

The Landscape Studio

Landscape Architecture LLC

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A Landscape Architect's Perceptions
A Studio in the Woods
New Orleans, Louisiana

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Introduction

The following narrative is a summary of ideas and insights gained from participating in Lucianne and Joe Carmichael's initiative of establishing a retreat for artists as a place to experience first and second Nature as a means of making third Nature. I participated in a planning workshop for the Studio that was held at the Studio and at Tulane University in January 2003. In the fall of 2003, I collaborated with architect Eean McNaughton, students of the Tulane School of Architecture, the Studio's founders and their supporters in the planning and siting of a performance pavilion.

The Studio's vision is guided by its founders' and supporters' conviction that Life is expressive of the web-like mosaic of creative and sustaining relationships that provides our intellectual, spiritual and sensual place in the Cosmos. At the Studio, Art is expressive of place specific relationships transformed and made conscious by the perceptual insights and gifts of visiting artists. In short, The Studio is a place of re-creation and renewal.

A Studio in the Woods is adjacent the Mississippi River and consists of second growth floodplain woodland that developed adjacent the River following the earlier transformation of first forests into plantation agriculture. The plantation system was abandoned in the early 20th Century and parcels of it have evolved into towering woodlands. Today, the Studio's second growth floodplain woodland is a small parcel at the edge of the only Mississippi River floodplain woodland remaining within the City of New Orleans.

Signatures of this place's evolution from plantation agriculture to second growth woodland persist in the straight-line drainage swales that run beneath towering pecans, oaks, gums and hackberries. A thicket understory of privet is expressive of this plant's genius for thriving in places that have been disturbed. Plants domesticated for and by agriculture/ horticulture grow and flourish amidst indigenous floodplain species.

A partnership of Nature and Culture permeates the whole place. The nearby industrial hum of floating commerce amplifies the significance of its opposite: the songs of birds, the silence of leaves falling, the motion of wind reflected in water, and mute, scattered, pools of concentrated sunshine illuminating the woodland floor.

The Studio's immediate region, known as English Turn, was a major theatre in the centuries' old formative cultural and biological evolution of New Orleans. The Studio is continuing its work within this historical tradition as it develops a strategic plan for nourishing the creative arts within the context of its biological inheritance. A Studio in the Woods is an arts and place renewal process, a one-of-a-kind synthesis that is unique to the Gulf South.

Mapping the Landscape's Architecture and Ecology

To guide the development of the Studio's land, a map of the land's structure is as important as plans, elevations and sections of the Studio's buildings. The map should be made to depict the mosaic footprint of drainways, topography, property lines, buildings, utilities, circulation routes and corridors, the stem footprints of woody plants, the massed, patterned footprint of herbaceous plants, the location of site furnishings, a diagrammatic footprint of plant communities and a diagrammatic footprint of the land's vertical and horizontal spatial structure. Typical sections through the length and width of the land should be drawn to scale and document the proportion and materiality of the land's vertical and horizontal structure, including that of its soil and ground water structures.

A permanently marked grid of fifty foot squares is to be laid across the land and referenced to the latitudes and longitudes of the Earth. This grid's purpose is to serve as a base line against which change can be observed and documented. It will also be the basis of establishing a GIS computer inventory of data describing the contents of each grid and the relationship of each part of the whole, including photographic documentation of the land's changing structure. The grid will be particularly useful for referencing an archive of the land's documentation over a long period of time. The accumulating knowledge will guide the land's development and management.

Human-made and Nature-made Structures

As the scientific and artistic documentation of complex living systems proceeds, there is compelling evidence that all of Life's relationships, whether Human-made or Nature-made, are self organizing and emergent. Each is of the other. Traditionally, human-made structures have benefited from humankind's knowledge of the physical laws of Nature and are expressive of them. A newly emerging science of complexity, coupled with an exploding network of information technologies is now contributing substantially to our knowledge of the changing nature of cultural and biological ecologies. New and exciting opportunities are emerging for artists and designers to make human-made places expressive of the varied and complex phenomena of their genesis.

Because of their complexity, landscapes have most often been simplified and structurally transformed to make them more understandable and manageable. An important emerging challenge is to make the development of the land membrane-like so that the resulting human-made changes are open to and transparent towards Life's sustaining ebb and flow. All that is done should make The Studio expressive of the flow of time revealed through the specifics of place. By immersing itself not on or in but of its place, the Studio's development can reveal the translucent poetry of Life to all those who visit, work and live here.

Master Planning as Evolutionary Process

Planning can be a self-correcting feedback process that adjusts easily to emergent opportunities and constraints. As such, it is a creative, call and response process that is self-adjusting, like an auto-pilot, to the dynamic and changing nature of Life's phenomena. It is on-going.

The Studio's plan should be conceived so that it remains truthful to its purpose and funding, the physical and expressive needs of its constituents, and the constraints and opportunities inherent in the structure of its place. The specific methodology for achieving these larger ends should be continuously adjusted to fit the here and now and tempered by the wisdom and insights gained from past experience.

Locating the Performance Pavilion

The sunny and spacious clearing, the in-between of studio/home and floodplain woodland, is the Studio's threshold. The clearing should serve as the Commons, that is, the shared link between the specialized nodes of the Studio's built-infrastructure network. The Commons gains its strength from its openness and transparency. Its transparency is gained from a clearly articulated peripheral edge. To the extent that the Commons is of itself, it will unite and clarify all places that lead to and depart from it.

The Pavilion should be placed to strengthen the Common's edge. An edge location that is convenient to parking, service access and construction delivery, that can piggyback with functions shared with the existing studio/home and whose functions can be expanded or extended into the Commons should be preferred. As an Edge structure, the pavilion might also serve as a threshold between woodland and clearing, analogous to the drama of twilight joining day and night.

Stewardship and Land Development

Good stewardship proceeds from empathy for Life and a familiarity for what is to be conserved. It is strengthened by being intimately acquainted with that which has been placed in one's trust.

Lucienne and Joe intimately know the place where they live and work. They care deeply about it and are generous in sharing with others their place and their experiences with it. They have assembled a diverse and accomplished group of individuals to help with the planning, development, stewardship and use of this land. When the map of the land is completed and evolved into a plan for development and stewardship, it will be fine grained portrait of the web of relationships giving form to this landscape's architecture and directing its use and stewardship.

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The challenge of all who visit, play, live and work here will always be one of journeying through the turbulent complexity of Life's creativity and creation to discover Life's mute, poetic essence. All planning, development and stewardship should serve this end. All that is done should be accomplished by means that reveal rather than conceal.

The design and placement of all that is added to this land should have a membrane like quality for containing an individual's identity while making it permeable to the larger, shared community of this place's relationships. In many instances, what is left untouched or what is removed might be more important than what is added.

This place, A Studio in the Woods, is a revealing handprint of Human-made and Nature-made. The challenge will be to refine this fundamental relationship and inspire its stewardship and development as a fine art. If achieved, each handprint will be expressive of its other, each revealing the poetic essence of one and all.