

Wellesley

A scenic landscape photograph of a pond with lily pads, pink azaleas, and a white flowering tree under a blue sky. The pond is in the middle ground, surrounded by lush greenery and trees. In the foreground, there are vibrant pink azaleas and a small yellow daisy. The sky is a clear, bright blue.

Spring 1995

Wellesley's
Vanishing Landscape

Alumnae Forum

How would you feel if you returned for Reunion and found Wellesley's campus irrevocably changed? You expected to find a garden-like setting dotted with buildings, but, instead, you saw an alien maze of buildings, roads, and parking lots dotted with patches of green. Unlikely, yes. Totally impossible, no. The landscape is the College's greatest treasure. It is also the surest bond between the College and alumnae, who assume that it is receiving the attention such a splendid asset deserves. Sadly, however, the grounds are nowhere near the top of Wellesley's current priorities.

Wellesley's *Vanishing Landscape*

by Jane Canter Loeffler '68

Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., head of the nation's most prestigious landscape architecture firm and son of the founder of the landscape architecture profession in America, recognized the artistic and topographical importance of the campus more than ninety years ago when he inspected the grounds at the request of College president, Caroline Hazard. Olmsted cited the College landscape for "its peculiar kind of intricate beauty and its immensely significant expression of geological history." In a report to Miss Hazard, he identified the campus's glaciated topography as unique to parts of southeastern New England and Long Island, and he warned that its character was so delicate, and its scale so small, that development threatened to make it "a vanishing type." That was in 1902. What about today?

Despite good intentions, the College is having a tough time balancing the needs of the landscape against competing interests and preventing encroachment by cars and facilities. According to Margaret Jewett Greer '51,

parking poses the biggest threat to the grounds. As chairman of the Trustees' Buildings and Grounds subcommittee on Landscape and Grounds, Mrs. Greer leads the often frustrating effort to meet an ever increasing demand for parking on property that is fragile in character and finite in size.

The magnitude of the parking problem is indicated by the fact that the College has 1,911 registered vehicles and a current total of 1,630 paved spaces. Of those registered, 1,255 belong to faculty and staff, 374 to resident students, 131 to nonresident students and Davis Scholars, 84 to auditors, and 67 vehicles belong to the College. (Students are asked to pay parking fees, but the fees are not high enough to serve as a parking deterrent, nor are they intended to be.) Not everyone comes to the campus at the same time, of course, but if they did, they certainly would not fit.

And what about visitors? Only a handful of parking spaces are reserved for them. There are three visitor spaces on Pendleton Hill, four more by Founders, and

Preserving a Treasure of 'Intricate Beauty'



Robert H. Loeffler

A "temporary" parking lot has become a fixture on the meadow.

only five reserved for the Office of Admission on Jewett Road. When those spaces are full, visitors have no idea where to go, and they generally park illegally in spaces assigned to faculty and staff.

Visitors, like students, want to park near the core of the campus rather than at peripheral sites, such as beyond the Keohane Sports Center at the Distribution Lot. (For a picturesque campus, the parking lots have distinctly un-picturesque names.) On a walking campus like Wellesley's, though, it is unreasonable to expect convenience plus parking. Nearly everyone agrees, for example, that commuting students should not be

Campus Visitors'

cars pose a potential threat to the grounds.

allowed to park in the forty or more spaces "temporarily" installed on the meadow. Even College officials admit that the meadow lot is truly "an unsightly intrusion on the Wellesley landscape," something to be replaced as soon as possible. But the problem now is where to move the spaces, not whether or not to bring those students to the campus.

The College has expanded its transportation services in an effort to decrease campus traffic. It has recently introduced van service to the Natick Mall, for example, in addition to the shuttle to Cambridge and links to public transportation. There is certainly no conscious effort to encourage on-campus parking, but various academic and nonacademic programs do produce that result.

More and more programs are specifically being designed to attract outside visitors to the campus. In almost every instance, such visitors are welcome to Wellesley, but they carry with them a hidden cost. They place demands on the campus, notably adding to the parking problem. The College lacks a comprehensive

Jane Canter Loeffler '68 is a planner and architectural historian in Washington, D.C. She is a graduate of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, and has had articles published in the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Landscape Journal, Preservation, and Progressive Architecture.

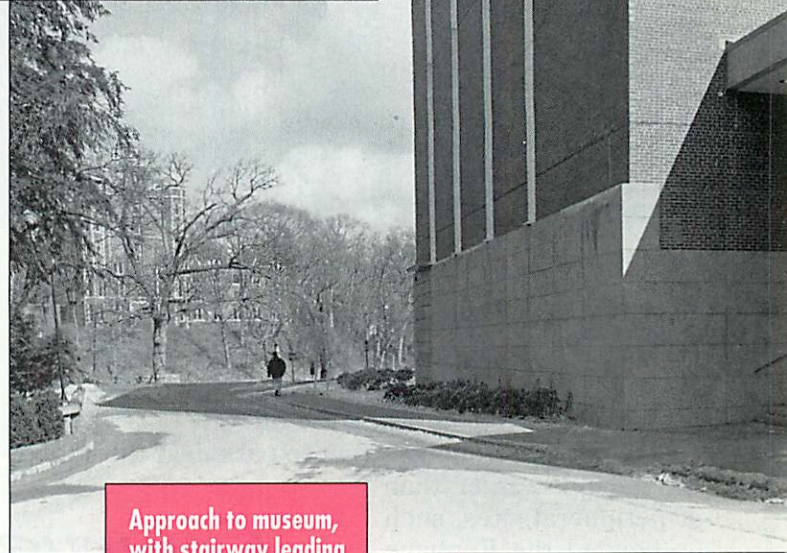


Visitors entering the campus from the Central Street entrance see this view of the new museum (looking southeast).

policy for evaluating such programs for hidden costs and potential harm to the grounds—*before* they are implemented, not after.

If commuting students represent a growing group, outside visitors present an even bigger problem, especially when they all arrive at once, as for conferences or functions. Business at the College Club, for instance, has climbed steadily in recent years. The decision to open its membership to those not affiliated with the College has certainly benefited the club, but it has also added to an insatiable demand for convenient parking. The club draws revenues from the parties, weddings, and meetings that it hosts, but lacking adequate parking for such events, it allows its parking to spill over onto the “temporary” meadow lot and the Founders lot. Guests complain about the distance to both, though both are relatively close to the club. Can the dollar revenues from such events possibly equal the cost to the landscape if another parking lot is added in that vicinity? Is it time for the club to think about curtailing events which cannot be handled by existing facilities? What are the alternatives?

The new Davis Museum and Cultural Center is another campus facility that expects to attract crowds. From the outset, planners of the new building described it as a magnet, one that would draw visitors from Greater Boston and beyond to see the College’s outstanding art collection and participate in educational and cultural programs. Since its opening, the museum has hired a full-time public relations person “to maximize media coverage of the museum” and expand its audience. But the more the museum succeeds



Approach to museum, with stairway leading to main entrance.

in building a constituency for its collection, the more it attracts visitors in cars and even buses, the greater the potential for negative impact on the campus landscape. In other words, if the museum is immensely successful in attracting new visitors to Wellesley, the people are going to have to park somewhere. Can the College adequately protect itself against possible pressure to pave over more of the meadow, for example? This question needs to be answered now—while it is still possible to fashion policy that balances a commendable impetus to play a widening role in the community with the educational value of Wellesley’s scenic setting.

Not only does the new museum's program affect the landscape, so does its architectural presence. Hailed as a design achievement on the interior, the building is a superb showcase for the College's art collection and also for traveling exhibitions. But it is less successful as it relates to its problematic site. The architect, Rafael Moneo, created a good relationship between his building and Paul Rudolph's Jewett Arts Center, its immediate neighbor to the east, but Mr. Moneo was evidently less concerned with the impact of his building on the larger pastoral landscape.

Recently added trees are a real asset to the museum's entrance plaza, but the pedestrian approach from the Service Lot, where nearly all visitors must park, calls out for proper landscaping. Right now, the approach is an embarrassment. The College plans to build a

sidewalk, which will be a major improvement, but proper planting along the sidewalk, along the rear of the power plant and also near the base of the museum, will be needed to complete the job. Planting around the museum is difficult because the structure practically abuts the street, and also because utilities are located in places beneath the ground surface. If sizable evergreens, for example, won't fit or won't grow, there still are plants that could lessen the visual impact of the blank wall that faces west. English ivy, for one, is an evergreen vine. Another possible choice is climbing hydrangea which has more fullness and produces a lovely flower.

Yet another way to announce the purpose of the building and to add some variety to its prominent rear facade might be to hang a banner (tree-like in color?) or install lettering with

the museum's name. After all, most visitors will approach by car from the campus entrance on Central Street or along College Drive, and from the road all they will see is the rear tower of the striking new building and its loading dock area.

What makes it all the more difficult to assess the impact of programs and buildings on the campus is the absence of a comprehensive landscape master plan supported by policies that explicitly outline the College's commitment to its landscape legacy. Such a plan exists. In fact, it was prepared in 1983 by the College's consulting landscape architect, Carol R. Johnson '51. But the plan was never adopted or fully funded. Twelve years later, it remains nothing more than a set of recommendations.



Robert H. Loeffler

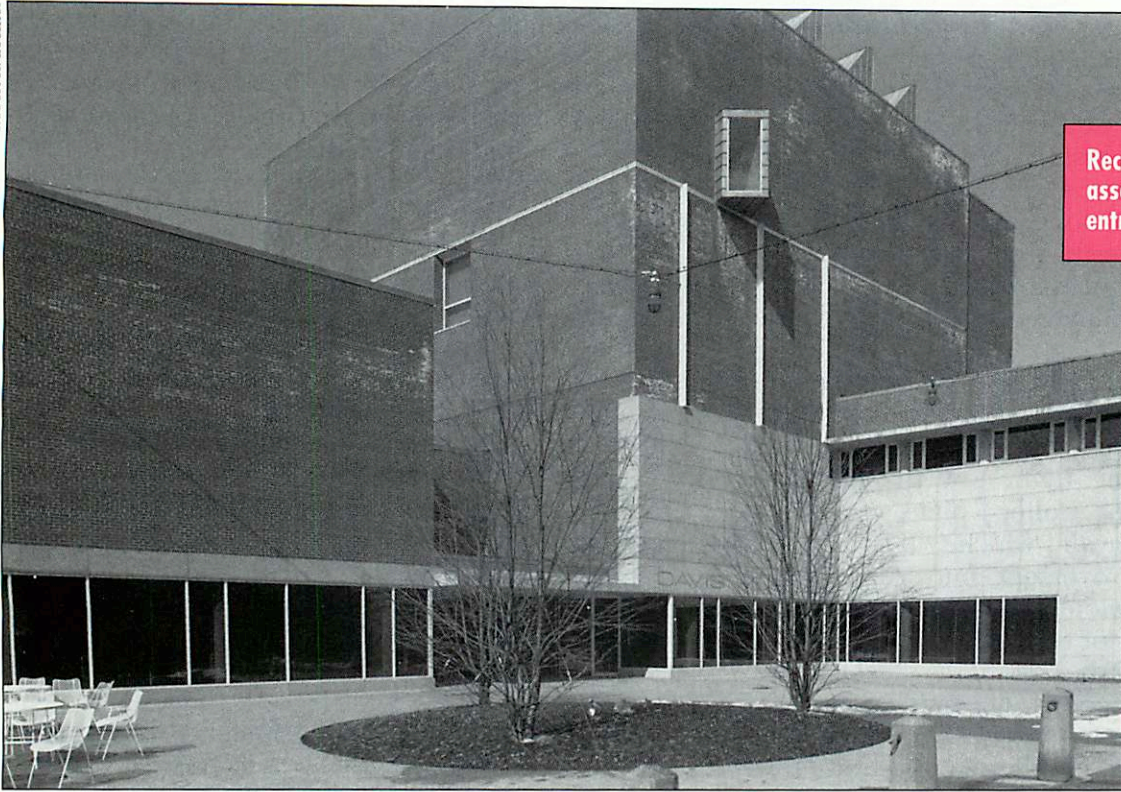
Until the Trustees commit themselves to a landscape policy and a plan, and until there is substantial financial support, there can be little predictability and no protection for the landscape. Projects proceed piecemeal as funds are made available. There is no long-term budget commitment, no overall strategy, and no guarantee against arbitrary changes that intrude upon the landscape and alter it forever. Even a seemingly innocuous-looking park bench leaves a lasting mark when it is installed on a concrete foundation. If the siting of outdoor furniture is not coordinated with lighting, security, and long-term planting and maintenance, such items may ultimately degrade the landscape and add significantly to the future cost of operations.

A partial list of current landscape needs includes erosion control and path improvements at Lake House and Tower Court; enhancements at Munger, Schneider, Founders, and behind the Chapel; plant replacement along the lakeside, in the academic quad, behind the power plant, in front of the Science Center, and at the Greek theater, where the arborvitae screen was destroyed by a storm; and clearing, thinning, pruning, and large-scale planting improvements campus-wide.

Pressed by an array of worthy demands, lacking a commitment from the Trustees, a plan, and necessary funds, the College finds it increasingly difficult to allocate resources for the proper maintenance and enhancement of its grounds. This does not mean that all landscape work has halted. To the contrary, the grounds crew has recently completed selective pruning by the lake, cleared scrub growth on the hillsides below the Quad dorms and Green Hall for eventual replacement by rhododendrons, provided planting along the new handicap ramp to Founders, raised the walkway through the meadows (to keep students' feet dry), and reduced nighttime blind spots by thinning some plants and trees and adding lights.

Outbacks in staff, however, make it impossible for the crew to take on anything but selective projects. This is no surprise since nine men are responsible for the care of more than 300 acres and outlying properties throughout most of the year. By comparison, a crew of three (including one woman) cares for the twenty-two-acre preserve maintained under the aegis of the biology department. That property, sited between Central Street, Munger, and Paramecium Pond, includes the Hunnewell Arboretum, the Alexandra Botanic Garden, and the Margaret C. Ferguson Greenhouses.

The Friends of Horticulture provides support for the arboretum, the gardens, and the greenhouses, and offers educational programs related to these resources. With a staff of thirty volunteers and more than 500 members, the Friends play a key role in helping to focus attention on that small portion of the campus that falls within their preserve—a tract that was first endowed in 1922 by a gift from Mary Harriman Severance, Class of 1885.



Recent planting is an asset to Davis Museum entrance plaza.

But what about the rest of the campus?

Anne Sinnott Moore '56, former alumna cochair of the Friends of Horticulture, says that there is no reason why the same concern directed to the arboretum should not extend to the campus as a whole. "I don't think there is a single alumna who doesn't put the beauty of the campus at the top of her priority list," she declares. Jo Ronan Clauson CE, administrator of the Friends group, echoes the same theme when she describes the whole campus as an arboretum, and notes the intense attachment that alumnae feel for the loveliness of Wellesley's park-like setting. Her organization, however, cannot expand its purview beyond its own properties. The challenge is how to establish an active constituency for the entire campus landscape.

A comprehensive landscape plan, adopted, funded, and implemented, would be a first step. With such a commitment, donors could give to the general fund knowing that their gifts were helping to fund landscape needs. A plan would also provide opportunities for designated giving, because there would be reasonable certainty that landscape features would remain or be renewed over time. Within the context of the plan, other contributions to the landscape might include endowments related to the teaching of landscape design and garden history (where better to study the subject?), an endowment to provide a salary for a head gardener, or endowments for long-term maintenance of a vista, such as the sweep of Severance Green to the lake, or for wildflowers (instead of cars) in the

meadow. If Isabella Hunnewell had not made a generous gift in 1923, surely the arboretum would not exist as it does today.

With its funds, Friends of Horticulture has created two paid student internships. Both of last summer's interns worked in the greenhouses. One was an art history major with a special interest in wildflowers, and the other was a psychology major who worked previously at Medfield State Hospital using plant cultivation as therapy. With more funds, this model could be expanded to include many more students and many more projects campus-wide.

The same factors that have made the College reluctant to commit itself to a plan and reluctant to accept specific landscape-related gifts, also prevent it from wanting to see its grounds designated as an historic landscape. The concern is that such constraints may someday narrow its development options, and that is a reasonable concern. But trying to keep all options open, the College is leaving its landscape vulnerable to all sorts of unanticipated pressures and unwanted intrusions. Moreover, whether or not it is officially labeled as such, the campus is already an historic landscape of extraordinary importance.

In the late nineteenth century, Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., convinced municipalities all across the United States that landscape improvements were both aesthetically and economically valuable as long-term investments. He designed the parks and parkways of Boston's "Emerald Necklace" as a continuous work of art, a series of scenes composed of plant materials

arranged to accentuate changing light and shadow, texture, openness and closure, and subtle changes of color. His son, who took over as head of his Brookline-based practice, saw the rare beauty of the campus and imagined it as a similarly intricate work of art. In his 1902 report to Miss Hazard, Olmsted, Jr., urged her not to permit the "indiscriminate scattering of buildings over the whole tract," and advised her to plan the campus with special attention to its irregular plateaus, its rounded ridges, its flat meadows, and its natural vegetation. Then, he asked her:

Am I not right in feeling that it is especially the duty of an institution of learning which is possessed of such an example to treasure it for future generations with the most sympathetic care for its scientific as well as for its aesthetic value?

That question is even more crucial today when so much of the distinctiveness of the surrounding terrain has already vanished.

Park maintenance and landscape improvement may fall low among the priorities of most cities and towns today, and that is regrettable, but Wellesley College is neither a city nor a town. It is a place that depends upon its setting to express the intentions of its founders, and to fulfill its educational mission. After

all, Henry Fowle Durant was not interested simply in building a school. His explicit aim was to provide educational excellence for women amidst a setting of natural beauty. Not only is the landscape a key component of the educational experience, it is also the common link that binds generations of alumnae to the College. "Wellesley College has in its grounds a peculiar

endowment and with the endowment, it seems to me, a peculiar obligation to posterity," Olmsted, Jr., wrote to Miss Hazard. The College can meet that obligation only by treating its landscape as a treasure. □

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Students enjoy the beauty of Severance Green.

