwest Waterfront. New stairs and paths enable pedestrians and cyclists to easily move along this corridor.

In developing design proposals for sites like Benjamin Banneker Park, a key consideration shared was understanding the original design intent and carefully balancing changes necessary to respond to current conditions and needs. For any adaptation, panelists stressed that designers must ask: At what point are changes in conflict, or even disrespectful, to the original design? Is it important to protect the work of certain design professionals? Is the example rare, or exceptional?

Panelists raised similar questions regarding the historic preservation process. Many Modernist landscapes are now eligible for historic preservation consideration, and like buildings, these landscapes must respond

to contemporary challenges and expectations. While alterations may not always be needed, any changes should be done in a manner that respects the design's important character-defining features so that the original intent remains intact.

Despite these similarities, there are several key differences between designed landscapes and buildings. Preservation and rehabilitation issues for designed landscapes have been explored less than for buildings. Landscapes, by their nature, grow and change. While some similar tools are used to assess buildings under consideration for renovation or redevelopment, landscapes use a different design vocabulary that does not always translate easily to the historic preservation practices for buildings. People interact differently with landscapes than buildings, and their expectations of landscapes' public space are also different. Designed landscapes are, in fact or in practice, frequently seen and considered as part of the public realm, with a strong sense of public ownership.

Another important consideration panelists raised was whether the challenges presented by many designed landscapes stem from adequate funding and maintenance. Many Modernist landscapes are now of an age where they require refurbishment and repairs. For example, the public spaces along Pennsylvania Avenue, between the White House and the U.S. Capitol, were cohesively redesigned in the 1970s and 1980s as part of the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation's streetscape redevelopment. Successful in their day, many of these spaces are now worn and no longer function as originally intended.

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While some Modernist landscapes in Washington and across the country have been rehabilitated or updated, others have been completely removed or redesigned. As this era contributes to the legacy of Washington's designed spaces, panelists noted the importance of determining which designs represent exceptional works and ensuring they remain intact. The National Historic Preservation Act can be used to protect sites that are 50 years or older, but many Modernist landscapes are not eligible yet. Therefore, the decision to rehabilitate or redesign altogether often resides with local community and regulatory boards who may not have access to a complete site history and analysis.

As the panelists concluded, Modernist landscapes offer a window into a broader discussion of how to sensitively and appropriately address proposed changes to all designed landscapes. It is important to see these landscapes as part of the overall, continuing design legacy of any city, demanding us to think about why we cherish and take care of various public spaces.

Key Considerations to Assess Designed Landscapes
(from the 2018 Comprehensive Plan for the National Capital's Parks & Open Space Federal Element)

To be consistent, consider the following—in both context and of the existing space and the proposed improvements—when assessing a designed landscape.

1) Use of Space |
Understand how the current use and users evolved over time. Compare how the needs of existing users, along with a proposed/modified user group, help define scope, program, and proposed improvements.

2) Design Characteristics |
Identify the existing design characteristics, including site elements, style, and amenities that help define the character and role of the unique landscape. Compare the existing conditions against the proposed improvements to understand the programmatic changes and their potential impacts.

3) Original Design Intent |
Consider information regarding the original design, including the spatial orientation of the site,



Banneker Park - Before. Image courtesy of NCPC.



Banneker Park - After. Image courtesy of NCPC.





AIA|DC welcomed Julia Koster (NCPC), Sarah Ridgely (NCPC), Jon Fitch (LAB), and Otto Condon (ZGF) to speak about Modernist Landscapes. Images courtesy of AIA|DC Urban Design Committee.

style, and site elements, when evaluating proposals.

4) Design Context |
Evaluate how the surrounding context of a landscape— including adjacent land-use, demographics, physical and visual characteristics— can influence the perception, and use of a specific site. Use this context to inform how the landscape responds to, and fits within, its surroundings.

5) Performance and Maintenance |
Understand the overall performance and function of an existing landscape to help determine inherent design issues and maintenance limitations. Use this information to improve the existing design, or to inform the new design of site systems such as stormwater management, water features, and a site's resilience with respect to climate conditions.

6) Historic and Cultural Significance |
Consider the historic and cultural significance of a landscape when evaluating proposed improvements and modifications. This includes a site's character-defining elements, views, or viewsheds, any cultural traditions, and if the site is associated with a notable designer.

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