

Alumni House Historic Structure Report – Preliminary Landscape Text

July 25, 2011

I. DESCRIPTION AND CONDITIONS ASSESSMENT – SITE AND LANDSCAPE

This assessment is based on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the treatment of Historic Properties, available photographs and documents, and informal field verification of existing conditions. A Planting Plan from Leland Vaughn's office dated 1954 describes the layout of planting beds and trees and general layout of paving. It notes that Lawrence Halprin was the supervising landscape architect for the project. The same year, a supplemental planting plan was issued independently by Lawrence Halprin and stamped by Lawrence Halprin. One detail sheet from a set of six from the University Architect was issued earlier the same year. It includes a detail for the wood and stone bench at the north east corner of the terrace, along with details of paving, curbs, catch basins and a culvert. These three sheets comprise the available site and landscape documentation. It is not know at this time whether additional drawing sheets and specifications were created by Vaughn's office.

In addition to the original plan, there was a modest supplemental planting plan done for the north property edge by Keller Mitchell & Company in 1995. A more extensive planting plan was apparently done in the 1980's by Arbergast and Newton, but the plan was not made available for this analysis. The existing site plan is a utilities plan, with trees and dbh but not species noted. A sketch by Jim Horner, campus landscape architect, dated 6/8/11 notes those trees on and around the site that are deemed "specimen" trees by the University. A complete topographic survey of the property has not been undertaken. Further tree health assessment information was provided by the campus landscape architect during a site walk with KVP on 6/14/11.

It is noteworthy that the Alumni House falls outside of the classical core boundary for the campus as defined by the Landscape Heritage Plan.

Conditions Assessment:

Spatial organization

Alumni House is sited on the south bank of Strawberry Creek corridor. The west and east wings of the building form an L which defines a garden and terrace on the north side. The paved terrace extends the length of the glass-walled north façade of the east wing and serves as an extension of the interior reception room and lounge, which is paved in the same continuous slate paving. The boundary of the terrace is defined by topography and vegetation, creating an enclosed room for gathering.

Topography

The natural topography of the site is a flat plane that slopes gradually toward the creek. The north and east perimeter of the garden terrace is defined by a man-made, planted berm that was part of the original Vaughn/Halprin design.

Vegetation

While the understory planting appears to have diminished due to increased shade or been replanted over time, the trees from the original planting are mostly still present. On the east edge of the site is a dense stand of nine mature redwood trees, which screen the view of the Chavez Center from the patio. At the south west corner of the site, two mature pine trees screen the view of the Haas Pavilion beyond. At the north west corner, a large, mature buckeye provides screening of the view west toward the Haas Pavilion loading area and visually encloses the west edge of the garden. Along the north edge, a number of large trees, such as oaks, buckeyes, redwoods, Japanese maples and a few tea trees define the garden edge and maintain a sense of enclosure. Smaller ornamental trees such as flowering cherry, flowering plum and Japanese maple are planted at the main entry courtyard, and along the edges of the garden terrace. The main entry courtyard has an oak tree in the central planting bed that has been described as “struggling” by the campus landscape architect. Along the east edge of the site, the understory planting evident in the original Vaughn/Halprin scheme has diminished. The existing planting consists predominantly of low groundcover and overhead tree canopy. Along the east edge of the west wing, the planting species have been changed from those called for in the original plan by the 1980s Arbergast and Newton planting plan, but the general layout and design intent has been maintained.

Circulation

At the main south entry, the west and east wings frame a prominent north-south entrance path that runs through the glass connection corridor of the building. The continuity of this access path and the transparency of the space between is emphasized by slate paving which flows continuously from exterior to interior. The main entry is via a small courtyard on the south side, with a secondary entry opposite the glass corridor on the north via the larger garden. To the north, an asphalt path leads from the main campus path (also asphalt) to the slate paved path. The asphalt is in a state of deterioration. Redwood tree roots have raised and broken through the paving, resulting in an unsightly and potentially hazardous surface. The slope appears to exceed ADA-complaint standards, and the transition between slate and asphalt, and garden and public path, is somewhat awkward and ill-defined.

Structures, Furnishings and Objects

A stone wall defines the west edge of the building, beginning as a low landscape wall at the south edge, extending under the cantilever of the west wing and out the north side as a prominent, architectural wall approximately 10 feet high. Its design is reminiscent of the typical vernacular of rustic stone walls and bridges along Strawberry Creek, and throughout campus. A similar wall defines the west edge of the Zellerbach Playhouse to the south.

A low wood bench on a stone pedestal base defines the northeast corner of the garden terrace, and was built as part of the original '54 Vaughn/Halprin landscape design.

It is not certain whether the wood bench at the south entry courtyard is original to the design, though it does not appear on the planting plan and it may have been a later campus addition.

The 'Alumni Centennial flagpole' at the northwest corner of the garden terrace was added at in 1973. A plaque at its base indicates that it was provided by the California Alumni Association. It's location and scale within the garden are awkward.

Two Japanese stone lanterns were relocated to the site in 1980. Originally installed in the glade opposite Wellman Hall adjacent to Strawberry Creek, then removed to storage, they were sited and installed in the Alumni House garden by former campus landscape architect, Ari Inouye. A plaque indicates that they were given to the University by the Alumni Association of Japan in 1934.

A plaque at the base of a redwood tree on the north west edge along the campus path indicates that the tree was planted in 1973 for the California Alumni Association Centennial.

Next to the centennial redwood is a small olive tree which was planted in dedication to Olive Hall, a former Alumni Association staffer. The dedication plaque disappeared several years ago, and may have been removed by the campus because the tree was not officially approved.

Other site benches along the west and south perimeters, as well as trash and ash containers are later, campus-standard additions. A large trash enclosure was added to the south east corner of the house, and is prominently visible from the main campus path leading from Sproul Plaza.

II. CHARACTER DEFINING FEATURES WITH SIGNIFICANCE AND INTEGRITY

Spatial Organization

The L-shaped organization of the west and east wings of the Alumni House that define the garden and terrace is a key component of the site organization. The space within this L is further subdivided by the configuration of paving, planting and topography to create an enclosed garden room for the terrace off of the east wing. The layout of slate paving visually and spatially defines distinct spaces within the garden: the event gathering area off of the east wing, the main north-west circulation path, and the south entry courtyard. The deliberate spatial and visual separation of these areas of the garden maintains their experiential and functional integrity.

The layout of the east and west wings is also spatially significant, The wing buildings exist as two independent architectural forms in an informal/offset relationship to one another and connected by a glass walled corridor. This informal relationship of architectural form, together with the informal landscape envelope around the building and it's orientation toward

Strawberry Creek, give the entire site an informal and 'creek-side' character that is unique on campus.

Topography

The planted berm around perimeter of the garden terrace creates a critical sense of enclosure and privacy for the terrace, screening the gathering space from the asphalt campus path along the north edge of the site.

Vegetation

The vegetation of the Alumni House site creates a garden setting which is a key experiential component of the place. The large, mature stature of the trees on site is remarkable. Their size helps mitigate the scale disparity between the modest 1-story Alumni House, and the much taller adjacent buildings, preserving the private, secluded, landscape quality of the garden that was part of the original design intent.

The framed view of the garden and creek landscape is the first impression a visitor receives upon arrival. The attendants at the reception desk within the glass walled corridor also benefit from the garden setting of the building entrance. The oak tree and the surrounding central planting bed provide screening for the reception area from the campus circulation corridor beyond. The garden setting and sense of landscape enclosure is defined by the immediate planting along the glass walled building edge as well as a "green wall" of mature site and creek corridor tree canopies in the distance. There is a strong relationship between the Alumni House to Strawberry Creek, and the impression is that it is actually within the corridor rather than separate or adjacent to it. The site falls within the "natural type" landscape as defined by the Heritage Landscape Plan for the campus, and is outside of the classical core boundary.

The two mature pine trees along the south edge of the west wing, provide screening and scale transition between the one story Alumni House and the massive Haas Pavilion beyond. Their presence maintains an enclosed, private garden courtyard entrance.

The buckeye tree at the north edge of the west wing provides visual screening and enclosure for the garden from the convergence of pathways further west.

Circulation

The continuity between interior and exterior spaces and paving at the entrance hall, and the sense of landscape flowing through the building, is a significant feature of the entry experience from the south.

Structures, Furnishings and Objects

Because of its relationship to the campus vernacular of rustic stone walls, and its unique integration with the architecture of the west wing, the stone wall along the west edge of the site is a significant feature. It ties building and landscape together in a way that demonstrates the original design intent of unifying building and landscape.

A low wood bench on a stone pedestal base is significant in that it was part of the original design and it spatially defines the northeast corner of the garden terrace.

The two Japanese stone lanterns, though not part of the original design, have become significant features of the garden. Their precise location within the garden seems to be less important.

III. TREATMENT RECOMMENDATIONS – LANDSCAPE

Spatial organization

Maintaining a sense of enclosure for the terrace of the east wing is integral to preserving the integrity of the original design intent as well as the much beloved garden quality of this space. Care should be taken to preserve this sense of enclosure and separation from the main entry path.

The definition of the north-south axis of the entry path, the continuity between interior and exterior spaces and paving at the entrance hall, and the sense of landscape flowing through the building, should be maintained and potentially upgraded.

In the future, if additional gathering space is desired along the east edge of the west wing, care should be taken to distinguish the gathering area from the circulation zone to ensure a sense of privacy and separation for the new gathering space(s) and not diminish the experiential quality of the former terrace space.

Though the design details may need to be revised or renewed to respond to the new west wing, the spatial definition of the south entry courtyard should be maintained.

Plans for the Proposed Student Community Center Site indicate an expanded paved plaza at the south-east corner of the Alumni House site. These plans should be carefully reviewed and coordinated to ensure that any detrimental impact to the integrity of the Alumni House site is avoided.

Topography

Maintaining the planted berm around perimeter of the garden terrace is critical to maintaining a sense of enclosure and privacy for the terrace.

Vegetation

While the understory and perennial planting may change without overall impact to the space, maintaining and protecting the mature tree canopy is critical.

The understory planting along the east and north edges of the site should be restored to ensure that privacy and screening of the terrace is maintained. Now that the tree canopy shades the area completely, a more shade appropriate planting palette should be implemented.

The planting of the south entry courtyard may be revised, but care should be taken to maintain the screening effect that it currently provides for the reception area.

The planting along the east edge of the west wing can be modified to accommodate the new plan, if it continues to reinforce the spatial qualities of the existing landscape that have been described as significant. This includes maintaining a planted edge along the glass walled corridor and creating a sense of separation between any new gathering areas and the north-south entry path.

Circulation

The alignment of the north-south entry path to the north of the glass-walled corridor and the continuity between interior and exterior paving at the entrance hall should be maintained. The original exterior paving appears to have been ground down around the edges of each paving piece. This was likely done because of displacement and tripping hazard concerns. It is unfortunate in that it creates a far more graphic pattern than was part of the original design. Alternatives should be considered for repairing or regrinding the paving to create a more uniform surface appearance, or replacing the paving with a matching stone and layout to maintain continuity with the interior paving. New areas of paving can and should be distinguished from the original.

Any gathering spaces created along the east wall of the new west wing should maintain a sense of spatial and visual distinction from the entry path and the existing terrace space.

The asphalt path from the north in the area of the redwood trees should be re-graded and repaved. There is an opportunity to upgrade the quality of pavement and improve the transition from the campus circulation path into the garden that should be considered in the new west wing landscape design. Reconfiguring this entrance to create more distinction between the campus path and the garden, would provide more privacy to the east wing.

Structures, Furnishings and Objects

The architectural stone wall along the west edge of the property is significant. If it cannot be preserved, the designers of the new west wing should consider responding to and integrating the qualities that it brings the site: integration of building with landscape and connection to contextual rustic stone walls from the period.

The deteriorated wood seat of the Vaughn/Halprin bench should be replaced according to the original design.

Since the original construction of the site, many new objects have been added over time. The University should consider implementing a policy to guide future interventions to prevent the site from becoming overly cluttered.

Of the items that have been added since the original 1954 plan, we recommend the following:

- Removal of the no parking signs along the north entry path
- Relocation of Japanese stone lanterns within the site if needed to accommodate the new west wing landscape without impact to the overall design of the site
- Removal and relocation of the flagpole

For a more complete historical analysis of the site, additional historic research and study is recommended.